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Puppet, Death, and the Devil:
Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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Francesco Dall'Olio*

Athens, the Moon and You: Diana and the Female Appropriation of Marriage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*[1]

Abstract

In the multi-layered set of elements that constitutes the imagery of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Diana, the ancient goddess of hunting, occupies a special place. She is the model for the characters of both Titania and Hippolyta; the frequent recurrence of moon-related imagery can be interpreted as a reprisal of important elements of her iconographic tradition; the plot of the play is built around narrative patterns derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the goddess is deeply involved. This article investigates the relationship between these structural and dramatic elements and the way the play stages the gender relationships. It suggests that the references to Diana mark the stages of a progressive 'appropriation' of marriage by the female characters. On the one hand, quotations and references to the goddess allow characters such as Hermia, Titania and Hippolyta to express their resistance to a male world that would repress them; on the other hand, the rewriting of the myth of Actaeon in the Bottom episode presents and exposes a 'revision' of marriage values aimed at integrating women's experience into the relationship.

KEYWORDS: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; gender relationships; Diana; Greek Gods; Elizabethan ideology; marriage

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has become a staple among studies investigating the presence of ancient literature in Shakespeare's theatrical corpus. The majority of these focus on the relationship of the play with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which has always been recognised as one of the play's main sources.[2] Other studies have considered the influence

[1] This article represents an expansion of a paper I presented at the ESRA Virtual Conference 2021. It is also part of my research activity within the PRIN 2017 Project "Classical Receptions in Early Modern English Drama".

[2] Siler 2011 offers the most comprehensive exposition of this relationship; for a shorter but equally effective exposition, see Taylor 2004.

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of Seneca's *Phaedra* (cf. Holland 1994; Burrow 2013, 183-4), Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* (cf. Nuttall 2000, 50-1; Findlay 2015, 199-201), Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (cf. Carver 2007, 429-45),[3] not to mention medieval or Renaissance texts that draw on classical imagery, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 63-4; Findlay 2015, 200-4) and the mythological plays written for the Queen's entertainment by authors such as George Peele, George Gascoigne and John Lyly.[4] Scholars have emphasised the fundamental role played by classical imagery in the poetic world of the *Dream*, and highlighted how Shakespeare uses classical references and allusions either to suggest nuances in the portrayal of his characters, or to highlight and/or better define certain important themes in his play.

In this article, I intend to return to this line of research, with an analysis of how the mythological figure of Diana is used by Shakespeare and how references to her contribute to the interpretation of the play. Beyond the four times when she is explicitly mentioned, both the plot and imagery of the play are made up of a series of elements that are part of the literary and iconographic tradition relating to the goddess, from classical antiquity to literature contemporary to Shakespeare. She is the model for the characterisation of Titania and Hippolyta, and one of the comedy's central events, her encounter with Bottom, may be viewed as a rewriting of the myth of Diana and Actaeon. At two points in the play, Shakespeare's text seems to be explicitly modelled on passages from Seneca's *Phaedra*, a tragedy in which Diana plays a central role.[5] In addition, Diana was a central figure in the mythological plays mentioned above, not least because of her relevance as one of the main iconographic models for the representation of Queen Elizabeth I, an iconography that Shakespeare picks up in a passage that is traditionally interpreted as a direct homage to the sovereign (see below, at section 4).

This being so, it is surprising that there has never been a study that took up all these elements and tried to draw an overall picture of them, all the more so because the single elements of said picture have often been ana-

[3] All of these texts had already been translated into English: Ovid's poem by Arthur Golding (1567), Seneca's tragedy by John Studley (ca. 1566, then printed 1581, in Thomas Newton's edited collection of the entire corpus), Plutarch's *Life* by Thomas North (1579) and Apuleius' novel by William Adlington (1566). Given the prominence of these authors in Renaissance culture (and in the case of Ovid, his presence in grammar school curricula: cf. Mack 2005, 13), it is also highly plausible that Shakespeare was able to read Latin texts in their language.

[4] The relationship between the *Dream* and John Lyly's comedy *Gallathea* (1592) in particular has been much studied: see the bibliography in Hunt 2001, 448n3.

[5] The two passages in question are *MND* 2.195-244 (Helen pursuing Demetrius; cf. Sen. *Phae.* 233-41, 700-3, 710-12) and 4.1.112-13 (the dogs of Sparta; cf. Sen. *Phae.* 31-43): see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 162, 234.

lysed within various studies regarding different aspects of the *Dream*. In the following pages, I will attempt to present at least a first solution to this problem, through a consideration of seven moments of the *Dream* (six specific passages and one entire episode) where there is a quotation, an allusion or a reprise of the character of Diana. This will not only provide an overall picture of the goddess' presence in the play, but will also highlight how the references to the figure of Diana serve to develop one of the central themes of the play, the gender relationships. In this, the article also fits within another strand of studies on the *Dream*. In the last thirty years, more and more voices have risen to question the view of the *Dream* as a "radically anti-feminist vision" (Campbell 2015, 8)[6] and have instead proposed to see within the play a kind of 'reform' of the marriage values of patriarchal society through the valorisation of the female experience.[7] In my opinion, the use of Diana in the comedy as will be shown by the analysis supports and confirms this interpretation of the *Dream*.[8]

1. *MND* 1.1.7-11

> Hippolyta Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,
> Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
> And then the moon, like to a silver bow
> Now bent in heaven, shall behold the night
> Of our solemnities.[9]

Thus Hippolyta replies to Theseus' impatience for their wedding night. As acknowledged by Sukanta Chaudhuri, the image "associat[es] [the bow] with the moon, hence with the virgin moon-goddess Cynthia or Diana" (Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 121). The piece is an elegant and tender promise of love, and the mention of the goddess here might be seen as slightly jarring: why should a goddess traditionally recognised as a virgin be evoked as a

[6] In that same page, Campbell cites the works of Louis Montrose, Laura Levine and S. N. Garner as examples of this view. I would add to the list James Calderwood (see Calderwood 1991, 423-4) and to some extent Nuttall 2000.

