

**“But as a Form in Wax”: An Ecofeminist Reading of  
Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

**Angela Schumann**

Carolyn Merchant’s 1980 book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* is widely considered to be one of the founding texts—if not *the* foundational text—for the articulation of ecofeminism in the U.S. academy.<sup>1</sup> Ecofeminism, at its most fundamental, can be defined as “a range of perspectives that consider the links between the social organisation of gender and the ways in which societies are organised with respect to ‘nature.’”<sup>2</sup> At the heart of ecofeminism, as propounded by Merchant, lies the link between the domination of women and the domination of nature which is underpinned by the world view of a science that reconceptualises reality as a machine rather than a living organism.<sup>3</sup> Merchant relates a history of the ways in which nature has been anthropomorphised as female throughout Western and non-Western cultures, expounding the patriarchal mind-set in which “like wild chaotic nature, women needed to be subdued and kept in their place.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2002, Australian ecofeminist scholar Val Plumwood codifies Merchant’s philosophy of androcentric and anthropocentric structures in her work, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. She presents a pair of tripartite assumptions that she claims typify harmful sociological attitudes towards women, men, civilisation and nature:

(A) 1 The identification of the female with the sphere of physicality

and nature (woman = nature assumption)

2 the assumed inferiority of the sphere of women and of nature (inferiority of nature assumption)

3 the conception of both women and nature in terms of a set of dualistic contrasts opposing the sphere of nature to that of reason or the human (dualistic assumption)

**(B)** 1 the corresponding identification of the male with the sphere of reason, of true humanity and culture (men = reason assumption)

2 the assumption of the superiority of the sphere of reason, humanity and culture to that of nature (superiority of reason assumption)

3 the conception of the human or cultural sphere in terms of a set of dualistic assumptions opposing it to nature (dualistic assumption).<sup>5</sup>

In this article I will argue that the idea of a linked domination of women and nature by men, which is the central, unifying element of ecofeminist criticism, is explored in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the male characters consistently misunderstand, underestimate and seek to dominate, exploit and control the female characters and the natural world, which they often conflate. Through an ecofeminist analysis of male-female relationships within the play I will show that it is the men who are more childish, impressionable and less psychologically and emotionally developed, whilst the women are more rational, constant, and civilised, and wield reason more effectively than men. In doing so I will argue that the play challenges the hierarchical dualism of reason and nature that is identified by Merchant and Plumwood, thus subverting perceived traditional expectations.

Merchant identifies the oppression of women and the environment as having roots in the Early Modern Era.<sup>6</sup> She argues that such oppression is intrinsically embedded in the ideologies of the scientific and economic revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries, and that women's life-giving and nurturing capabilities had made them, along with nature, regarded as mere objects of scientific enquiry and industrial exploitation.<sup>7</sup> It is curious, therefore, that ecofeminists have largely neglected to explore the ramifications of this for Shakespeare criticism.<sup>8</sup> Surely Shakespeare, who has been seen by many critics as radically complicating and implicitly critiquing contemporary assumptions about social and political arrangements, would be an obvious testing-ground for a theory intending to

source social and political trends to the Early Modern period. I have chosen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as it is largely set in the natural world and centres around female characters that seem to both fulfil (on the surface) and yet defy cultural sexual stereotypes. There is an insightful chapter in Bruckner and Brayton's *Ecocritical Shakespeare* by Robert N. Watson called "The Ecology of Self in *Midsummer Night's Dream*" in which Watson highlights the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world of the play. However, it is surprising that there appear to be no ecofeminist readings or criticism of *The Dream* to date, especially since Shakespeare and ecofeminist criticism have a lot to offer each other. I will argue that in this play Shakespeare undermines, rather than reinforces, the patriarchal social structures that Merchant identifies as poisonous and that she claims would continue to oppress both women and the natural world for over 400 years.

The Elizabethan understanding of the relationship between the human mind, body and the natural world was that it was distinctly porous and potent. A person's connection with the mysterious elements could not be underestimated: "Man . . . lives in close relationship with the world about him. Diet, climate, and the stars may alter his temperament and his spirits."<sup>9</sup> The prevailing psychological and medical theory was based on Galen's four humours, which were affected very profoundly by the four elements—earth, water, air and fire.<sup>10</sup> Each person contains all four humours but in differing degrees, which affect their personalities accordingly. During the day the humours reign by turns, as they do throughout the seasons: in summer the blood flows more freely, and so choler is dominant, in autumn phlegm, winter lends itself to melancholy and spring to a sanguine disposition. At midsummer, then, when Shakespeare's play is set, the choler reigns supreme.<sup>11</sup> According to Anderson:

