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Something of Great Constancy: Representing and Reading Fairies on the Tudor Stage

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> Son Altesse ne se plaignit en aucune façon de la mauvaise réputation dont elle jouit dans toutes les parties du monde, m'assura qu'elle était, elle-même, la personne la plus intéressée à la destruction de la *superstition*, et m'avoua qu'elle n'avait eu peur, relativement à son propre pouvoir, qu'une seule fois, c'était le jour où elle avait entendu un prédicateur, plus subtil que ses confrères, s'écrier en chaire: « Mes chers frères, n'oubliez jamais, quand vous entendez vanter le progrès des lumières, que la plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas! » (Baudelaire, p. 52 [« Le Joueur généreux »])

According to François Truffaut, who was interviewing Alfred Hitchcock about *North by Northwest*, the director had eschewed notions of cause and effect: the MacGuffin had been boiled down to its purest expression: nothing at all. The espionage that drove the plot did just that: it drove the plot.[1]

Belief

I began by thinking I wanted to talk about belief. In fact, my paper was going to be called, "I don't believe in fairies": had I used that, you might have thought, "Ay, ay: the Peter Pan of the academic world".

1 See Truffaut, *passim*.

I seem to have grown up a bit recently. Why? The problem of belief never disturbs audiences watching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a playhouse. Why is that?

First, because the notion of the play as a dream is not only proclaimed in the play's title but also infused throughout the play. In a dream, according to Philip Goodwin, who was writing in about 1657, "men deceive themselves if they take the signs of things for the natures of things, mere shadows for substance. In a dream are thoughts of things, not the things thought" (Goodwin, pp. 11-12; cited Clark, *Vanities*, p. 302). Fairies in a dream are obviously fictitious. Second, because there are as many truths or realities as there are productions. Third, belief in what? The signifiers or the signified? Are fairies, by their nature, both signifiers and signifieds?

It follows that it is difficult to relate a theatrical experience involving the supernatural, where a text may be reproduced in a myriad of ways, to our sense of what might have been the ideological contexts for magic and religion. Does this mean that we cannot use a playtext like this to test, say, a central thesis of Max Weber concerning modernity? He argued in "Science as a Vocation" (1918-19) that "the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world" (Weber, p. 155). Is the distance between cultural history and cultural theory, on the one side, and antiquarianism, on the other, unbridgeable? More generally, it is extremely difficult for us to eschew regressiveness, shed our dominant and reductive attitudes, marinated as they are in nineteenth-century scientific rationalism and current models of evolutionary development, and recover the ways in which popular magic was regarded in the age of Shakespeare, assuming that it *was* an informing context for the play.

A defining example: at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon, king of the fairies, blesses the chambers of the house, presumably Theseus' palace (V.i.379-400[2]). How might we read this? How, in Shakespeare's time, was it performed on stage? The speech describes what was termed a sacramental: in pre-Reformation England such a blessing would customarily have involved holy water to drive away demons, and this, sprinkled on the marriage-bed, was supposed to promote fertility. However, Thomas Cranmer disliked the blessing of objects, and this blessing, along with all other sacramentals, did not appear in

2 *MND* is cited in the New Cambridge edition of Foakes.

The Book of Common Prayer of 1549. (Hardly surprising: a clergyman had prescribed holy water as a specific against piles [Duffy, pp. 281-82, 439, 465-66].) Would godly Protestants in the audience discern either sinister shades of papistry (Oberon's consecrated field-dew as sham holy water), or an example of popular magic, open to demonic opportunistic interference? Only a couple of years later, in 1597, the future James I was to argue (in *Daemonologie*) that fairies such as Diana and her wandering court were demons (3.5 [p. 74]). Is this moment at the end of the play just charming, in the colloquial sense, or might the ceremony of charming have generated a *frisson* in performance?