[7] Perhaps the most explicit example of this tendency is the aforementioned Campbell 2015; see Campbell 2015, 8 for other examples of this tendency such as Marilyn French, Burton Raffel and Dianne Hunter.

[8] To the best of my knowledge, such an analysis has rarely been proposed. The closest reference is Montrose 1983, whose interpretation, however, is fully within the 'feminist' reading mentioned above, and in any case only partially considers classical literature. Campbell says he wants to consider the allusions to Diana, but he limits himself to noting passages and reprisals already known (cf. Campbell 2015, 9-10), without venturing into an analysis of the literary tradition of which they are part.

[9] All quotations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* refer to Shakespeare 2017.

guarantee of a loving relationship?

In actual fact, Renaissance culture knew that Diana could also represent other aspects of femininity, including motherhood. In Vincenzo Cartari's mythology manual (translated into English in 1599 under the title *The Fountaine of Ancient Fiction*),[10] among the various incarnations of Diana are Lucina, invoked as a protector of childbirth (see Cartari 2004, 58-9), and Natura, whose body is represented as "tutto pieno e carico di poppe" ("completely covered with breasts", 65; translation mine). Another hypostasis of Diana as a 'maternal' deity was Cybele, a goddess whose literary and iconographic tradition included various texts known to Renaissance England and whose importance in terms of both imagery and plot for two other Shakespearean plays, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*, has been pointed out by Elizabeth Hart (see Hart 2003, 350-4). The mention of Diana in Hippolyta's speech, then, not only is not surprising in itself, but it also helps to give substance and depth to the Amazon's reminder to her impatient husband that love requires its own time to be enjoyed.

But there is also a second meaning, which reconnects this passage to the well-accepted interpretation of the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta as heavily fractured by internal tensions. In Plutarch, Shakespeare could read that the marriage between Theseus and the Queen of the Amazons was the result of a war (see Nuttall 2000, 50; Taylor 2004, 49). The union between the two is then anything but peaceful, and Theseus himself shows awareness of this: "I wooed thee with my sword" (1.1.15). Nor is this the only problematic element. On the one hand, the ambiguous connotations of Theseus, a well-known ravisher of women (an aspect of his figure alluded to by Oberon later on, 2.1.77-80), have been noted by the scholars,[11] as well as the fact that those two characters are the parents of Hippolytus, the male protagonist of Seneca's *Phaedra* (see Nuttall 2000, 50-1). On the other, the Amazons were mythical creatures traditionally connected in Elizabethan culture not only with undisciplined femininity, but also with uncivilised lands (see Montrose 1983, 65-7): a factor that could be brought to bear in support of their desirability, as in Sir Walter Ralegh's *The Discoverie of Guiana* (1596), where the presentation of the land as 'virgin' served to exhort his peers to

[10] The influence of this text has been recognised in the works of Ben Jonson, George Chapman and Samuel Daniel, and has also been postulated for Shakespeare: see Hart 2003, 351, 368n18.

[11] For the ambiguity of Theseus' character with regard to the sexual question, see Holland 1994 and Nuttall 2000. To this must be added his ambiguity as a political figure, resulting both from his apparently contradictory behaviour towards the legal problem posed by Hermia and Aegeus (on which see Herman 2014), and from the ambiguity of Greece in the Elizabethan imagination as a place of great civilisation, but also of great decadence (see Findlay 2015).

conquer it (see Montrose 1983, 76-7).

Theseus' first words in the play reveal a disturbing closeness to Ralegh's mentality. In complaining about the moon slowing down the wedding time, the Duke of Athens compares her to a "stepdame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's revenue" (1.1.5-6): a reference to the economic practice of the time whereby "a widow paid a jointure . . . out of her late husband's wealth, just blocking or reducing the income of his young heir" (Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 121). A. B. Taylor is right: his is an "earthy, practical" language (Taylor 2004, 50),[12] belonging to a conqueror who cannot wait to enjoy the fruit of his labours. Hippolyta's response is a peaceful but determined rebellion: Theseus may have conquered her, but the time and manner in which he will 'enjoy' his conquest are decisions that do not pertain to him. In a certain sense, Hippolyta is trying to bargain on the only ground on which she still has autonomy: referring back to Diana and her image as Queen of a world beyond the law of men is a way for her to recall her right not to be treated just as a new-conquered land to be plundered.

2. *MND* 1.83, 86-7, 89-90

The passage marks Theseus' final decision in the case of Hermia and Aegeus. We find here the first explicit mention of the goddess within the play:

> THESEUS Take time to pause, and by the next new moon,
> . . .
> Upon that day prepare either to die
> For disobedience to your father's will,
> . . .
> Or on Diana's altar to protest,
> For aye, austerity and single life.

The problem posed to Theseus is far from trivial. On the one hand, Aegeus appealed to an "ancient privilege" (1.1.41): a term "closely associated with the authority of the Ancient Constitution, the privilege of Parliament, habeas corpus and *Magna Carta*" (Herman 2014, 11). The insistence on law is also reminiscent of Plutarch's Theseus, who founded Athens on the assumption that the Athenians would not be ruled by the absolute power of a ruler, but by respect for the law (cf. Herman 2014, 7).[13] The Athenian elder (who bears

[12] As Herman points out, in Elizabethan England a widow's rights were enshrined in law, and she could defend them if they were challenged (cf. Herman 2014, 9). That Hippolyta calls Theseus to order is yet another nuance of this dialogue, which paints a less than flattering portrait of the Duke of Athens.