The choleric are easily provoked, given to treachery, and vehement in action; fierce in assailing but inconstant in sustaining the assault; inclined to envy, pride, prodigality and wrath. They are tall, lean, and brown. Their hair is black, crisp, and hard. If choler is corrupt, they are subject to evil passions and dreadful dreams.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the mysterious influence that nature was seen to have over mankind, it was also perceived as unmistakably female. Western culture "has historically identified women with nature, emotion, and the realm of the physical. It oppositely identifies men with culture, reason, and the realm of the mental."<sup>13</sup> In *The Death of Nature* Merchant relates a history of the ways in which nature has been anthropomorphised as female in Western culture.<sup>14</sup> There is a tension between her wild and destructive powers and

her nurturing powers, both of which are seen as inherently female qualities. Though in the pastoral tradition nature and women are represented as fruitful and yielding, "subordinate and essentially passive,"<sup>15</sup> "[l]ike wild chaotic nature," however, "women needed to be subdued and kept in their place."<sup>16</sup> Both nature and women can be blamed for catastrophes and utilised as an asset. They therefore required a firm, masculine hand and a short leash because "nature when plowed and cultivated could be used as a commodity and manipulated as a resource,"<sup>17</sup> as could women.

This kind of thinking underpins the patriarchal structure of Elizabethan England, in which Merchant claims that it has its roots. Masculinity was traditionally associated with daylight, the Sun, reason, civilisation, law, wholeness, firmness and constancy; femininity with night-time, the Moon, imagination, emotion, the woods, irrationality, softness and inconstancy. It is interesting to note that "nature" in Latin is a feminine word: *natura*. The male was thus superior to the female both psychologically, and also biologically: as Merchant notes, "Aristotle's biological theory viewed the female of the species as an incomplete or mutilated male."<sup>18</sup>

The association of women with the Moon through their changeability is expressed in a play of one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Lyly:

Now rule, Pandora, in fayre Cynthias steede,  
And make the moone inconstant like thy selfe;  
Raigne thou at women's nuptials, and their birth;  
Let them be mutable in all ther loues,  
Fantasticall, childish, and foolish in their desires,  
Demanding toyes:  
And starke madde when they cannot haue their will.<sup>19</sup>

Shakespeare consistently undermines, however, rather than supports the prevailing patriarchal structure of his culture, with its oversimplified view of human personalities. Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits to "unsex me here"<sup>20</sup> contains a subtle dig at Elizabethan biological theory. In asking to be made a man she is, on the surface, asking to become a more "complete" and capable human being, and yet in saying "make thick my blood"<sup>21</sup> she is implying the opposite, as a thickening of the blood was associated with illness.<sup>22</sup> Thus, she is (inadvertently) saying that to become a man is somehow to become less than what she was before. Lady Macbeth's intention is not to suggest masculine inferiority, but her language does suggest it. This implies that she has a subconscious awareness that this may be the case. Shakespeare also rejects the kind of essentialism that ecofeminists have often been falsely accused of: "There has been a

tendency to identify ecofeminism with an essentialist universalism . . . [which] unites all women through their essential life-giving, life-loving 'natures.'"<sup>23</sup> A quick contrast of Lady Macbeth with Lady Macduff would soon show that Shakespeare does not labour under this kind of essentialism. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* satirises traditional natural and sexual stereotypes, as I will demonstrate.

I will now analyse a range of male-female relationships that occur in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, applying Merchant's and Plumwood's model of ecofeminist criticism, and showing how, within each relationship, the play progresses from merely portraying examples of female subordination and association with the natural world to undermining this structure in two ways: firstly, by showing female characters to be intellectually and morally superior to the male characters, and secondly by showing that the "natural," "feminine" elements of imagination, instinct and emotion can sometimes be superior to the "masculine" elements of reason, order and convention.

### Father/Daughter

The showdown between Egeus and his daughter in Act 1 Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which Egeus demands that Hermia marry the man of his choosing, Demetrius, whilst Hermia insists that she will marry her lover, Lysander, or nobody, demonstrates the elements of Plumwood's tripartite sets of gender assumptions in action, grounded in Aristotelian biology, and undermines them.

The aristocratic family in Shakespearean England was patriarchal, with remote and formal relations between parents and children; daughters were often regarded as burdensome.<sup>24</sup> This is instantiated in Egeus' attitude towards his daughter: "As she is mine, I may dispose of her,"<sup>25</sup> and supported by popular Aristotelian biological conceptions. According to Aristotelian philosophy, whilst matter and form were unified within each individual, activity was associated with maleness and passivity with femaleness.<sup>26</sup> The act of procreation was seen as the planting of a man's seed, which contained the entire blueprint for a new life, into the cold, dead earth (the woman). Because, claims Merchant, "[f]orm reigned superior over dead, passive matter,"<sup>27</sup> it followed that: "The male was the real cause of the offspring."<sup>28</sup> Merchant has over-simplified Aristotle's theory of causality, which comprises of four causes for everything, but she is to an extent correct, as Aristotle sees the father as being the efficient cause, of the child.<sup>29</sup> This can help us to understand Egeus' reference to his godlike authority over Hermia: because he provided the form or blueprint for her person, he can indeed claim that "she is mine, [and] I may dispose of her"

(1.1.142). Theseus adheres to this belief when he tells Hermia her father "should be as a god" (1.1.47). Both of these men have conformed to Plumwood's woman = nature assumption—in which the woman has no agency but is owned by a man as a man owns land and may be "husbanded" accordingly—and the superiority of reason assumption, in which a man's decision must be obeyed unquestioningly, as he represents reason.