In an analogous sequence in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, contemporary with the *Daemonologie*, the Queen of Fairies commands her "elves" (V.v.49) and "nightly meadow-fairies" (58) to "scour" (54) the whole of Windsor Castle with herbs and flowers, consecrating it to the ritual of the Garter. (Perhaps this use of sacramental flowers survives in the well-dressings of Derbyshire.) The stage action seems to have shunned that shred of the specific Catholic sacramental of holy water, which remains in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and replaced it by a less contentious ritual.

Overall, however, it is impossible to postulate a definitive interpretation of that earlier sequence in the *Dream*. The problem is paradigmatic: it is impossible to recover key details of practically any early *mise en scène*, any locating tone, any full meaning for parts of the play like this.

To turn now to the fairies themselves. The first significant fairy in the canon is conjured by Mercutio, but of course his Queen Mab does not herself appear. When describing her, was Shakespeare invoking a residual popular belief, in order for Mercutio, witty and agnostic (?), to mock it with attitude? And, by contrast, in Shakespeare's next play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the fairies are the *donné*, central to the action, was the author *affirming* traditional fairy-lore, offering a "retractation" (Spenser's word [Epistle to "*Fowre Hymnes"*, ed. Oram *et al*., p. 690]) of that implied mockery?

There is a further problem: *when* might fairy-lore have become residual? Well before the sixteenth-century Reformations, fairies had been associated with the olden days. In her tale, Chaucer's Wife of Bath begins thus:

> In tholde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> . . . . . .
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede. (ll. 857-61)

The Wife goes on to tell how fairies, practisers of heathen magical rituals, had been searched out and destroyed by limiters and friars of an unreformed Catholic church. Later, we have been told, Protestants separated magic from religion, so that, after the Reformation, fairies were hauled out of that siding of *false religion* in order to be hitched up to that same Catholic church which, two hundred and fifty years before, had supplied their inquisitional persecutors. This is all registered in the first part of a ditty by Richard Corbett (1582-1635), written during the reign of James I,[3] who brilliantly evokes a world purged of magic, only to dismiss both fairies and their exorcism by his witty and disbelieving tone:

A Proper New Ballad, Entitled The Fairies' Farewell . . . To be Sung or Whistled to the Tune of The Meadow Brow by the Learned, by the Unlearned to the Tune of Fortune [My Foe]

Farewell rewards and fairies,
Good housewives now may say,
For now foul sluts in dairies
Do fare as well as they;
And though they sweep their hearths no less
Than maids were wont to do,
Yet who of late for cleanliness,
Finds sixpence in her shoe? . . .

Witness those rings and roundelays
Of theirs which yet remain,
Were footed in Queen Mary's days
On many a grassy plane;
But since of late Elizabeth
And later James came in,
They never danced on any heath
As when the time had been.

By which we note the fairies
Were of the old profession,
Their songs were Ave Maries,
Their dances were procession;
But now alas they all are dead
Or gone beyond the seas,
Or further from religion fled
Or else they take their ease. (Corbett, pp. 47-48)

3 See Simpson, p. 740.

By naming two tunes, Corbett creates two perspectives on his text, one for the elite and one for rustics or the unlearned. Nevertheless, there *are* locating tones here: perhaps Shakespeare and Corbett were quietly mocking the Calvinist position that men, having fallen, were peculiarly vulnerable to the snares of papistry. They might have been thus tempted to have recourse to antique supernatural forms to explain what Lafew in *All's Well That Ends Well* called the "modern and familiar" (Shakespeare, *AWW*, ed. Hunter, II.iii.2). Spenser, after all, had desperately claimed that the words "elves" and "goblins" were derived from Guelphs and Ghibellines, the warring factions of Papist Florence.

So, if late medieval and early modern writers were aware that times were changing, it is almost impossible to fix dates for the changes. Titania enters Shakespeare's play from classical antiquity, Robin Goodfellow, the Puck, from an oral tradition, which, it is claimed in a ballad, derives from the Middle Ages. Here is the last stanza of a poem called simply "Robin Good-Fellow" (it was once attributed to Jonson):

> From hag-bred Merlin's time have I
> Thus nightly revelled to and fro;
> And for my pranks men call me by
> The name of Robin Good-fellòw.
> Fiends, ghosts, and sprites,
> Who haunt the nights,
> The hags and goblins do me know;
> And beldames old
> My feats have told;
> So *Vale, Vale*; ho, ho, ho!