[13] This makes the city and its constitution, in not a few political texts of the time,

the name of the Duke's mythical father)[14] is thus calling Theseus to respect his duties as a ruler. On the other hand, however, no one in Elizabethan England could be forced to marry against his or her will (cf. Herman 2014, 17): the right that Aegeus asks Theseus to sanction is therefore not only unjust, but also illegal (and Herman notes that "Shakespeare . . . casts Hermia's response in terms that recall . . . England's political system", Herman 2014, 11).

Theseus is confronted with an impossible situation: whatever he decides to do, he will end up breaking a law; he must therefore seek a compromise. To put it mildly, he does not do a very good job: shutting Hermia up in a convent may save her life, but it will also mean imposing on her another fate she didn't choose, and it is questionable whether it would satisfy her father.[15] Nor does the Duke do much to hide his opinion of what kind of life it is: "to live a barren sister all your life, / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (1.1.72-3). He is certainly pressuring Hermia to submit to her father, but the fact remains that this description could not be presented in more derogatory terms. Not only is there no reverence for the goddess in Theseus' words: his language carries forward the problematic image of woman's only value as a 'fruitful' land to be cultivated by a man, with almost no other worth or use. It is no coincidence that Hippolyta does not like this solution at all, something Theseus realises in the famous line "What cheer, my love?" (1.1.122), to which a gesture of annoyance or disapproval is matched in numerous performances (cf. Campbell 2015, 7; Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 80-2, 128).

3. *MND* 1.1.209-10, 213

The second direct mention of the goddess in the play occurs a few lines after:

> Lysander Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
> Her silver visage in the watery glass,
> . . .
> Through Athens' gates have we devised to steal.

a fitting model for the relationship between the sovereign and the laws: see Herman 2014, 5-8.

[14] See Hodgdon 1986 on an interesting difference in the text of the play between the first *quarto* (printed in 1600) and the Folio, where Aegeus takes the place of Philostratus as 'master of revels' in 5.1.

[15] It should also be noted, as Chaudhuri does, that there were no convents or nuns in England after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 125): what Theseus proposes to Hermia is another example of a life frowned upon by Elizabethan culture.

The name used here by Lysander is the epithet that the goddess shares with her brother Apollo: in the words of the young lover, it describes the perfect concord between him and Hermia, similar to the well-known harmonious relationship of the two divine siblings as representatives of the two major heavenly bodies, the sun and the moon.[16] Chaudhuri finds Lysander's juxtaposition of the virgin goddess with their elopement ironic (see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 135), but I do not think this is the case. The flight is a consequence of Hermia's rebellion against her father, and has as its destination the home of a female authority figure (an aunt of Lysander): it thus falls to all intents and purposes into the sequence of the various female rebellions against male authority in the play. Moreover, Aegeus, in presenting his case, had already accused Lysander of having "by moonlight, at her window sung" (1.1.30), and also "Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight" (3.1.45), as Peter Quince will remind us (one of the many details underlining the similarity between the two stories). In short, as the fruit of a woman's desire to decide on her own life, the clandestine relationship between Hermia and Lysander is fully entitled to the protection of the goddess.

And yet, Chaudhuri is not wrong: even if it is not the case identified by him, there is indeed irony in Lysander's choice to place their relationship under Diana's protection. As may be gleaned from a long literary tradition, in the myths concerning the figure of the goddess purity and violence go hand in hand. Not just that: the former is often the cause of the latter. In Seneca's *Phaedra*, it is precisely the purity of Hippolytus, a follower of Diana, that makes him attractive, triggering not only the dreadful passion of his stepmother, but even forcing the moon to stop and contemplate him, as described in a passage in the second Chorus of the play (*Phae.* 785-94).[17] In an opposite but similar case, the protagonist of John Lyly's play *Endymion* (1588, printed 1591) nurtures a passion for the nocturnal aster that takes on the features of a true, 'carnal' desire that ultimately leads Endymion to try and become similar to his beloved object (see Knoll 2014). The 'cult' of Queen Elizabeth also exalted her beauty and desirability, in a way that added to the social tensions of Renaissance England towards a woman in government (see Montrose 1983, 63-4). In other words, Lysander may be using the image of the moon as a guarantee of the purity of the relationship between him and Hermia, but behind that lies a potentially violent meaning.[18]

[16] Their relationship is the first aspect of Diana presented by Cartari: see Cartari 2004, 55.

[17] In John Studley's translation, the generic mention of the moon in the Latin text was replaced with explicit mention of the goddess: "when from high Starbearing poale Diana downe did looke / On thee . . . / Shee could not weilde her weltring wayne . . . / thou didst cause hir busines, and madest her in a maze" (Seneca 1581, 66).

[18] In this sense, Lysander's use of Apollo and Diana's relationship as a model for

The ambiguity is further emphasised by two other details. In the next line, Hermia tells Helena that she and Lysander are to meet in the same place where the two girls "upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie / Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet" (1.1.215-16). A few lines earlier, Lysander recalled meeting Hermia in that very place (1.1.166-7). Put together, these two images evoke a third, that of a Lysander who 'intruded' into a peaceful, all-female space and thus fell in love with a girl: a recurring narrative pattern in the first three books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where, however, it ends in an attempted violence against the young woman (usually a follower of Diana).[19] By using its basic elements to recount, in retrospect, how Lysander and Hermia met, and combining it with the ambiguous image of the moon, Shakespeare thus casts a shadow over the relationship between the two young lovers, suggesting that it contains within it the same spectre of violence that we have seen at work in the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta. And in fact, once they are in the woods, Lysander will make an attempt on Hermia, and her rejection will be the beginning of a "totally confused and progressive nightmare for all the young lovers" (Taylor 2004, 54), forced to confront the negative sides of their desires.