A close reading of this passage, however, undermines the validity of these assumptions. When Theseus says "look you arm yourself / to fit your fancies to your father's will" (1.1.117-8) his words contain another meaning. By "fancies" Theseus presumably means "capricious or arbitrary preference,"<sup>30</sup> but in Shakespeare's English "will" could equally mean "wilfulness, self-will; a whim"<sup>31</sup> (*OED* n1 9), so that Theseus is making a distinction without a difference, so to speak. The reasons of the father in desiring a particular match are no more rational than those of the daughter. Theseus is in effect telling Hermia, you must overcome your irrational desire in order to submit to your father's irrational desire. Merchant argues that this linking of woman with irrationality and man with rationality is rooted in Aristotle: "Socially, Aristotle found the basis for male rule over the household in the analogy that, as the soul ruled the body, so reason and deliberation, characteristic of men, should rule the appetites supposedly predominant in women."<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Egeus assumes that his choice is rational and Hermia's is not, simply because he is the man. Yet here we see that the father is just as irrational as the daughter, only he is unaware of his irrationality, which is based in pride and self-aggrandisement, whilst Hermia's is based in romantic love, and as such is more universally recognised as irrational and based on perspective: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,/ And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind" (1.1.234-5). As further proof of Egeus' irrationality, we know that Lysander is in no way less eligible than Demetrius:

I am, my lord, as well deriv'd as he,  
As well possess'd; my love is more than his;  
My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd,  
If not with vantage, as Demetrius; (1.1.99-102).

In fact, Egeus is aware that Demetrius has broken faith with Helena, showing himself to be a "spotted and inconstant man"(1.1.110). Perhaps he is offended that Lysander did not come to him instead of his daughter: he has all the advantages of Demetrius but made the mistake of courting the daughter and not the father. Egeus is selfish, narcissistic and controlling,

and accordingly the audience's sympathies lie with Hermia and her superiority is recognised. Furthermore, whilst an audience contemporary with Shakespeare may have supported Egeus' right to marry off his daughter to whomever he chose, his invocation of the death penalty upon his own child (1.1.44) is undoubtedly savage and extreme, and would have been recognised as such by an Elizabethan audience, showing, in this instance, the female to be the more civilised party.

### **Husband/Wife**

#### **Oberon and Titania**

Shakespeare uses the quarrels of the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, over who shall have possession of an orphaned Indian boy, to again explore what Merchant and Plumwood would identify as a dominating, dualistic male/female dynamic and to again parody, or deconstruct it. Titania is a more complex and mature character than Oberon. She wants the Indian boy out of love for his mother, "for her sake do I rear up her boy" (2.1.136). Conversely, "jealous Oberon" (2.1.24), who, like Egeus, suffers from a case of wounded male pride, only wants the boy as an exotic trinket—a "Knight of his train" (2.1.25)—and out of jealousy for taking Titania's attention away from him: "am I not thy lord?" (2.1.63). Although Michael Alexander claims that both fairies are "irrational and self-indulgent" and that their argument is a mere "jealous quarrel over the Indian toy-boy,"<sup>33</sup> he appears to have misunderstood the character of Titania by taking Oberon's accusations at face value. Titania's motivations run much deeper than Oberon's characterisation: her account in 2.1.122-137 of her nights with the boy's mother "in the spiced Indian air" (2.1.124) paints a beautiful picture of female friendship, loyalty, honour and duty.

In the introduction to the 1979 Arden edition of this play, Harold F. Brooks also views Titania as painted in conformity to the Early Modern patriarchal stereotypes of women, being fickle, irrational and unfaithful. Brooks draws a parallel between Titania and Demetrius, who displays these qualities in his betrayal of Helena. Brooks argues that both characters exhibited "perverse attitudes"<sup>34</sup> towards their lovers (Oberon and Helena respectively) prior to their metamorphoses, and have "have been put beside themselves in order to take them beyond themselves" as a result of the metamorphosis.<sup>35</sup>

This reading is flawed, however, and textual evidence acquits Titania of being a typical Early Modern portrait of female caprice. Demetrius left Helena out of selfish distraction and lust for another woman, whereas

Titania is distracted from Oberon through maternal and sisterly love. Thanks to the transformation, Demetrius is now compelled to keep his promises to Helena, whereas Titania has been made to break her promises to her votaress. Titania has indeed "forsover [Oberon's] bed and company" (2.1.62), but it is not, as Brooks indicates, because of a 'perversion' on her part, but rather because of Oberon's infidelity with "amorous Philida" (2.1.68).

