

Witches, Fairies, and Nature in Shakespeare's Plays

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Vanderbilt University

Dr. Marcia McDonald, Professor of English (newly retired!) Belmont University

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Overview

- Nature as grounding for magic and theatre
 - We will explore Shakespeare's biography and the material conditions of his theatres as the backdrop to the language and actions involving nature & magic
- This approach opens up the plays to “presentist” readings and brings Shakespeare into our current environmental and climate change concerns
 - *Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet* all have interwoven languages of nature and magic that offer relevant insights into our current environmental issues
- Experiencing NSF's Summer Shakespeare outdoors reclaims experience of Shakespeare's theatre AND stimulates our thinking on relationship between art, human experience, and environment

Biographical outline

- Born 1564: Stratford upon Avon, to John Shakespeare & Mary Arden Shakespeare
 - Both from farm families
- Youth in Stratford (market town)
 - Though parents lived in town, young WS likely had farm chores
 - Stratford Grammar School: Latin, likely read comedies by Roman playwrights Plautus & Terrence; Scripture, especially Genesis & Matthew; reading & writing
- Marriage to Anne Hathaway, 1582 (she = 24; he = 18)
 - 1583, daughter Susanna born (d. 1649)
 - 1585, twins Hamnet (d. 1596) & Judith (d. 1662) born

Early life: rural farm, market town

- Grandfather (Richard) & father (John) identified as farmers in records; Grandfather a tenant farmer (rented land), had cows, pigs, sheep—produced milk, meats, wool, skins for tanning
- Shakespeares rented land from Arden family (old Warwickshire family); John Shakespeare married Mary Arden (@1557); lived in Stratford, established himself as tanner, but also sustained farming
- Families of both parents all in farming; thus, young William grew up in agricultural environment—characterized by day-long and year-long work, fluctuations in markets, connections to basic needs (wool for clothing, bedding; leather for shoes, gloves, harnesses; meat & milk for sustenance; seasonal crops). He probably knew how to milk a cow, wring a chicken's neck, plow a field, and recognize the daily and seasonal changes in weather.



Warwickshire: County home of Stratford-upon-Avon

- Warwickshire in Tudor times:
 - Farms, orchards, herbs
 - Forests, wild & cultivated flowers
 - Gently rolling hills
 - Rivers: notably, the Avon (broad enough for commerce; rare floods)
 - Meadows, grazing lands
 - Castles—Warwick, Kenilworth
 - Nearby towns: Coventry (cloth center), Warwick, Birmingham

1590s
(pastoral)
description of
Warwickshire

Here hills do lift their heads
Aloft from whence sweet springs do flow:
Whose moisture good doth
Fertile make the valleys couched below.
Here goodly orchards
Planted are in fruit which do abound
Thine eye would make their
Heart rejoyce to see so pleasant ground!

--on woven map of Warwickshire by Richard Hyckes



Shakespearean vistas
(Ok, well, my pictures from rural Wales!)

From Stratford to London

- Transportation options
 - Carrier's wagon (market goods & occasional passengers)
 - Horseback (2 days)– the older Shakespeare's likely form of transportation
 - Foot (4 days) – Shakespeare's likely form of transportation in early years
- Route (next slide)
- Does Shakespeare as walker in the countryside emerge in the plays?
- Britain's tradition of footpaths expedited walking; walkers had right of way through farms, common areas

From Stratford to London



London: A Natural World within the Urban?





The Globe: Today and 1600 (Norden Map)

London: A Natural World within the Urban?

- Trees (wooded areas surrounding London; a few remain today that were wooded in Shakespeare's Day: Highgate, Coldfall, Oxleas, Selsdon)
- Deer Parks (How Hyde Park started; enclosed land, with grasslands, small woodlands & meadows; for aristocratic use)
- Squares and gardens, especially with churches, aristocratic houses
- Common lands—ex. Spitalfields (for cattle, sheep; growing small crops; for use by local citizens; now often small parks; often just outside “gates”: Moorgate, Bishopsgate)
- Thames, river and bankside
- Landscaping & barriers: hedges (property, common areas), trees, shrubs

Theatres in London: A Natural World Visible from the “Wooden O”

- Weather always a part of the experience of the play
- To what extent does the visible sky factor into staging?
- On the ceiling of the stage overhang: the cosmological heavens
- Timber from woodlands – a “prop” in plays? A reminder of the environmental reality of theater?