4. *MND* 2.1.155-64

The following passage is one of the most studied in the entire play:

> OBERON That very time I saw . . .
> Flying between the cold moon and the earth
> Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
> At a fair vestal, throned by the west,
> And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
> As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
> But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
> Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
> And the imperial votaress passed on
> In maiden meditation, fancy free.

the one between him and Hermia may constitute an (unintentional?) self-censorship on his part, aimed at calming the fears of his beloved, who seems to harbour a subterranean distrust of men's faithfulness (see 1.1.173-6, 2.2.57, 65; cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 133, 172).

[19] The first myth to begin the sequence, as John Heath notes, is that of Apollo and Daphne (cf. Heath 1991, 234), mentioned by Helena in the *Dream* as a tragic reversal of roles between herself and Demetrius: "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase" (2.1.231). In doing so, the other pair of lovers is also drawn into the spectrum of male violence against the female universe.

Scholarship has long recognised in this passage an explicit homage to Elizabeth, through the re-proposition of a series of iconographic elements that refer to the best-known aspects of the 'cult' of her person, which in the years when Shakespeare wrote the *Dream* permeated English art and literature.[20] As the main mythological figure associated with the Queen,[21] Diana was a central figure in these texts. In *The Araignment of Parys* (1580), a play written by George Peele to be performed before Elizabeth, the famous myth of the judgement of Paris is rewritten to end with the intervention of the goddess, who takes the apple away from Venus and gives it to the only woman truly worthy of the prize, i.e. Elizabeth herself (cf. Montrose 1980). Eight years later, John Lyly's aforementioned play, *Endymion*, comes perhaps to represent the highest and most complete literary manifestation of this ideology, with its exaltation of the moon/Diana as a beneficent and 'inspiring' force (see Khomenko 2010). In this, Lyly's comedy would be followed by Sir Walter Ralegh's poem *Praisd be Dianas faire and harmless light* (printed in the 1593 anthology *The Phoenix Nest*), where the virgin moon goddess is exalted as the source of all virtue and true knowledge. Here the strong parallels Shakespeare's passage has with the literature of the time may clearly be seen.

But many critics have also noted that the homage is somewhat equivocal in tone. Oberon's description of the moon as "cold" and "watery" (2.1.156, 167) recalls Theseus' earlier and very unflattering description of consecrated virginity as a barren life. Nor does it help that the homage to Elizabeth is placed at the beginning of a tale explaining the birth of a flower that Oberon intends to use to humiliate his wife, a character Shakespeare has presented in a manner reminiscent of the goddess. 'Titania', i.e. 'daughter/daughter of a Titan', is in fact an epithet that Shakespeare takes from the *Metamorphoses*, where it is used for several female characters of divine progeny (cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 52), including Diana at the moment when Actaeon stumbles upon her bathing ("ibi perluitur solita Tytania lympha", "while the progeny of Titans bathed at her usual spring", *Met.* 3.173; translation mine).[22] Titania also enters the *Dream* as the leader of a procession of fairies, intent on avoiding the company of her male counterpart,[23] and refuses to surren-

[20] For the connections between the Shakespearean passage, the official portraits of Elizabeth and the many entertainments organised by various nobles for the sovereign, see in particular Yates 1975, 112-19; Montrose 1980; Hunt 2001.

[21] Cf. Yates 1975, 76-80, for how Diana as goddess of the Moon and Nature is positioned within the broader recovery in Elizabethan ideology of the cultural tradition of the 'imperial theme', modified to suit Elizabeth.

[22] The quotation comes from Ovid 1984. The use of the Latin name can be seen as evidence that Shakespeare read Ovid in Latin, since the epithet is absent in Golding's translation (see Barkan 1980, 354).

[23] In this regard, the similarity noted by Harold Brooks between the dialogue be-

der to Oberon an Indian boy, the son of her "votaress" (2.1.123: the same term that defines the vestal), who for her is a pledge and reminder of their bond. The poetic description of female friendship that follows represents "a moment of female bonding" (Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 156), an expression of nostalgia for "a feminine world rich with all the mysteries of fertility, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (Calderwood 1991, 416), which recalls the well-known iconography of Diana at the head of a procession of only women. That the homage to Elizabeth thus opens a discourse dedicated to exposing Oberon's revenge against a character inspired by the goddess is indeed problematic.

It is also undeniable that the Elizabethan 'cult' itself had ambiguous overtones due to its use as an instrument of political control. John N. King has noted that it is only from the 1580s onwards that the reference to Diana in the official portraits of the Queen shifts from emphasising Elizabeth's virginity as a temporary condition to be resolved in marriage to its exaltation as a demonstration of her virtuousness (see King 1990, 36-58). Elizabeth's 'tyrannical' attitude towards her ladies-in-waiting, who could only marry with her approval, is also well known (see Montrose 1983, 77-80): an attitude also traceable in the character of Diana, who punished the girls who did not respect their vow of chastity. There had also been those who tried to use the 'official' imagery of the Queen to invite her to marry or to propose themselves as suitors, as in the case of the various entertainments offered to Elizabeth by the Earl of Leicester between 1566 and 1575 (see Montrose 1980, 441-4). Put simply, the very imagery that in theory was supposed to pacify the realm under the adoration of the sovereign risked contributing to tensions, and not a few critics, including Montrose and Maurice Hunt, have recognised the presence of these in the *Dream* itself.[24]

Usually, however, these notations prefer to dwell on the 'masculine' aspect of the matter, on how Shakespeare's play, through Titania's ridicule through Bottom, would deploy a kind of revenge and compensation of men for having to obey a woman. Instead, I would tend to see in it a negative representation of the male (embodied by Oberon) as the oppressor and exploiter of a female universe that deserves quite different attention. Links with what we have seen so far in the play support this hypothesis: Titania's nostalgia for her all-female friendship with the Indian Queen recalls both the friendship of Helena and Hermia shattered by the arrival of men, and Hippolyta's

tween Puck and the Fairy at the beginning of Act 2 and the one between Cupid and a Diana nymph in the second scene of Act 1 of John Lyly's *Gallathaea* is interesting (see Shakespeare 1979, 26).