Oberon justifies his adultery by accusing Titania of being unfaithful to him: "I know thy love to Theseus" (2.1.76). Yet Brooks sees Titania as justly undergoing the punishment of transformation, humiliation, deception and deprivation of her charge in order to purify her of her "aberration" and "fixation"<sup>36</sup>, whilst Oberon need not suffer or change. Furthermore, it is ambiguous as to whether Titania has even been unfaithful or not, as 2.1.76 does not clarify whether her "love to Theseus" is of a sexual nature (in fact, Shakespeare often uses "love to" in a non-erotic, non-romantic sense: see, for example, *As You Like It* 1.1.137, *The Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.34, *Richard III* 3.7.40). Titania dismisses his accusations as "the forgeries of jealousy" (2.1.81), which seems likely, considering that Titania never mentions Theseus, even when alone.

Titania and Oberon continue to defy Early Modern sexual stereotypes in their individual responses to the natural disasters that rage around them. Nature is upset and imbalanced because of the disruption within the fairy court:

And this same progeny of evil comes  
From our debate, from our dissension;  
We are their parents and original (2.1.115-7).

As in *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, disruption in nature represents an inversion or perversion of the "natural" and therefore right order of political familial power. Just as the monarch and the hierarchical order of society was seen as divinely appointed by God, so were the seasons, the heavens, and the entire natural world. Therefore, upsetting one disturbed the natural balance and thus upsets the other. Titania takes responsibility for this upset (2.1.115-7) and shows concern for how it affects mortals—in fact, a large portion of her monologue from 2.1.93-105 is concerned with the disasters that her argument with Oberon has brought upon the natural world and focuses on how it will affect mortals, from their crops to their livestock to their health, both mental and physical, to their entertainment and pastimes. Meanwhile Oberon is completely self-absorbed and shows no concern for the mortals. In response to Titania's acknowledgement that she and Oberon are the cause of such natural disruptions, Oberon's response is



childish and stubborn in the extreme: "Do you amend it then: it lies in you" (2.1.118). Shakespeare is here contradicting the popular Aristotelian idea that a woman is incomplete and "half baked"<sup>37</sup>, (her humanity, by implication, somehow stunted), presenting instead a woman with a wealth of compassion and empathy, which are at the core of what it means to be human.

Contrary to this, Brooks concludes that: "It is of course she [Titania] who is principally at fault"<sup>38</sup> and claims that Titania's attachment to the child has become an obsession—that she is subverting the natural order through both not allowing him to grow up and become a man, and by preferring him to her husband.<sup>39</sup> Brooks' reading of the text suggests a chauvinistic mindset, which is not uncommon for the early-mid Twentieth Century, and which has led him to believe Oberon's evaluation of Titania. It also puts him at odds with the text. Considering that the boy's mother died in childbirth and that the fairies' argument cannot have been raging for years (as the resulting natural disasters would have caused a famine), the child can hardly be out of infancy. Alternatively, if Oberon desires him as a page boy (2.1.121), the child may be as old as six or seven. The idea that a woman was to blame for domestic quarrelling due to disordered sentimentality and irrationality was a stock-in-trade of 1950s sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, is not Shakespeare's contribution to popular Early Modern comedic representation of the follies of women, but rather an unsettling jab, at once subtle and glorious, at the cultural derision of feminine intellect, intuition, instinct, emotion and imagination.

### Theseus and Hippolyta

On the surface Theseus appears to be the embodiment of reason, law and order, civility, aged wisdom and compassionate authority. Brooks also views this character in a way I argue is not supported by the text. Brooks argues that "Theseus is a sketch of the noble ruler;"<sup>40</sup> he is the "Renaissance prince educated in humanistic disciplines;"<sup>41</sup> "wise-hearted and wise-minded;"<sup>42</sup> "He stands for rational order; even in his poetics for what cool reason comprehends;"<sup>43</sup> "As lovers, he and Hippolyta are mature;"<sup>44</sup> "they await their marriage with controlled impatience;"<sup>45</sup> "A particularly sympathetic trait in his love is his concern at her disquiet over the course and outcome of Hermia's trial, a disquiet of which he is sensitively aware."<sup>46</sup> However, I argue that there is more to the complexity of Theseus' character and relationship with Hippolyta. The subtext and

language chosen in the play reveals that Theseus is the opposite of what he thinks himself to be.

Theseus' impatient grumbling over the duration of his betrothal, "but O, methinks, how slow / This old moon wanes!" (1.1.3-4), reveals that, rather than behaving in a controlled manner, as Brooks suggests, he is behaving like a child counting the sleeps until Christmas. The continual use of long vowels in stressed syllables—the "O" could easily be turned by an actor into a moan—slows down the line and thus conveys that he is moping and whining. The imagery he uses to illustrate his impatience is disturbingly misogynistic and egocentric, and shows an absurd sense of masculine entitlement:

...She lingers my desires,  
Like to a step-dame or a dowager  
Long withering out a young man's revenue (1.1.4-6).