We have to conclude that we are dealing with literary *topoi* with a long shelf-life, another reason for concluding that any certain engagement with ideology is almost impossible. Or it might be that appearances of fairies or evocations of fairyland in texts, signs of nostalgia and associated with nature as they are, are themselves indices of a sense of cultural change.

Perhaps, however, these excavations in the soil of text and folklore do reveal more specific ideological fault-lines. I have tentatively suggested that Shakespeare bowed to the pressures of Protestant thinking and rejected anything supernatural, anything akin to a miracle. More generally, was he happy with residual beliefs or, alternatively, disenchanted and, living in the dawning of an age of scepticism, seeking to expose them? Did he write from the position of

intellectual elitism, or did he assume that, if his audiences were content with the quaint practices of popular magic, so was he?

By contrast, sixty odd years later, the goddess Reason had obviously snatched Samuel Pepys into her grip:

> This day my oaths of drinking wine and going to plays are out, and so I do resolve to take a liberty today, and then to fall to them again. To the King's Theatre, where we saw *Midsummer's Night's Dream*, which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure. (Pepys, p. 56 [29 September 1662])

I presume Pepys was thinking primarily about the fairies. Some fifty years after that, well into the Enlightenment (Baudelaire's "[l]es lumières"), Alexander Pope was prepared to deploy fairy-like creatures, the sylphs that figure in *The Rape of the Lock*. He spelt out his intentions in the dedicatory letter to Arabella Fermor:

> The machinery, Madam, is a term invented by the critics, to signify that part which the deities, angels, or dæmons are made to act in a poem: For the ancient poets are in one respect like many modern ladies: let an action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the utmost importance. These machines I determined to raise on a very new and odd foundation, the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits. (Pope, ed. Butt, p. 217)

Pope therefore saw the use of spirits as a quaint rhetorical device, serving to make claims for significance. More interestingly, he also, impishly, links belief to gender. But might not ideological maps drawn by those who read as women indeed be different from those drawn by men? Were the fairies in Shakespeare originally perceived, by metropolitan or courtly elites, as being associated with rusticity, and old wives tales? Were they incorporated only to be used for amusing insets, singing and dancing, as in Greene's *James IV* and Jonson's *Oberon*? In both these texts they are described as "antics", a splendid word that has connotations of the antique, of revelry, and of the monstrous. However, there are no stage directions to give us a sense of their appearance.

Alternatively, one could invoke a distinction between believing *in* and believing *that*. Theseus in the *Dream* thinks one should be able to *believe in* the action of a play, thinking that any product of the poet's imagination was an airy nothing. I would postulate that Shakespeare gave us a cue in Hippolyta's rejoinder to her husband-to-be: the dramatist believed that he and his audiences could engage in a collective enterprise, *believing that* something of great constancy could

be generated by *thinking with* fairies. (The same sort of observation could be made about the deities in court masques. Oberon in Jonson's 1616 masque of that name is obviously an idealized version of Prince Henry.) The fairies in the *Dream* are functional, a way of marking patterns of the progression of love, from the infatuations of first sight, through confusion, to the rituals of betrothal and wedding, into the forgeries of the married state. Oberon and Titania offer a way of thinking *about* Theseus and Hippolyta: the link has been made visible in modern productions by the practice of doubling, and may have been similarly foregrounded in productions from the early modern period.