[24] Maurice Hunt proposes to recognise in the *Dream* a political allegory in which Bottom represents the Duke of Anjou and Titania Elizabeth, who is mocked for refusing Leicester's court and instead favouring the Catholic suitor: see Hunt 2001.

defence against Theseus' 'exploitative' mentality, which Oberon seems to share. Titania and her rebellion come to be, from this point of view, a sort of 'hypostasis' of all these female rebellions, further emphasised by her representation as inspired by the figure of the virgin goddess. In turn, Oberon comes to be a sort of 'hypostasis' of male violence[25] that would like to invade and possess the female universe, and the very use of 'Elizabethan' imagery in such a derogatory tone qualifies him as such. In the words of Sir Walter Ralegh, in the aforementioned poem, Diana/Elizabeth is the only guarantee of true knowledge: "A knowledge pure it is her worth to know: / With Circes let them dwell that think not so" (16-17).[26] And, as Montrose points out, in *The Araignment of Parys* Peele already deprecated the character of Paris as an arrogant and ambitious man, destined to cause the ruin of Troy (see Montrose 1980, 436-8), to celebrate instead, through Diana, the virtues of Elizabeth. Seen against this light, Shakespeare's text can also be read as a subterranean criticism of Oberon, as someone who does not understand how one should really relate to the female universe.

5. Titania, Bottom and the Myth of Actaeon

Contrary to the other points of this article, this section does not deal with a specific passage; nevertheless, the two scenes comprising the encounter between Titania and Bottom (3.1.108-92, 4.1.1-44) constitute a pivotal moment for this analysis since, as Leonard Barkan pointed out, Shakespeare constructed this passage around a reprise of the myth of Diana and Actaeon in Ovid's version (*Met.* 3.138-259; cf. Barkan 1980, 342-3). Here too, the operation performed by the playwright is situated within his cultural context: the myth of Actaeon was among the most renowned in Elizabethan literature and art (see Barkan 1980, 332-4), and only a few years before Shakespeare's play, Edmund Spenser offered, in *The Faerie Queene*, no less than two different takes on the myth.[27]

The scene has also been one of the most widely discussed concerning the 'sexual politics' of the *Dream*; interestingly enough, the discussion of it has moved from an almost morbid insistence that the two should have sex[28] to an equally embarrassed denial that this is what happens. James Calderwood is perhaps the most explicit example of the latter critical stance: in his article,

[25] See below, at section 6, for a more in-depth consideration of the literary tradition on Oberon.

[26] I quote the text from Ralegh 1962, 10-11.

[27] Of particular interest is the second, in book 7, which represents another 'comic' rewriting of the story: see Quilligan 1987.

[28] Jan Kott famously stated that Titania "longs for animal love" (1964, 239).

he goes to great lengths to propose another interpretation of the passage according to which what attracts Titania to Bottom is a more 'spiritual' desire for mortality and motherhood, unattainable for the ethereal Fairy Queen (cf. Calderwood 1991, 419-25). Other recent studies, such as those of A. B. Taylor and Robert Carver, reveal a different awkwardness: while they accept that Titania's attraction is sexual in nature, they seem to note only her more negative connotations, through her resemblance to characters such as the nymph Salmacis (the 'rapist' of Hermaphroditus in the fourth book of *Metamorphoses*: cf. Taylor 2004, 58-9) and the matron who mates with Lucius in the form of an ass in Apuleius (cf. Carver 2007, 437-42). I wonder whether we should not recognise here a side-effect of the 'feminist' analysis of the play that has long dominated the critical discourse around the *Dream*, offering an interpretation of what happens between the Queen and the donkey as a paradigmatic example of the humiliation of women for the pleasure of a male audience: an interpretation aided by the fact that technically what happens is the result of Oberon and Puck's double manipulation.

I believe that although all these interpretations have valid points in their favour, they tend to ignore some important elements that suggest how the encounter between Titania and Bottom can be seen in a positive light without necessarily denying its ambiguities. Taylor, for instance, acknowledges that the character of Salmacis "could be seen *in bono* [sic] as a figure for an ideal marriage" (Taylor 2004, 60), and Barkan, in expounding the various and different interpretations of the myth of Actaeon in Renaissance culture, links Shakespeare's play to one of the positive ones (see below).[29] Calderwood points out that what actually happens is 'not' what Oberon has in mind, either because "his charm calls for Titania not to enjoy her new-found love" (Calderwood 1991, 420), or because Bottom is not portrayed as a character inclined to take advantage of the situation, or because if this were the plan, then we would be faced with the paradox that Oberon thinks that "the best way to teach a wife obedience is to encourage her to make a cuckold of him" (421). I would also add another detail. When Bottom wakes up, he uses the words of Paul to the Corinthians (1Cor. 2.9) to describe his experience: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen . . . what my dream was" (4.1.209-11; see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 242). Chaudhuri recalls how in that letter Paul stresses how God chooses the poor and the 'foolish' over the rich and the wise to work his wonders (cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 89-92). Although a parodic use of this reference is technically possible, yet I find it difficult that an author, in a still officially Christian culture, could have thus openly mocked the New Testament.

To sum up, it is my opinion that what happens between Titania and Bot-

[29] For the negative interpretations, see Barkan 1980, 323-6.

tom can be interpreted as a positive moment in the *Dream*, more specifically as the first time when a female character obtains control over her body and desires.[30] The encounter with Bottom allows Titania to satisfy, also 'through' sexual desire, her claim to a position, if not of power, at least of equality in sexual relations. Nor does this imply excluding the negative or ambiguous sides of the scene noted by previous studies: that Titania's treating of Bottom highlights characters of possessiveness and narcissism[31] is part of the description of the sexual relationship as a combination of violence and beauty in the *Dream*, and that the scene is the result of a male manipulation (even one that does not exactly achieve the desired effect) in itself is not enough to nullify its positive aspects.