Theseus likens himself to a young man impatient for a female relative to die so that he may gain his inheritance. Hippolyta responds to him in a maternal manner, consoling him in his self-indulgent immaturity: "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night; / Four nights will quickly dream away the time" (1.1.7-8) which immediately alters his mood (a trait traditionally ascribed to women), and causes his following lines to be much more upbeat: "Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth"(1.1.13). We see in this interchange that, contrary to the cultural Theophrastian stereotypes and the categories identified by Plumwood, the woman is the steady and mature party, and the man is less stable, more impressionable and less self-contained.

This is interesting considering the context of their relationship. Hippolyta was a "bouncing Amazon" (2.1.70), a warrior clad in buskins (2.1.71), which were high hunting-boots.<sup>47</sup> Titania's description of her shows us a type of feminist archetype, independent and beholden to no man, who is wild, free, close to nature, savage, strong and capable (2.1.69-71). This displays a linking of women with their natural environments. In stark contrast to this, the "good wife" of Renaissance England must be orderly and subordinated, just like the Renaissance garden, and so Hippolyta is now expected to be compliant to all of Theseus' desires. Theseus' capture of her may be likened, particularly in Merchant's paradigm, to civilisation, industry and technology invading and ravaging nature.<sup>48</sup> Shakespeare does not necessarily portray this as a good thing, though. Rather, through the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta, he is continually emphasising is how much beauty and power there is in these dominated elements and how man is too often undeserving and insensible

of it.

The concept of Theseus as a modern, progressive, colonising man ravaging nature is enforced by the violent imagery with which he speaks of his relationship with Hippolyta: "I woo'd thee with my sword" (1.1.16). This is a phallic symbol, and also a disturbingly violent one; "But I will wed thee in another key" (1.1.18), he claims, implying that their future will not be one of violence and domination. However, the fact that he says "I will wed thee" and not "we will wed" suggests a continuing power imbalance and objectifying of Hippolyta. His plans to wed "With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.19) evoke a military victory celebration in which one party has triumphed over another. Similar imagery occurs in Antony and Cleopatra: Agrippa says of Cleopatra, "She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed. / He ploughed her, and she cropped."<sup>49</sup> The image of the sword is once again phallic, and here we see the metaphor of the man planting a seed in the woman, and the woman being passive and receptive like the earth.<sup>50</sup>

Hippolyta is not simply upset by Hermia's plight in a sentimental, "womanish" kind of way, as Brook's interpretation of her "disquiet" implies.<sup>51</sup> If we look at where her anger is registered—for I believe it is anger—it is in 1.1.122, just after Theseus outlines Athens' misogynistic laws. No doubt she is reminded of her own impending enforced marriage to her conqueror and his treatment of her. Theseus' apparent cluelessness as to why she could possibly be upset is much more insensitive, I think, than sensitive, contrary to Brooks' analysis.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, in Trevor Nunn's 1971 film adaptation of the play Hippolyta slaps Theseus as he asks her, "What cheer, Hippolyta?"

From these relationships we can see that the world of the play undermines the nature-reason juxtaposition that Plumwood identifies.<sup>53</sup> The two are instead compatible: nature can exhibit signs of reason, and reason can be natural. Hermia does not know why or from whence she has the courage to speak out for her rights, "I know not by what power I am made bold" (1.1.59), but she simply has a natural sense of justice, the basis of which is reason. From the aberrant timing of the chaotic storms that rage as a result of the fairies' dispute, we are reminded that nature is inherently ordered through the regularity of the seasons. Human civilisation, however, is often unreasonable and irrational, as is seen in the characters of Theseus and Egeus, who are pillars of the societal structure of Athens.

### Young Lovers

In this section I will argue that Shakespeare satirises the “natural” structure of male and female personalities, in that it is the women who are consistent, steadfast and faithful, and the men who are inconstant and capricious.

### **Hermia and Lysander**

The uncommon name Hermia is derived from the god Hermes, god of trickery, cunning and speed.<sup>54</sup> It was also, mistakenly, used by a contemporary of Shakespeare to refer to Phyllis, the mistress of Alexander the Great, who, according to legend, rode Aristotle like a horse for the promise of sex,<sup>55</sup> as is alluded to by Merchant in *The Death of Nature*.<sup>56</sup> This creates the expectation that Hermia will conform to the stereotype of women as wild, cunning and dangerous. However, Shakespeare uses Hermia’s name ironically, as Findlay notes, because “much of her behaviour is diametrically opposed to the qualities of trickery, speed and change associated with Hermes,”<sup>57</sup> and with Phyllis, as has been shown. Hermia remains faithful to Lysander until the end.

