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Attempts to Control Nature: The Feminine Wild and Resistance to Courtly Convention in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Katherine Colborn

The world of Shakespeare terminology was rocked in the mid-1950s and greatly affected for several decades after Northrop Frye coined the phrase “green world.” In his published books and essays, he coined the phrase to describe and establish the opposition between the “green world of romance” and the “normal world.” He categorized the green world as the world of “dream” and “desire,” referring, of course, to male desire. Ever since, there has been an increased interest in Shakespeare’s portrayal of gender in light of this distinction. While the 20th century welcomed a significant increase in feminist criticism of Shakespeare’s plays, there is still a comparably small amount of scholarship on the relationship between gender and the green world. Frye’s references to the roles of males and females within the green world remain underdeveloped. While other scholars have considered the subject and more still use Frye’s terminology, few connect gender and the green world very directly. I argue that the forest setting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a common and obvious example of Shakespeare’s use of the green world) alludes to the feminine nature in the play and actively symbolizes the masculine fascination with the wild and mystery of the feminine; it draws attention to the patriarchal obsession with taming that very feminine wild and mystery, so as to place it within the courtly conventions of a male-dominated structure.

In her work,¹ scholar Jeanne Addison Roberts makes a very similar argument in which she directly relates the feminine presence in Shakespeare’s plays to the presence of nature, though it is more generalized to apply to a greater number of Shakespeare’s works and not limited to the comedies. I expand upon her work by focusing primarily on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, specifically examining a few of the female characters and exploring their roles in the green world, as opposed to their roles in the Athenian city setting. The female characters

¹ See Roberts, *The Shakespeare Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender*.

Hippolyta and Titania, in their relations with male characters and their position within the natural world, emphasize this male-to-female and male-to-nature confrontation.

The audience's knowledge of the "green world" within this particular play stems from the forest setting introduced in the second act. The faeries that live in the forest, particularly Oberon and Titania, are perhaps characters most closely associated with the natural world. As Frye writes, these faeries are "spirits of the elements, and as such they are part of the cyclical processes of nature: when Oberon and Titania quarrel their dissensions are reflected in bad weather" (214). Through their manipulation of the natural elements and clear comfort in the forest setting—a setting unfamiliar to the Athenian characters—Oberon and Titania act as metaphorical links to the strange and very un-Athenian Wild that becomes the basis for the play's conflict. Tradition has dictated that in most performances, the roles of Hippolyta and Titania are double-cast. By making this choice, the director and cast heighten a pre-existing (if subtle) parallel between the two characters and their positions.² As Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, faces the loss in her culture and nation, so too does Titania, Queen of the Faeries, later face the fear of loss: an Indian boy that she has vowed to raise is in danger of being taken.

Each of the women also experiences a form of defeat in the relationship with her husband. As Shakespeare scholar and expert on Amazonian myth in the Renaissance, Geraldo U. de Sousa, writes,³ "both Titania and Hippolyta eventually have to submit themselves to males: one tricked by a patriarch; the other, overpowered by one" (28-29). He even goes so far as to suggest that the play "splits the role of the Amazon into two parts that never interact with each other: the momentarily defiant Titania and the submissive Hippolyta"⁴ (28). The

² Frye even argues that all elements in the green world exist to symbolize the natural world, "the word natural here referring to the original human society which is the proper home of man, not the physical world he now lives in but the 'golden world' he is trying to regain. This natural society is associated with things which in the context of the ordinary world seem unnatural, but which are in fact attributes of nature as a miraculous and irresistible reviving power" (142).

³ Here I refer to his book, *Shakespeare's Cross-Cultural Encounters*.