The very use of the myth of Diana and Actaeon as a hypotext is, in this sense, revealing. In Ovid's poem, this myth, in marking the 'climax' of the tales of violence and rape against Diana's followers in the first three books, also constitutes a tragically ironic reversal of them: unlike the previous male ravishers, Actaeon penetrates the 'heavenly' feminine space without violent intentions, and the fate that befalls him is the result of a misreading of the situation by the goddess, defending herself against what she mistakenly perceives as an aggression (see Heath 1991, 241-2). The same opposition is repeated in Shakespeare's play. After so many examples of voluntary and violent invasion of female space by men, Bottom's represents a completely fortuitous case, and while previously women suffered from it, this time it positively resolves itself into an opportunity for the female character to exercise her freedom. For Shakespeare's text, Bottom's scene thus preserves the 'paradoxical' value of its literary counterpart. Even later (especially in 4.1.1-44), Bottom remains innocent of any attempt to take advantage of his situation (cf. Calderwood 1991, 424). In this, he recalls the other great model of his characterisation, the Lucius of Apuleius' novel (in turn modelled on Actaeon: see Barkan 1980, 352-3), who during his coupling with the matron maintains a rational approach to the situation, thus dissipating any morbid potential and highlighting the paradoxical co-presence, in the woman's attitude, of innocence and practicality that guarantees her eventual satisfaction (cf. Carver 2007, 439-41). The same thing happens in the Shakespearean scene, with the contrast between Bottom's practical attitude and Titania's authoritarian but at the same time comforting behaviour, which recalls that of the matron (cf. Carver 2007, 442) and which actually seems to give her

[30] So much so that Titania ends up echoing Oberon as she retires with her lover to a secluded place: "The moon, methinks, looks with a watery eye" (3.1.189-91).

[31] Not to mention a sort of maternal instinct, which led to see it also as a displacement on to the lover of the attentions she initially paid to the Indian child: see Montrose 1983, 65.

pleasure – that of finally being the mistress of her kingdom (like the goddess on whom she is modelled).

The fusion of the two models, Ovid and Apuleius, is also recognisable in another respect. As Barkan points out, at the beginning of the play Bottom "is an Actaeon of the Apuleian . . . kind . . a boastful, inquisitive figure" (Barkan 1980, 354). As with Lucius, his metamorphosis is a 'punishment' for this attitude. However, in Apuleius' novel such metamorphosis is also a precondition for eventually meeting the goddess Isis and being saved, in a way that "prefigures the Renaissance understanding of the Actaeon story: that divine powers can find their basis in nature" (Barkan 1980, 353).[32] As an example of this reading, Barkan recalls Giordano Bruno's *Gli eroici furori*, published in England in 1585. In this text, Bruno interpreted the metamorphosis of Actaeon as a symbol of a mystical union between the lover and nature, which allows the former to become a god in his turn (see Barkan 1980, 342-6). Shakespeare, according to Barkan, takes up this reading through Apuleius: Bottom, through his encounter with Titania, "fulfils his deepest nature in asinine form" (Barkan 1980, 356) and becomes the protagonist of a sacred mystery that puts him in contact with nature (represented by Titania) and 'cures' him of his madness making him a sort of 'holy fool' (in full coherence with Paul's letter: see Barkan 1980, 358). And if we recall what has been said so far about the use of the myth of Diana to emphasise Oberon and Theseus' 'ignorance', this is an absolutely consistent interpretation: where the wise are rejected, the fool gets to love the goddess precisely because he is a fool, i.e. not conceited about his own knowledge.[33] And so, the relationship between Bottom and Titania becomes a true, symbolic and powerful scene of harmony, where the female universe, even within a delimited space, is free to express itself in all its aspects, positive and negative. Bottom becomes the means by which this universe can celebrate its own triumph, regaining the autonomy hitherto denied to it in the play and showing its essence as a beneficial power.

6. *MND* 4.1.70-3

Oberon Be as thou wast wont to be.
See as thou wast wont to see.
Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower

[32] It should be noted that the ending of Apuleius' novel is reported almost entirely by Cartari in his textbook, as he considers Isis as another manifestation of Diana: cf. Cartari 2004, 65-7.

[33] Cf. Barnaby 2015 on the social and political antithesis between nobles and artisans, and its connection to Paul's letter and its Renaissance interpretations.

Hath such force and blessed power.

With these words, Oberon frees Titania from the spell, cancelling the power of his first flower with that of another.[34] Given what we have said about Diana as a model for the representation of Hippolyta, the mention of the goddess in this context is highly significant: in a sense, Oberon is here restoring his wife to herself. There is also another connection, the one with the Theseus passage we saw in section 2, created by the recurrence of the name (of the three names used by Shakespeare to refer to the goddess, 'Diana' is the only one to be pronounced twice): in both cases, the mention of the goddess takes place in a context where a man decides the fate of a woman. However, the context and the language used are deeply changed. Then, Theseus, pursuing a masculine logic that the plot and imagery of the play denounce as fallacious, attempted to force Hermia to choose against her own will and desires, and had therefore described the chaste life in the service of the goddess as a sterile, empty life, devoid of all joy. Here, Oberon instead recognises that the power of the goddess' flower is "blessed": not only powerful, but beneficial, and he does so at the moment when, by his own admission, Titania is restored to herself. There is a newfound respect, in Oberon's words, for the figure of the goddess.[35]