Dreams can be a platform for the subconscious mind. They are often used by Shakespeare to reveal a subconscious knowledge of a reality that a character would not entertain at a conscious level: for example, Clarence’s dream in *Richard III* that his brother, whom he trusts, will kill him, which later occurs.<sup>58</sup> As the serpent traditionally represents betrayal, Hermia’s dream that Lysander watches smilingly while a serpent eats her heart (2.2.148-9) suggests that Hermia subconsciously suspects that Lysander will betray her. Shakespeare uses the dream to highlight the fact that it is Lysander who is inconstant like the Moon, and Hermia who is steadfast and civilised. Whilst her conscious mind would never entertain the idea, being so in love, her subconscious has no doubt registered that Lysander does not defend her when she is threatened with death and imprisonment for their marriage in 1.1, he tries to steal her virginity before their marriage ceremony has been conducted (2.2.40-1), and lures her to leave her home, be cut-off from her family forever and run away with him into the woods. This conflicts with Brooks’ interpretation, which implies that the only impediments to the perfection of their love are external.<sup>59</sup> Hermia is faithful to Lysander, and yet when he is under the influence of the flower, even though he is no longer in love with her, he acts as though she has betrayed him. Lysander accuses her of being a serpent: “Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing, let loose / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent” (3.2.260-1). The serpent in genesis tempted Eve into original sin, yet moments earlier in the woods it was Lysander who tried to tempt her. It

is also interesting to note that Shakespeare uses a woman's dream in the woods—a midsummer night's dream to be precise—which evokes imagination, night-time, nature and intuition, to reveal a truth about Lysander. This suggests that for Shakespeare, truth is not accessed exclusively by reason (associated with daytime, masculinity, civilisation), but may be reached through what is perceived as the more feminine element of imagination.

Egeus' account of Lysander's behaviour towards his daughter, (despite the fact that Egeus behaves irrationally) also suggests an element of insincerity on Lysander's behalf: "With faining voice verses of feigning love" (1.1.31). "Feigning" implies falsehood and deceit. Egeus recounts, "Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung" (1.1.30). Commonly in Western symbolism moonlight is the symbol for transition, inconstancy and change, traditionally associated with the female, but here associated with the male. It also suggests that Lysander's intentions are dishonourable and that he has something to hide.<sup>60</sup>

### Helena and Demetrius

Gilbert and Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980) argues that women in patriarchal literature are generally portrayed as either angel or monster or both.<sup>61</sup> Shakespeare uses descriptions of Helena in natural and supernatural terms to show how she is perceived as either sub- or super-human, and also highlights how unrealistic and absurd these projections are. When Helena is desired by one or both suitors, she is perceived as "goddess, nymph, perfect, divine" (3.2.137). But when she is not loved she perceives herself as the opposite: "No, no; I am as ugly as a bear" (2.2.93), and although she is objectively as pretty as Hermia: "Through Athens I am thought as fair as she" (1.2.227), Demetrius claims that the sight of her is so revolting that "I am sick when I do look on thee" (2.1.212). Either way she is not affirmed as human. Helena recognises the unreality and unfairness of such expectations and accusations, as she tells the young men it is shameful "To vow, and swear, and superpraise my parts" (3.2.153), and knows that it is equally unfair that she should be treated with scorn, as she is a "gentle lady" (3.2.152), and not an animal or a monster. One of the major themes of the play is the disjuncture between appearance and reality. Whilst factors such as love and prejudice can alter the way men perceive women, and how women perceive themselves, at no point does the audience or the reader believe that the girls resemble these natural and supernatural creatures any more than we believe that *Pyramus and Thisbe* showcases a real lion.

Merchant claims that a common image in patriarchal poetry is the linkage of a woman's body with a mine: "the search for precious gems and metals, like the sexual exploration of nature or the female, can benefit a kingdom or a man."<sup>62</sup> The relationship between Helena and Demetrius subverts this, however. Helena, after pursuing Demetrius and obtaining his affections (traditionally a masculine role), compares him to a hidden gem: "And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own, and not mine own" (4.1.191). She thus reverses the traditional patriarchal structure as depicted by Merchant, and then progresses from it, showing that she does not intend to dominate Demetrius through his newfound idolatry of her, but rather live with him in equality, recognising his autonomy: "Mine own, and not mine own."

### The Natural World

Shakespeare's woods are a place of darkness, danger, mystery, magic, and deception. They are also a place of beauty, for lovers to hide and fairies to play. Shakespeare gives us a world of imagination and infinite possibilities, in which social norms and the rules of logic do not apply. "As in *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare combines the natural world with the mythological world of the *Metamorphoses*. The yellow sands are Neptune's: the morning star is 'Aurora's harbinger' . . . we find Actaeon's hounds, the plague of Aegina, Deucalion's flood, and Ceres' curse."<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the moon is a goddess: "Phoebe, Luna, one of the forms of the triple Hecate,"<sup>64</sup> as referred to in the text: "By the triple Hecate's team" (5.1.370). Hecate is "the underworld form of the triple goddess."<sup>65</sup> This triple goddess includes the associations of "Diana, her form on earth, with the woods she ranges as virgin huntress".<sup>66</sup> These figures anthropomorphise natural phenomena, endowing them with a poetic sheen: "Luna... angry with them, as 'governess of floods' is responsible for the devastation of the land with her waters",<sup>67</sup> the imagery of the Moon clearly embodying the theme of transformation and uncertainty.