⁴ While Roberts argues for the Amazonian nature of both women in their roles of strength and power, Aidan Day, like Sousa, links them by the way their Amazonian powers are upset. In her essay "Angela Carter's Fairy Orientalism: 'Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,'" Day suggests that Titania's Amazonian tendencies manifest themselves in her drug-induced adoration for Bottom. She writes: "To the extent that [Titania] dominates Bottom, a man with the head of an ass, Titania is already in the process of being brought under control by Oberon, who has caused her to desire what is no more than a parody of a man. Bottom, with an ass's head, is a dark grotesque, not to be taken seriously as a man, just as Titania's 'patriarchal' domination of him is a delusion engendered by Oberon, the man who is reestablishing control over her" (13). She continues to discuss the role of the Indian boy and Oberon's wants, noting that he wishes not only for control over the boy, but for "a restoration of his authority over Titania" (14). We can compare him in this light to Theseus. Carter argues that this power exchange between Titania and Oberon is a reflection of that unseen defeat of the Amazons, of which the audience

long-held tradition of double-casting these two characters in the performance of this play invites comparisons of the two women and their relationships with their respective husbands.

The similar unsettling relations between these two couples, the clear parallels in these women's experience with loss, and the long-held tradition of double-casting these characters on the stage all lead to link Hippolyta with Titania, and therefore with the forest and the natural Wild, opening the space to explore the smaller role that Hippolyta plays in the green world (in comparison with that larger role of Titania) and its relation to her place in a male-dominated culture. While Roberts is more interested in cataloging and analyzing the different types of femininity the female characters exhibit within the "green world," I choose to expand further on the specific connection between that green world and Hippolyta's character. I believe it is most evident in her relationship with Theseus, her husband and the acting symbol for the conventional court and patriarchal society of Athens.

The audience is immediately informed of the male-to-female relationship from the moment the show begins. Hippolyta is one of the first two characters presented to the audience in the play; the other is Theseus. He speaks the first line of Act I, setting up the male position for the rest of the play: "Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour / Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in / Another moon—but O, me thinks how slow / this old moon wanes!" (I.i.5-6). She speaks the second line, in response to his words: "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time" (I.i.7-8). Immediately, the audience is presented with a situation that forces a comparison between Hippolyta and Theseus, suggesting that we must understand her in relation to *him*. The conversation focuses on *his* impatience and *his* experiences and gains in conquering the Amazonians. Hippolyta's character is only introduced in relation to Theseus. Therefore, their relationship becomes critical to defining and understanding Hippolyta's role in the play.

Her response, appeasing Theseus's impatience, suggests one of two things, depending upon the interpretation: she is resigned to her capture and defeat, embraces her new life as Theseus's queen, and is heartfelt in her response; or she is bitter, and shows this by responding in a sarcastic or mocking tone. Both give different and interesting introductions to Hippolyta's character and both can be considered slightly disturbing, particularly to a modern, feminist-minded audience.

Hippolyta's attitude gives the audience insight into her character. She, Titania, and all the characters in this play are first and foremost defined by their

only gets the slightest recount in the play's first act. From this perspective, "the fairy plot . . . rehearses what goes on in the framing plot: the reinstatement of 'authentic' masculine power over a female usurper of such power" (14).

relationships to each other; their roles are defined more clearly when they act in response and in opposition to one another. Hippolyta, by nature, is representative of the exotic and unknown. De Sousa examines this label of the exotic and describes the myth surrounding the Amazons by referencing the words of the scholar Gail Paster; de Sousa contends that the Amazons “differ from the Renaissance ideals of womanhood in their ‘complete uninterest in an erotic appeal governed by male desire’ and in their ‘emotional distance from or refusal to become absorbed into the personal and maternal gratifications, the social rewards, of nurture” (Pastor qtd. in Sousa 12). This view certainly brings a note of skepticism into Hippolyta’s apparent acceptance of her defeat in the first scene of Act I.