It is undeniable that this is also the result of satisfaction at having obtained what he wanted all along, the Indian boy: now that the cause of the quarrel no longer exists, Oberon can afford to be magnanimous. It is perhaps a scandalous reality for us that, in the play, Oberon is always the character in control, even when he proves to be capricious, choleric and selfish. In this, Shakespeare is the heir to a literary tradition that started with the French romance *Huon de Bordeaux* (translated into English as early as 1515 by John Bourchier) and was later taken up by other Elizabethan plays where Oberon was portrayed as a veritable ruler of the elements (cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 50-1); in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser even used him as an allegory for Henry VIII (2.10.75-6). It should therefore come as no surprise that Oberon is depicted as the holder of absolute power, the legitimacy of which is never questioned, even when his actions are morally questionable (like the Jupiter of myth, which Taylor points out is a model for the character: see Taylor 2004, 58). The decisions of this power can, however, be criticised, according to a pattern of thought well known to the political culture of Elizabethan England, and in fact, as this analysis shows, a line of criticism of

[34] That the two flowers are two different plants is rightly reiterated by Campbell 2015, 11. On the possible identification with real plants see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 69-70.

[35] 'Newfound' when compared to the attitude he had previously shown: see section 4.

Oberon (and male power in general) is recognisable in the *Dream*.

Nor do I think it is at all coincidental that the Titania and Bottom scene is followed by the lovers' quarrel which the action of the play makes clear is another result of Oberon's interference. He sees Demetrius and Helena fall out in 2.1, after sending Puck to fetch the flower; by the time the latter has returned, he has already decided to intervene in the matter. In 3.2, he has barely managed to rejoice at the (supposed) success of his humiliation of Titania, when immediately Demetrius and Hermia enter the scene, revealing Puck's mistake. Oberon enchants Demetrius, but the arrival of Lysander and Helena prevents him from continuing: he is then forced to watch the whole long scene of their bickering, which 'he' has caused (not least because he uses the same flower with them that he uses with Titania: cf. 2.1.259). The result is that the scene of the somewhat genuine 'triumph' of Titania's femininity is followed by the failure of Oberon's masculinity, portrayed as the cause of the dissolution of every bond of human solidarity, be it the love of Lysander and Hermia or the friendship of the two girls.[36] The failure is all the more evident because, as different from the case of Titania, Oberon in this instance was really acting according to his original characterization in the romance tradition, as a just king, protector of lovers. In this sense, his failure echoes that of Theseus at the beginning of the play: just as the Duke of Athens, after winning a bride by force, misjudged Hermia's case by failing to interpret the law correctly, so now the fairy king, after toying with his Queen to humiliate her, is forced to realise that he failed to exercise his power properly.[37] The condemnation of oppressive male power, and its attempt to crush and repress the female universe, reaches its climax in that scene.

It is therefore significant that after Oberon decides, in addition to actually setting things right between the lovers, to free Titania from the spell (3.2.374-7): just as the 'desecration' of the goddess is accompanied by the collapse of human relationships, so their restoration and that of Titania go hand in hand. The quotation of Diana, in this context, underlines the changed aspect of the situation: the same Oberon who had despised the goddess now reverently invokes her power to get his Queen back. The succession of ac-

[36] Both bonds are evoked in this scene through the reprise of some important imagery we saw in section 3: first, Hermia evokes the bond between the two divine siblings in front of Demetrius to affirm her disbelief at Lysander's abandonment (3.2.51-5), then Helena laments the loss of the friendship with her (3.2.195-217). Both references have a touch of irony: Lysander has indeed abandoned Hermia, and Helena has been technically the first to break the friendship pact by telling Demetrius about the lovers' elopement.

[37] In my opinion, this parallelism has never been sufficiently emphasised by scholars, despite the fact that the characters of Oberon and Theseus, Titania and Hippolyta, have often been recognised as 'doubles' of each other.

tions proves to be symbolic: male power, faced with the failure of its ability to rule by violence alone, now consents to welcome the 'mysterious' female nature into the relationship, without claiming to dominate it. Oberon's decision will be followed, in the human world, by Theseus' decision to unite the pairs of lovers, at the end of a long sequence dominated by the theme of "musical . . . discord" (4.1.117), where the Duke of Athens and his bride are shown hunting together. It is worth remembering that hunting is Diana's main activity, and that Hippolyta is an Amazon: to see her re-enter the scene now armed, riding alongside Theseus, proudly recalling other hunts with mythical heroes such as Hercules (4.1.111-7), is a visual signal that, like Titania, Hippolyta has been restored to her original identity.

Much has been debated about the reasons for Theseus' decision to help the lovers and I personally agree with those who argue that psychological or factual reasons do not really explain it (cf. Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 239). On a symbolic level, however, it can be read as a consequence of Oberon's failure: having ascertained through his fairy counterpart the fundamental inefficiency of a male-only power, Theseus decides to renounce the ancient law represented by Aegeus and establish a new one, in which the female world is no longer simply repressed in the name of male prevalence, but the two sexes are enabled to live harmoniously together. The subsequent dialogue of 5.1.1-27, underlines this new harmony even more: in that scene, the Duke, instead of simply repressing his bride's opinions about what happened, allows her to make him reconsider the matter from a different point of view.[38]

7. *MND* 5.1.373-4, 376-7

> PUCK And we fairies, that do run
> By the triple Hecate's team
> . . .
> Following darkness like a dream,
> Now are frolic.