In contrast to this, the Renaissance garden is a perfectly ordered, pruned and symmetrical one, reflecting what ecofeminist critics identify as the masculine desire to subordinate, dominate and control nature. Similarly, as has been discussed, the Renaissance idea of the "good wife" or "good daughter" is one of obedience and submission.<sup>68</sup> Just as the structured garden was seen as preferable to the dark and dangerous woods, so too was the unimaginative and "pruned" wife preferable to the emotional, independent and imaginative one. The woman, creature of nature and imagination, must therefore be subordinate to the man, who is a vessel of

reason.

As we have seen, Shakespeare's plays do not subscribe to these definitions of woman and man. However, even assuming that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* did conform to Plumwood's "woman = nature" assumption, the play rejects the "inferiority of nature" assumption and shows that imagination is in some ways superior to reason, as it is capable of accessing truths that are beyond reason's grasp. The play takes place on the night of the full moon. Moonlight is not as strong as sunshine, but it can point out aspects of reality that the Sun can obscure, because sunlight has the potential to dazzle. Theseus, upon hearing the lovers recount the extraordinary events of the Midsummer's night, claims:

More strange than true. I never may believe  
 These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.  
 Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
 The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact [entirely made up of] (5.1.2-8).

To comprehend is to understand, which implies that imagination is able to perceive certain realities that at times reason cannot. The words "antique" and "fables" lend multiple meanings to what Theseus is saying. "Antique" can mean both ancient in the sense that it is venerable, but also in the sense that it is out of date or stale;<sup>69</sup> a "fable," likewise, can refer to stories illustrating deep truths, or to idle talk, nonsense or fabrication.<sup>70</sup> Thus Theseus' language deconstructs itself. On one level Theseus is wise to only trust his senses and not succumb to foolish, absurd and idle talk, yet on another level he is unwise for not opening his mind to the possibilities of the story he has heard, which, in the world of the play, is true.

Shakespeare has also added another layer of irony, as Theseus is himself a figure from "antique" mythology, which he finds too "strange" to believe. As the figure of a wise, old monarch, he is supposed to embody reason, and yet, under this mantle, he is completely blind to the events that have been expounded before him. Because he lacks imagination he lacks access to truth. He, along with Egeus, Oberon, Lysander and Demetrius, also lacks empathy, which comes from the ability to imagine another's pain, and thus is unable to understand the suffering and humiliation he has inflicted upon Hippolyta. Likewise Egeus cannot see through his daughter's eyes, Oberon cannot understand Titania's attachment to the boy and

Lysander and Demetrius have no compassion for Helena and Hermia when their love is not reciprocated. It is the imaginative compassion and empathy that we see in the women that shows them to be the party with the greater humanity, comprehensively contradicting the dualistic structure that views women and the natural world as inferior to men.

Merchant, standing at the dawn of the movement of ecofeminism, pointed to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as a time in which Western culture reinvigorated the subordination of women and the natural world and enforced the restrictions of a patriarchal and industrial society. We are now entering an age in which issues surrounding the needs of women and the plight of our world's ecology are coming more and more into public focus. In the current critical field we may well see a revival of ecofeminist theory, in which case it would be wise to, like Merchant, look back to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but not only for patterns of sexual inequality and environmental domination. The dignity and power of women and the natural world was celebrated within the work of the period's greatest playwright, if only we have the eyes to see it.

*Monash University*  
*aesch4@student.monash.edu*

#### NOTES

- 1 Charis Thompson, "Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms," *Isis*. 97.3 (2006): 506.
- 2 Erika Cudworth, *Developing Ecofeminist Theory: The Complexity of Difference* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.
- 3 Thompson, "Back to Nature", 508.
- 4 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 132.
- 5 Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 33.
- 6 This is perhaps an oversimplification on the part of Merchant. It might have been better for her to argue that the Early Modern era was a point of acceleration of a pattern of domination that had occurred previously for thousands of years, rather than a cause. This period was the beginning of a desacralisation of nature that went hand in hand with industrialisation, which the Romantics reacted against in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.
- 7 Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 2.