The Renaissance ideal of the Amazon also plays a significant part in the critique and de Sousa also explores the myth of the Amazonian woman and her personality, writing “as it came down to Shakespeare, [the myth] consists of a cluster of contradicting elements. Amazons conjure up images of spectacular female defiance, subversion, or ‘aggressive, self-determining desire.’” (12). Queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta is the embodiment of an Athenian, patriarchal, and arguably Shakespearean, fear. The Athenian life in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* depends upon a structure that she, as the former leader of a matriarchal society, alarmingly uproots in the minds of Athenian men. It is this fear that inspires Shakespeare’s patriarchal men, such as Theseus, to attempt to control, tame, and mold women (along with all of the wild and mystery they embody) so that they may fit within the male-dominated structure.

Our first impression of Theseus in the play is as a conqueror who has entered the wild (the Amazon) and returned to his city homeland, victorious: “Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (I.i.16-17). Roberts argues that, for Shakespeare, “the Wild is the locale for the male’s necessary, seductive, and terrifying confrontation with the female, his braving of the perils of maternal regression and destructive erotic abandon in order to annex a woman into his Cultural context” (24-25). Roberts continues:

From Aristotle on, philosophers have seen women as formless matter upon which men must imprint their shape, even as Nature was the raw material from which . . . Culture [was] to be constructed. . . . Women were seen as closer than men to animals in the Great Chain of Being, barely rational and being dominated by passion and appetite. . . . Like Nature, the female was fixed and given, if chaotic and shapeless, whereas the male, like Culture, belonged to the intellectual world of becoming. . . . Although Nature and the female are clearly linked in Shakespeare, it would be folly to try to set up a system of exact equivalence between man and Culture and woman and Nature. (25-26)

Certainly, Roberts makes a good point in rejecting the attempt to create a systematic and exact definition to describe relations between women and nature,

but she also opens up the space for discussion about Theseus's awareness of himself within the culturally-constructed, patriarchal social structure. By acknowledging that there is an undeniable link between woman and nature, she allows for the exploration to establish the mirroring connection between the male and the "intellectual world." Theseus's understanding of his own place in society, as a controlling and authoritative patriarchal figure, defines Hippolyta's role as a "wild" woman, in conjunction with all that must be tamed and controlled, compacted and confined, to the courtly conventions.

Theseus, perhaps representative of all men in a patriarchal society, projects his own socially constructed culture onto his experiences, and in turn, represses and oppresses that which does not conform to his understanding. He is quick to uphold patriarchal attitudes and tradition. This trait is evident to the audience in the first scene of the play when Theseus advises Hermia to honor her father's wishes: "To you your father should be as a god, / One that composed 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." (I.i.47-51). Once more, Theseus asserts his authority in his words and his relationships to others. He encourages patriarchy within the family structure—showing evidence that he believes it is as necessary to the family structure as it is to the structure of the greater community.

One of the best examples of Theseus's self-orientation is found in the final act. The scholar Howard Nemerov critically analyzes and compares Theseus's and Hippolyta's responses to the play put on by the rude mechanicals, using the play as a tool to understand their relationship and each of their motives.⁵ While Nemerov argues primarily for the presence of paradox within their marriage, he also presents a strong argument for Theseus's understanding of his own place within society and I believe it has great relevance to Roberts's proposed link between "man and Culture." Theseus's commentary of the mechanicals' *Pyramus and Thisbe* "has in it something at least 'administrative,' probably priggish" (636). Theseus, despite Philostrate's protests, decides to hear the mechanicals' play: "I will hear that play; / For never anything can be amiss, / When simpleness and duty tender to it" (V.i.82-84). He defends his choice: "Trust me, sweet, / Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome; / And in the modesty of fearful duty / I read as much as from the rattling tongue / Of saucy and audacious eloquence" (V.i.99-104). By saying this and even by making sport at the mechanicals' expense he further illustrates for the audience the lens through which he sees the world.

Theseus views the world as one of order; anything that upsets order only exists to demonstrate the necessity of patriarchal structure. Nemerov summarizes

⁵ From his essay, "The Marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta."

his own textual analysis of Theseus's words in this scene with the mechanicals: "The components of this attitude are these: none of this is real, none of it matters; whether it is well or badly brought off does not matter; the performance of the plays, however, is a sign of order in society, it is 'done'; what one looks for is not intellectual delight, so much as an assurance of one's own authority in a rationally stabilized commonwealth" (636). Theseus's focus is on maintaining social order and continuing tradition. In this case, that tradition is the social structure of patriarchy.