This is the last mention of the goddess in the play, and it is, in a way, the darkest. On the one hand, the chosen name, 'Hecate', evokes her 'black' as-

[38] Cf. Campbell 2015, 12-3 on Theseus' change and the positive interpretation of Theseus' behaviour in the last scene. My analysis, on this point, also owes much to Calderwood, and his interpretation of the events in the forest as the manifestation of Theseus' anxieties about his ability to 'handle' Hippolyta. Contrary to him, however, I do not see what happens between Oberon and Titania as a simple punishment of the woman to calm Theseus' anxieties; as for the scene of the lovers' quarrel as a manifestation of Theseus' anxieties about his abilities as ruler, that is my interpretation.

pect as ruler of the terrors of the night:[39] in Cartari's manual, Hecate is a representation of the moon that governs the elements and their changes (cf. Cartari 2004, 61; cf. the moon as "governess of floods" at *MND* 2.1.103), and also the deity who guards the crossroads of the highways (see Cartari 2004, 62). On the other, the passage recalls contemporary treatises on demonology, where Diana often recurred not only as the leader of a specific kind of spirits, the 'wandering' one, (see Shakespeare 1858, 383), but was also frequently quoted as the leader of the witches' gatherings (cf. Serafini 2015, 171-5). In a word, Diana here is the goddess of darkness and what is hidden there: a presence appropriate to Puck's description of the night as a world where wolves howl and graves open.

It may seem strange that this aspect of the goddess is invoked in the last scene of the play, at the conclusion of the wedding feast (see Chaudhuri's perplexity in Shakespeare 2017, 273), but a closer look reveals the presence of some very interesting thematic connections with the rest of the play. The adjective "triple", of Ovidian origin,[40] recalls the three names by which the goddess is called in the *Dream*, each linked to a different aspect of the love relationship: 'Phoebe' for the naive passion of the young, 'Diana' for the sexual maturity that contains the possibility of love, 'Hecate' for the mystery of the nuptial night. The play also opened under the image of Diana, whom Hippolyta evoked as the promise of the fulfilment of a love (see section 1): this night has now finally arrived, and rightly so, Diana presides over it in her most mysterious aspect. If we then count how throughout the play the sexual relationship has been described as containing a component of violence, that the name that most embodies Diana's 'dark' side is reserved for the highest degree of the amorous 'ladder' is consistent with the thematic course of the play.

But there is also another aspect. Along this analysis, we have seen how references to Diana serve to condemn a rigidly oppressive male mentality and to emphasise the 'sacred' nature of the female universe. The evocation of Hecate as Queen of a world of supernatural beings[41] is part of this logic: the name once again emphasises the 'sacredness' of the goddess (to which fairies are intrinsically linked) and of the female universe she represents. And if, as we have seen in section 4, the action of the play in its second half, after

[39] It is also the aspect that is most specifically linked to Renaissance culture, because although the two goddesses were already in some way connected in Greek religion (see Marquandt 1981), it was only in Late Antiquity and later in the Middle Ages that they were identified in the same figure: see Serafini 2015, 165-6.

[40] It recurs twice in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*, both in book 7: see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 274.

[41] Fairies themselves had demonic connotations in English folklore: see Nuttall 2000, 53-4.

3.2, can be viewed as a progressive abandonment and renunciation (even if only partial) of their attitude of repression on the part of the men, then the evocation of the goddess can also be read as a 'victory' of the female universe, in a night where every single female character in the play gets what she wanted.[42] The final evocation of the goddess in her victorious and sovereign aspect of the night of love thus completes the process of 'appropriation' of the relationship by the female characters that has been going on since the beginning of the play.

Conclusion

Another Shakespearean comedy of those years, *The Comedy of Errors* ends with a maternal female character reuniting a shattered and divided patriarchal family (cf. Hart 2003, 356). That play was set in Ephesus, the city of Diana-as-Cybele, and the seat of the Christian community to which Paul addresses a letter where he intervenes on matters of marriage, admonishing wives to submit to their husbands' authority, and these in turn to "love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church" (Eph. 5.21).[43] In view of what we have seen (and also counting the traditional interpretation of the play as written for performance at a wedding),[44] Paul's words may be thought to resonate with the *Dream* even more than they do with *Errors*, since, as we have seen, the former play at times stages a proper process of 'delivery' and 'validation' of femininity against a male power represented as legitimate but potentially tyrannical.

In this process, the virgin goddess of hunting does indeed play a fundamental role in the imagery of the play. From the initial reference to Hippolyta to the evocation of Puck, the quotations, allusions and references to Diana mark the stages of a path that starts with the female characters defending themselves against repressive male violence (see sections 1-4) and ends with them achieving a new, more satisfying position in the relationship (see sections 5-7). In the first four passages, Diana recurs as an embodiment of the female, whose disrespect highlights how questionable the attitude of male

[42] On this aspect of the *Dream* as a "wish fulfilment . . . of its female characters" (Campbell 2015, 8), see Hopkins 2003.

[43] I quote the text from the Geneva Bible (1595).

[44] On this tradition, and the possible identifications of the wedding the play may have been written for, see Chaudhuri in Shakespeare 2017, 283-6. It would be interesting to ask why Shakespeare chose Diana as the main mythological figure for a wedding play, instead of either Juno or Venus, two classical goddesses traditionally more connected to matters of love and marriage (although Juno may be another model for Titania's: cf. Taylor 2004, 58).

characters as Theseus, Oberon and even Lysander is. By contrast, in the following scene with Bottom, the depiction of the weaver as a 'fool' allows him to penetrate Titania's bower and be loved by her: this comical reversal of the myth of Actaeon permits the Queen of the fairy world (who is modelled after the goddess) to show the true colours of a harmonious relationship, which contrasts with Oberon's failure to solve the problems of the lovers. The last two passages then mark the acknowledgment by the men of the power of the female and the now open possibility for women to take part in the relationship without being oppressed – with the last mention of Hecate even putting the relationship itself under the protection of a female deity.

Shakespeare's use of Diana's imagery thus contributes to uphold the current critical interpretation of the *Dream* as proposing and endorsing a process of harmonization and 'reconciliation' of the two sexes in the marital relationship, mainly through a re-evaluation of the female experience. Not just that: it also once again reveals how carefully and how skilfully he read his ancient texts, and reused them to replenish and substance its own work, to give depth to what remains, to this day, one of the most fascinating and intriguing amongst his comedies.

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