- <sup>8</sup> There has, however, been work done in the field of ecocriticism of Shakespeare. See in particular Simon C. Estok, who provides an insightful ecocritical reading of Shakespeare in his book, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), and Gabriel Egan's *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- <sup>9</sup> Ruth Leila Anderson, *Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 46.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-34.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>13</sup> Jytte Nhanehge, *Ecofeminism: Towards Integrating the Concerns of Women, Poor People, and Nature into Development*. (Lanham: UP of America, 2011), 108.
- <sup>14</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 1-9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>19</sup> John Lyly, "The Woman in the Moon" in *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. Warwick Bond (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3: 5.1.320-6.
- <sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Robert S. Miola, (New York: Norton, 2004), 1.5.39.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.5.41.
- <sup>22</sup> Anne Charlton, "Tobacco or Health 1602: An Elizabethan Doctor Speaks" *Oxford Journals: Health Education Research*, 20.1 (2005): 108.
- <sup>23</sup> Mellor, *Feminism and Ecology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 2.
- <sup>24</sup> Lynda E. Boose, "The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare" in *Ideological Approaches to Shakespeare*, eds. Robert P. Merrix and Nicholas Ranson (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 3.
- <sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks, (London: Methuen, 1979), 1.1.42. All subsequent references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated, and will appear in the body of the text.
- <sup>26</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 13.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Merchant here misses the subtlety of Aristotle's causality. Aristotle says that things have 4 causes: material, formal, efficient and final. Falcon, Andrea, "Aristotle on Causality", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward, N. Zalta (ed.). Web. 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2015. The man is the cause of the child only in the efficient (3<sup>rd</sup>) sense:

In one sense, then, (1) that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called 'cause', e.g. the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl, and the genera of which the bronze and the silver are species. In another sense (2) the form or the archetype, i.e. the statement of the essence, and its genera, are called 'causes' (e.g. of the octave the relation of 2:1, and generally number), and the parts in the definition. Again (3) the primary source of the change or coming to rest; e.g. the man who gave advice is a cause, **the father is cause of the child**, and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed. Again (4) in the sense of end or 'that for the sake of which' a thing is done, e.g. health is the cause of walking about. ('Why is he walking about?' we say. 'To be healthy', and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause.) Aristotle. "2.3." *Physics*. Trans. R. K. Gaye, and R. P. Hardie. Adelaide: U of Adelaide Library, 2000. Web. 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> "fancies 8a." OED Online. Oxford University Press, 21 June 2014.

<sup>31</sup> "will n1 9." OED Online. Oxford University Press, 21 June 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Alexander, *Reading Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks, "Introduction," ci.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, xciii.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Groves and Geoffrey Hillier, eds., *Character Books of the English Renaissance: A Selection* (Fairview: Pegasus Press, 2008), 31.

<sup>38</sup> Brooks, "Introduction," cvi.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, cii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ciii.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, civ.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Brooks, "Introduction," footnote 71, p.xxxi.

<sup>48</sup> Theseus' capture of Hippolyta would also lend itself to a rich postcolonial analysis, but unfortunately there is not room here. For further reading, see Val Plumwood's analysis of the "logic of colonisation" in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> William Shakespeare *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.2.242.

<sup>50</sup> Shakespeare does complicate this, however, in saying "She made great Caesar

lay his sword to bed", which implies a reversal of power, as does the fact that this is a reference to Isaiah 2:4 "And he shall judge the Gentiles, and rebuke many people: and they shall turn their swords into ploughshares" Edgar, Swift, and Dumbarton Oaks. *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2010). Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library; 1., implying that Cleopatra has a godlike power over Caesar.

<sup>51</sup> Brooks, Introduction, liv.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, liv.

<sup>53</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> Alison Findlay, *Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 185.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Greene, "Greene's Mourning Garment", Nina Green, October 2003. *Oxford Shakespeare.com*. Web. <[http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Greene/Greenes\\_Mourning\\_Garment.pdf](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Greene/Greenes_Mourning_Garment.pdf)> 4.

<sup>56</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 133-5.

<sup>57</sup> Findlay, *Women in Shakespeare*, 185.

<sup>58</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. Antony Hammond. (Scarborough: Arden, 1981), 1.4.18-21

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, cxxxii-iii.

<sup>60</sup> This would, perhaps, redeem Egeus from my accusation that he dislikes Lysander out of wounded pride and stubbornness, except for the fact that Demetrius is known to be inconstant towards Helena, and therefore Egeus cannot be refusing Lysander out of care for his daughter's welfare, since he is trying to marry her to another inconstant man.

<sup>61</sup> Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* eds. Julie Rinkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 812.

<sup>62</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 41.

<sup>63</sup> Brooks, Introduction, cxxviii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, cxxviii.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Groves and Hiller, *Character Books of the English Renaissance*, 30, 35-6.

<sup>69</sup> "antique, adj. and n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, 16 June 2014.

<sup>70</sup> "fable, n." OED Online. Oxford University Press, 16 June 2014.

Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* (1603) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600), explore the theme of conflict and its repercussions, each play highlighting different aspects of the theme due to differences in genre and subject. Conflict, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one", and would therefore seem to lend itself naturally to the more tragic of the two plays, *Hamlet*. 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 New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night Of our solemnities. THESEUS. Go, Philostrate, Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments; Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth; Turn melancholy forth to funerals; The pale companion is not for our pomp. To you your father should be as a god; One that compos'd your beauties; yea, and one To whom you are but as a form in wax, By him imprinted, and within his power To leave the figure, or disfigure it. Demetrius is a worthy gentleman. HERMIA. So is Lysander.