The “Wooden O”: When rural forests come to London

- We think of nature as invoked primarily through Shakespeare’s language, and that’s true .
..
- But nature also part of material reality of theater, especially in timber used in construction.
- Late 1500s-early 1600s, crisis in supply of timber, especially in urban areas. Prices doubled and tripled.
- Globe Theatre of 1599 constructed out of timbers from The Theatre, the first freestanding theatre constructed by James Burbage in 1576.
- Actors “revivif[y] wood of theatre” and “enchan[t] dead wood” in action and language of plays (Nardizzi, 22-23); materials of theater ground symbolism and metaphors of language

Shakespeare's Nature Imagery

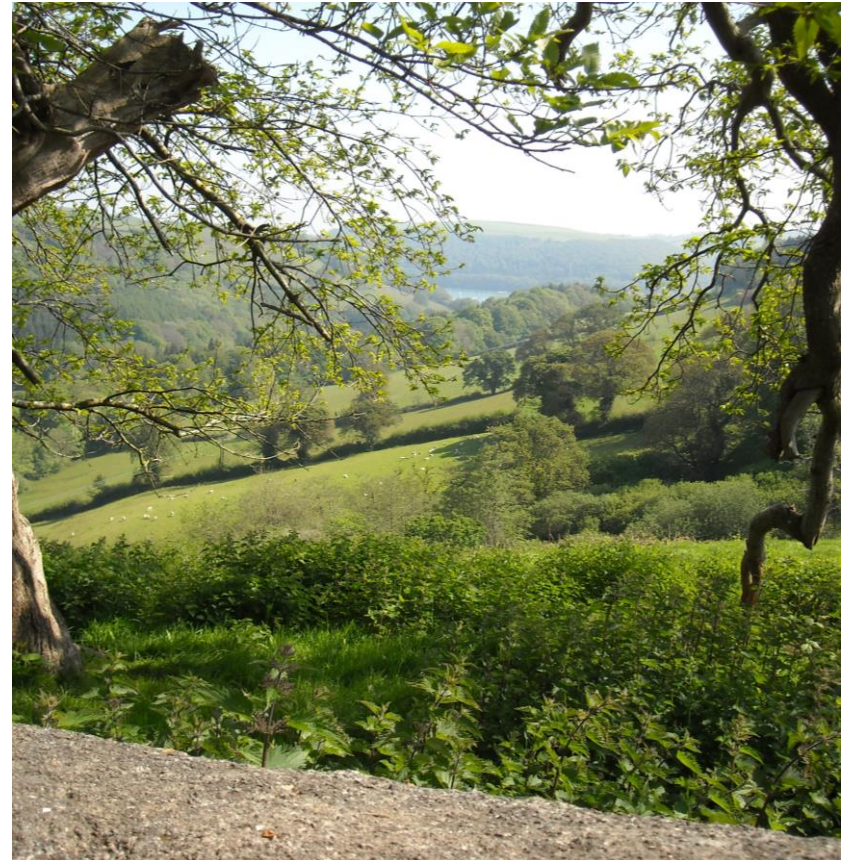
- From childhood, Shakespeare immersed in nature—farm, countryside, rivers, groves, forests
- London, while expanding its urban infrastructure, maintained green areas, some wooded areas, and parks and gardens; theatres used timbers visible in construction
- If we put Shakespeare back in his setting, we can recognize that the language of nature that permeates his stage language (and his poems) emerges from a lived experience of nature as informing all aspects of life, in contrast to the “alienation” described as the primary condition of modern urban life
- Thus, Shakespeare's plays can be vehicles for refreshing our sense of a life within nature, for valuable experiences of understanding ourselves as in nature. (Ergo, we can't destroy nature or we destroy ourselves.)

A Midsummer Night's Dream

- Staged @ 1595-96 at Curtain Theatre
- Middle of Shakespeare's first great decade; comic abundance—*Comedy of Errors, Shrew, Two Gentlemen, Much Ado, All's Well, TN*
- Human folly in love (and in art) exposed and resolved during night in the "woods outside Athens"
- Woods and night the home of folklore fairies and mythological figures with magical powers
- When you think of "forest" or "woods," especially at night, what comes to mind?
- From one of my students in 2020 seminar: "the woods make the narrative possible—they open up the potential for stories from the lovers' and the actors' simple wish to escape Athens, the urban world."