Having sketched the problems of relating texts to the forms and pressures of Shakespeare's time, I want to move further into *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. My argument is that Shakespeare was treading very carefully: I think I have detected traces of explosive and Catholic beliefs, which Shakespeare carefully defused. In the Queen Mab speech, Shakespeare is also musing upon (but not wholly endorsing) supernatural agency; in the *Dream*, counter-intuitively—because the whole plot is driven by the fairies—intention is invisible, nothing comes of nothing, and any interpretation we place upon the play's MacGuffin belongs in our age, not in Shakespeare's. It follows, perhaps, that they and the fairies in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* carry a much lighter ideological burden than the less important fairy in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Romeo and Juliet

Might we get a fix on Mercutio's Queen Mab speech that is firmer than any we can attach to the *Dream*? First, what is Queen Mab, and what is her function? Mercutio, in this instance a kind of witch-finder, claims she had appeared to Romeo in a dream. Dreams, of course were much discussed in the early modern period. The matter is too complex to set out here, but Mercutio's scenario suggests that this is a true dream, one that will come true as Romeo is afflicted by his love and Juliet's sexuality is kindled, a dream which, according to Homer, Virgil, and Macrobius, may have come through the Gates of Horn. Protestant thinkers accepted this distinction and then rehearsed the ancient categories of natural, divine, the demonic: so, if this is relevant, Queen Mab is a demon.

Now we need to look at two Jacobean dream-bringing Fairy Queens, much less known, who are far more sensational, presumably because they were associated not with anything religious but with magic and could therefore be coupled

with papist practices. The first is from the unpublished and untitled dramatic romance of about 1611 about Tom a Lincoln, the Red Rose Knight. Thomas Heywood may have written it, and the author seems to have internalised the King's opinion of fairies:

> *Enter Cælia, the Fairy Queen in her night attire*
> *Cælia*. Murder's black mother, rapine's midwife,
> Lust's infernal temptress, guide to foulest sin;
> Fountain of all enormous actions, night
> Horrid, infernal, dern [evil] and ominous Night,
> Run not, oh run not with thy swarfy steeds
> Too fast a course; but drive Light far from hence.
> What is't that hates the light, but black offence?
> And I abhor it, going now to tempt
> Chastest Hippolytus to hell-bred lust,
> To thoughts most impious, actions most unjust. (*Tom a Lincoln*, pp. 43-44)

What Queen Mab might do to young men is very explicit in a later text, Drayton's *Nimphidia* of 1627:

> And Mab, his merry queen, by night
> Bestrids young folks that lie upright [on their backs, supine].
> (In elder times the mare [nightmare] that hight)
> Which plagues them out of measure. (sig. Q1^{v})

I take it that this is a *monde renversé* image: females on top must be agents of effeminisation. This sexual demon may not appear, but Puck ominously says that, after the play is resolved, "The man shall have his mare again and all shall be well" (III.ii.463).

Shakespeare, however, chose not to include such topics of malefice and sexual practice. Moreover, Mercutio's tone is quite different, although, ultimately, equally misogynistic. Much of the speech comprises the description of Mab's person, a listing of the dreams she brings to others, and it concludes with a brief reflection upon her apotropaic aspects, the malefice she performs. What does it add up to?

First, the catalogue of dreams. Keith Thomas has written recently (*The Ends of Life*) on the way the political and religious assumptions about vocation made self-fulfilment difficult in the early modern period: careers only seldom lay open to talents. The dreams Mab brings are of fantasies, not only idle but also strait-

jackets to self-refashioning. All men might do is labour in their vocation: their vocation is their destiny. This little woman is a dead weight for young men clambering on the slippery tops of advancement.

Or we might say that Mercutio is simply indulging himself with an excessive feast of invention, at least in his description of the Queen's person, which feels pretty innocent. He goes "off on one": it's as though someone had invoked Murphy's law ("if anything can go wrong, it will"), then amused his mates with a fantastical description in the manner of an Irish tinker or bar-room pundit. Anything demonic *seems* to have been purged away. I suspect, however, the speech is best explored in the context of laddish relationships and the ideology of gender.

To do this I leap back to 1450 and 1451, when bands of Kentish protesters, out to poach the deer of the Duke of Buckingham at Penshurst, painted on their faces with black charcoal, calling themselves servants of the queen of the fairies, intending that their names should not be known (Purkiss, p. 67). Diane Purkiss intelligently asks how we should read this detail: to her suggestions I would add another—that these breakers of the king's peace were offering insult to injury, impugning the masculinity of the Duke, who could not stand up to puny creatures like fairies.