One must also consider Theseus's response to finding the four lovers. Hippolyta's words allow for mystery whereas Theseus's words are dismissive. Though her lines are limited, they are significant in establishing her connection with the forest and its mysteries: When Hippolyta remarks upon the strangeness of the lovers' story, Theseus replies, "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" (V.i.2-6). His dismissal of their story can be contrasted with Hippolyta's response: "all their minds transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy's images, / And grows to something of great constancy; / But howsoever, strange and admirable" (V.i.24-27). There is more invitation in Hippolyta's words than in those of Theseus, as well as possible understanding. The connection with the green world is evident in her speech as well as her parallel storyline with Titania.

Nemerov continues on to examine the determined nature of Theseus's rhetoric: "The poetry of Theseus is rational, civic-minded, discursive, and tends constantly to approach prose" (641). He compares it to the rhetoric of Hippolyta's commentary, calling her words "magical, fabulous, dramatic, and constantly [approaching] music. The excess of Theseus is to declare that art is entertainment" (641). The contrast between the lines of these two married characters encourages the audience to compare their roles: by identifying Hippolyta as a symbol for the "Wild" through her relationship with Theseus, and consequently linking that "Wild" with her role as a woman in the play, we are able to find greater significance in Shakespeare's forest setting.

The link between femininity and the "green world" extends beyond the so-called "green world comedies." Frye's terminology, while greatly insightful, limits that analytical lens to comedies alone. This conversation can be continued. Roberts certainly explores the presence of females within the "Shakespearean Wild" and her research could prove insightful for any further examinations of the tragedies and their links to the feminine wild.

Moreover, the comedies are not the only place where the feminine wild is threatened by a male-dominated social structure. Hippolyta and Titania have been overpowered because of the patriarchal interests of their husbands, who tame and control their wives, and Hippolyta, an Amazon woman, loses her virginity to

Theseus.⁶ Lavinia of *Titus Andronicus* is likewise defeated: stripped of autonomy, speech, communication, and her virginity, all in the deep of the forest. Titania asserts what power she has in the forest (primarily through her sexuality) and struggles in the interest of keeping a child of another race only to have it manipulated and stolen, just as Tamora (also a Queen of a defeated nation), uses her own adulterous sexuality as a form of power in the forest, and is responsible for the birth of her racially foreign child, fathered by Aaron the Moor. With parallels between tragedies such as *Titus Andronicus* and comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we cannot disregard the role of femininity within the Shakespearean Wild. The connections in Shakespeare's plays may prove to be more significant (and more common) than Northrop Frye might have originally considered when he began exploring Shakespeare's green world.

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About the Author

Katherine Colborn (Class of 2014) earned a B.A. in art and English, with a minor in gender & diversity studies. As a student, she worked as the managing editor

⁶ Sousa writes in detail about the Amazonian nature of same-sex partnership, a common sisterhood and lesbian culture present in the Amazon society. Sousa suggests that the patriarchal Athenian society suppresses Hippolyta not only "on the repression of part of the Amazonian nature," but through the "suppression of the Amazons' same-sex partnership" (29), indicating sexual oppression that Theseus may have forced upon Hippolyta on their wedding night.

for Xavier University's weekly paper, the *Newswire*, and also served as President and Editor-in-Chief of the Xavier *Athenaeum*, the university's annual literary magazine. She has presented her artwork and research at national conferences, and plans to continue her art education in the near future. "Attempts to Control Nature: A Study of the Feminine Wild and Resistance to Courtly Conventions in A Midsummer Night's Dream" was presented at the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference 2013 and was sponsored by Dr. Niamh O'Leary, professor of English.