A Midsummer Night's Dream

- Introducing the woods outside Athens in language:
 - **PUCK.** How now, spirit! whither *wander* you?
 - **Fairy.** Over *hill*, over *dale*,
Thorough *bush*, thorough *brier*,
Over *park*, over *pale*,
Thorough *flood*, thorough *fire*,
 - (2.1.1-5)



A Midsummer Night's Dream

- And more . . .
 - **FAIRY:** The cowslips tall her pensioners be:
In their gold coats spots you see;
Those be rubies, fairy favours,
In those freckles live their savours. (2.1.10-13)
- Abundant English wildflower
- Links fairies & their magic with natural world—magic emerges from known natural world, material culture and magic woven together



A *Midsummer Night's Dream*

- Titania and Oberon: “parents and original” (2.1.81-117)
- Titania’s response to jealous quarrel about her liaisons with Theseus and his with Hippolyta:
 - These are the forgeries of jealousy:
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,
Or in the beached margent of the sea,
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents:

*A
Midsummer
Night's
Dream*

- Titania, continued:
 - The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud,
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable:
The human mortals want their winter here;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest:
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound:

A
*Midsummer
Night's
Dream*

- Titania, conclusion of speech:
 - And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set: the spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries, and the amazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is
which:
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

- Speech functions in multiple ways:
 - Commentary on weather experienced 1594-98 in England: record floods, crop failures with consequent higher food prices (with consequent hunger), impacts on community space (“nine men’s morris”), temperature fluctuations
 - Tangible physical description to introduce mythic power of Titania and Oberon—power to impact weather and natural phenomenon beyond human control (as it seemed), with little concern for consequences on humans
 - Backstory of lovers’ quarrel; parallels tensions between Hippolyta and Theseus and confusion of lovers that will emerge
 - World upside down that needs righting . . .
 - “Presentist” reading: an uncanny description of our own climate predicament? (But we can’t blame ours on quarreling gods . . .)

A Midsummer Night's Dream

- “Natural” resolution to conflicts and threats? A “little western flower”? (wild pansy)
 - **OBERON:** Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.

(2.1.165-68)



A *Midsummer Night's Dream*

- Theatre also “grows” in this natural + crafted environment; rehearsal of Peter Quince’s troupe in the forest outside Athens:

Peter Quince: Pat, pat; and here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal.

This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house;

- Theatre also infused with magic and mystery of forest: Bottom’s ass-head and liaison with Titania, his experience as “a most rare vision. . . . a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was,” and he will get Peter Quince to make art, “a ballad” out of this dream.

A *Midsummer Night's Dream*— Summary

- Natural world, magic, fairies, theatre woven together as tightly as a Chinese knot in MND; language pervades nearly every speech
- No “space” between these phenomena, just as actors immersed in space created by timbers and wood of theatre building, stage, props
- Broad movement from court -> forest -> revived court world
- For human life to thrive, need blessing of nature & nature’s spirits (fairies and Titania and Oberon at end “bless this house”), but also a reciprocal deal:
 - **PUCK:** Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends. (last 2 lines, a request for applause)

Macbeth: Fair Nature, Foul Nature

Witches, like fairies, embedded in natural world

- **Opening scene:**

First Witch

When shall we three meet again
In *Thunder, Lightning, or in Rain?*

Second Witch

When the Hurlyburly's done,
When the Battle's lost and won.

Third Witch

That will be ere the *set of Sun*.

First Witch

Where the place?

Second Witch

Upon the *Heath*.

Third Witch

There to meet with Macbeth.

ALL (repeat chant, get audience to chant with you)

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the *fog and filthy air*.