Mercutio also stresses that Mab is very small. It used to be thought that Shakespeare had invented the diminutive fairy (*MND*, ed. Foakes, p. 8; ed. Brooks, pp. lxxi-lxxv), of which there is a plethora of images in later books of fairy tales, but there are, in earlier texts, many references to small creatures, particularly elves, along with reports of the sighting of very small fairies, although Purkiss may be right to say that the notion that fairies are small comes far more from literary culture than from popular folklore (p. 6). (At the end of the play Oberon bundles together "elf and fairy sprite", also presumably Robin Goodfellow, the play's Puck [V.i.371].) Shakespeare seems to have playfully given the fairies names that suggest smallness, while requiring the parts to be played by non-dwarfish players, whether boys or adults we do not know. In Greene's romance-play, *James IV*, of 1590, five years earlier than the *Dream*, Oberon's attendants are dismissed as puppets by the bluff Bohan, who mocks King Oberon's image (Induction). However, there is evidence from a seventeenth-century droll that these roles were doubled with those of the Mechanicals, parts that obviously demanded adult actors (*MND*, ed. Holland, p. 24).

Shakespeare's Mab is all too obviously gendered: she performs what would, if the trivial (Pope's word) acts had been enacted by Puck, have been called knavish tricks, but which here are either omens of misfortune (I.iv.91) or have to do with female sexuality. Concerning Fortune, the speech does not seem to be choric; at its end Shakespeare seems, as always, careful not to impute *agency* to a supernatural being, as did the choruses in Greek tragedy: all Mab can do is create signs that bode misfortune. In this respect, she resembles the witches in *Macbeth*: *inclinant sed non urgent*—they sway but do not compel.

Basically, the speech is an insult to Romeo, implying that he has been unmanned by his infatuation with Rosaline and become superstitious, believing in his dream in the way that the dreams of women might make something of nothing. ("Queen" might have punned with "quean", a slut or hussy.) Mercutio, exposing Romeo's credulity, must have scored a palpable hit, for in Act Three, just after his friend has been killed by Tybalt, Romeo laments:

> O sweet Juliet,
> Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
> And in my temper softened valour's steel. (III.i.103-5)

In the same way, Troilus feels his heroic self has been destroyed by his love for Cressida. Like so many womanisers, Romeo and his friends seem to be misogynistic.

There are further misogynistic details: the word "midwife" signals a female target, but here is used figuratively for someone who helps to bring something into being. That is *OED's* definition, and its first instance is recorded as occurring two years later, in *Richard II*: "So, Greene, thou art the midwife to my woe" (II.ii.62). There, too, the word is used between men who seem homo-erotically bonded.

The state of midwives was an index of the state of a commonwealth. In "Mad-caps Oh the merrie time", Nicholas Breton evokes a golden age,

> When Gammore Widginne would not lose a lamb
> And Goodwife Goose would see her chickens fed,
> And Mother Midwife kindly where she came,
> With merry chat would bring the wise a-bed,
> And take the child and softly close the head:
> Then take the babe and bring it to the mother,
> God make you strong, to work for such another. (ll. 456-62)

However, a few years later, in Robert Anton's "The Philosopher's Fifth Satire, of Venus", we hear of "the bawdy midwife, and the pifering nurse" (p. 53).

The direction of Mercutio's speech alters at its end with a couple of Puck-like instances of mild malefice, plaiting the manes of horses and tangling the hair of sluts. The first is a widely recorded in folk literature (Thompson, ed., F366.2.1) and the second was associated with elves and, in Russia, with *domovois*. Mab's most important function is to induct maids into sexual practice, even engendering that disturbing phenomenon of female desire which effeminises any man who reciprocates.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Given that fairies could be categorised as demons, subject to ideological control, it is significant that Shakespeare's texts do not seem to have drawn the attention of the censorious. Despite the precedent set by Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, he obviously thought they might have done:

> *Puck.* My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,
> For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,
> And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger,
> At whose approach, ghosts wandering here and there,
> Troop home to churchyards. Damnèd spirits all,
> That in crossways and floods have burial,
> Already to their wormy beds are gone,
> For fear lest day should look their shames upon,
> They willfully themselves exile from light
> And must for aye consort with black-browed night.
> *Oberon.* But we are spirits of another sort.
> I with the morning's love have oft made sport,
> And, like a forester, the groves may tread
> Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red,
> Opening on Neptune with fair blessèd beams,
> Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams. (III.ii.376-95)

These fairy spirits can be more than harmless, in fact benign: the mother of the Indian boy, a "votress of [Titania's] order" (II.i.123), was happy to confide her new-born son to Titania, the goddess of childbirth, a reversal of the topic of the changeling, a deformed baby substituted for one the fairies had snatched away. (As Diana, the same goddess had a habit of exiling or killing any votary who got

herself pregnant [Purkiss, p. 178].) On the other hand, they or at least their actions can be frightening: the translation of Bottom, which sends the Mechanicals running from the stage, may be an index of the fear engendered by unpeopled spaces, in particular the wild wood. After punning on the word "shadows" (actors and spirits), Robin as Epilogue disowns and hands to the *audience* the responsibility for conjuring fairies, banishing them from the land of fairy in the woods into a land of dreams—was this a safety precaution?

> If we *shadows* have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended:
> That you have but slumbered here
> While these visions did appear;
> And this weak and idle theme,
> No more yielding but a dream. (V.iii.401-5, emphasis added)

Where Shakespeare had gone, others followed: recollections of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, along with the name Queen Mab and other details of Mercutio's speech, appear in Jonson's *Entertainment at Althorpe* (1603) and also, as we have seen, in Drayton's *Nimphidia*: in both texts Mab appears as Queen of the Fairies, but in Jonson she resembles Puck, whereas in Drayton she is the wife of Oberon.

Rather than being agents, Shakespeare's fairy monarchs and their crew are markers, deftly evoking various kinds of transgression. They would be dangerous if they were abrogating laws of nature, raising tempests or blighting crops. They are not folkloric versions of the classical Fates, although the word fairy is said to derive ultimately from the Latin *fatum*. Perhaps we should not engage morally with the fairies: they are there to demonstrate something about human behaviour (Purkiss, p. 8).

Again Shakespeare treads delicately: when we hear of the climate change goaded by the actions of Oberon and Titania, we realize that the speech is rhetorical, setting out the limits of fairy power: "on old Hiems' thin and icy crown / An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds / Is, as in mockery, set" (II.i.109-10) deploys the trope of what R. W. Scribner calls a moralized universe. "Pre-Reformation religion … believed that certain human actions could provoke supernatural intervention in the natural world, either as a sign or a punishment", and Scribner argued that this nexus came more forcefully to the fore after the Reformation (pp. 485-86).

The actions of Oberon and the mistakes of the Puck also reveal to us the fragility of constancy. Casting spells upon the eyes of the lovers alerts us to the fact that Helena's couplet, "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, / And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind" (I.i.234-35), may explain the iconology of the love-god, but it also implies that love *does* in fact originate in sight. Not only do Titania's spell-bound eyes make her into a kind of succuba for Bottom, but it is also notable that, after the men have been enchanted, Oberon calls after Helena, "Fare thee well, *nymph"* (II.i.245, emphasis added): if Shakespeare is "playfully [absorbing] the lovers into a quasi-mythological world" (Foakes, ed., n. to II.i.245), part of the game is the use of a word that was applied to those who were alive but doomed to die and to man-snatchers like Calypso (Purkiss, pp. 38-46)—and also applied to prostitutes. When he awakens, Demetrius addresses Helena with the same word (III.ii.137), and Helena echoes it by when recalling the moment to Hermia (226)—these are the only instances of the word in the play. We might well believe that fairies serve to make everything seem double.

To end where I began: *pace* Baudelaire, the devil may have been dealt with, but the MacGuffin lives on.

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