Macbeth: Witches

- Multilayered figures:
 - “real” witches, based on witchhunts of medieval & early modern England
 - Women, especially aging and single women, targeted as witches
 - Malign elements of nature (cannot separate from “fog and filthy air”)
 - Versions of the devil or evil force (especially in theological readings of play)
 - External to Macbeth—an evil force influencing him? Intervening in human history?
 - Linked to Macbeth’s psyche, a “horrid image” barely suppressed
- While arguably more complex than MND’s fairies, witches constantly linked to malign weather, inversions, chaos (“hurly-burly”). Macbeth, when with witches, echoes their images of chaotic nature (see 4.1.50-60)

Macbeth

- Macbeth's murder of King Duncan threatens to pollute all of nature/Nature, to his horror:
 - **MAC:** What Hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine Eyes.
Will all great Neptune's Ocean wash this blood
Clean from my Hand? No, this my Hand will rather
*The multitudinous Seas incarnadine,
Making the Green one Red.* (2.2.62-66)
- Now it is Macbeth, and not only the witches, who is disrupting and changing nature (recall Titania & Oberon's quarrel . . .).

Macbeth: Birnum Wood reverses the “seas incarnadine”? The antithesis of witches?

- Macbeth: certain that the witches’ prediction cannot happen—it would be unnatural:
 - That will never be
Who can impress the Forest, bid the Tree
Unfix his earth-bound Root? Sweet bodements, Good:
Rebellion's head, rise never till the Wood
Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed Macbeth
Shall live the Lease of Nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal Custom.
- Malcolm directs the choice of camouflage:
 - Let every Soldier hew him down a Bough
And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow
The numbers of our Host and make discovery
Err in report of us.
- And then the Messenger’s news:
 - I looked toward Birnam and anon methought
The wood began to move

Macbeth

- Malcolm, MacDuff aligned with nature through Birnam Wood—as symbol and as realism
 - Symbol: the temporal forces of “The grace of grace” (5.8.72) reverse the devastation of the temporal forces of evil in the witches and Macbeth; “filthy air” reversed by leafy woods
 - Dunsinane and Birnam Woods are real places, geographical locations; play envisions a re-forestation of a blighted place
 - Theatre itself a “Birnam Woods”—the timbers of the Globe also march against Macbeth . . . the “poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.”

Romeo and Juliet: Herbal Magic

- Patterns of imagery derived from nature can be traced through *R&J*, though the patterns are not quite as dense as those in *MND* and *Macbeth*.
- One key moment, and one that has a decisive influence on the outcome of the play, is Friar Laurence's prescription of the "distilling liquor" for Juliet to feign death. This distilling liquor is made from herbs, and Friar Laurence is a specialist:

Friar Laurence, 2.2.15-30:

- O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities:
For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give,
Nor aught so good but strain'd from that fair use
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse:
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied;
And vice sometimes by action dignified.
Within the infant rind of this small flower
Poison hath residence and medicine power:
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each
part;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart.
Two such opposed kings encamp them still
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;
And where the worser is predominant,
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.



Romeo and Juliet: Herbal Magic

- The Friar describes nature as producing plants that have the potential to be used for “special good,” yet “being misapplied” can turn evil.
- He may have given Juliet a weak dose of “nightshade,” or Belladonna (picture left)
- We are reminded again of the power of human choice to use wisely or destroy the benefits of nature. In this play, the “ancient grudge” of the Capulets and Montagues destroys the bonds to the next generation and healing herbs turn to poison
- By Flobbadob - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68344800>

Shakespeare and our climate crisis

- Shakespeare's theatrical language and action evoking nature weave together the local and the symbolic—a consciousness of how our concepts of nature (symbolic) are related to our daily experience (local).
- Shakespeare's language emerges at a moment when it was still possible to be immersed and not alienated from nature; thus, Shakespeare's language of nature can be understood as rooted in experience, and not simply as literary use of pastoral imagery.
- If we grant the validity of “presentist” readings (a literary equivalent to Shakespeare in modern day costume), we have a source of reflection on and insight into the human interaction with our environment that can be a catalyst for our “debates and dissension,” as Titania put it, today.

NSF in the open air

- If we think of the Globe Theater, and before it The Curtain and The Theater, as “living” spaces because of their use of timbers from England’s woodlands and because of the opening to the skies, and of Shakespeare’s language that constantly weaves humanity and nature, then we have a conception of this innovative new public, commercial theater as integrated with the natural world
- Consider your experience watching NSF plays in Centennial Park and more recently, One C1ty. In what ways does Nashville’s “Summer Shakespeare” reclaim the conditions of Shakespeare’s theaters? Is the experience of theatre in the open air like for you? Can it strengthen the sense of the natural world? Or, in an urban setting, can we ever escape the city?

Thoughts and questions?

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