Playing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Reinventing Gender in Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* and Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play well-known for its comedic and romantic aspects, bringing in fairies, confused lovers, and a romance between Bottom the weaver and Titania, queen of the fairies. However, on closer examination, the play emerges also as a text complexly enmeshed in discourses imbued with the ideologies of the period. Most clearly, following earlier readings of the play, I shall argue that while it is set in a patriarchal society, and although it appears merely to reaffirm Elizabethan society's values, these are actually subtly criticised. When examined in this light, the play appears to favour a more equal society – that is, a society in which classes respect each other, and women possess as much agency as men and are equal to them in terms of the power they can wield. Two operatic adaptations of the play, Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (1692) and Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), confirm this idea in the elements of the original text that they preserve or omit, and through the subtleties of their musical settings of this text. This thesis therefore aims to explore the following idea: William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, among many other things, a play that subtly criticises the patriarchal society in which it is set, advocating a more equal society instead, and this interpretation is confirmed and built upon by Henry Purcell and Benjamin Britten in their respective operas based on the play.

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1595 or 1596. The exact date remains unknown, as it similarly remains unknown whether the play preceded *Romeo and Juliet*, or was followed by it. Critics have given arguments for both options, but Peter Holland points out that the precise order in which these two plays appeared does not matter greatly: "all that matters is that the two plays were clearly being worked on at roughly the same moment" (110). Clearly, the theme of love and restrictions imposed on it by society, together

with “the circumstances under which characters adhere to or rupture” these restrictions interested Shakespeare (Bailey 403), and he therefore wrote two plays with very similar themes and very distinct conclusions.

Shakespeare has drawn inspiration for his play from various sources, but created an entirely new story with this inspiration. The Pyramus and Thisbe story is of course based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and the main storyline of the four lovers can be seen as a variation on this theme. Moreover, specific characters have their predecessors as well. Theseus and Hippolyta appear in Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” and Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus* (Tanner 120). From these sources, Theseus is known to be a “triumphant conqueror, … law-giver and bringer of social order,” (Tanner 120), while Hippolyta was Queen of the Amazons before being conquered by Theseus, and thereby queen of a tribe of fighting women who were known to be “excellent warriors” who were not afraid of killing their own sons and husbands (Montrose 66). Similarly, Puck was known at the time as a “Cornish earth demon,” while Robin Goodfellow “was something between a house-fairy and ‘the national practical joker’” (Tanner 120). Shakespeare merges these characters into one fairy who both likes to tease and aids the lovers. Furthermore, Titania is another name for Diana in Ovid, and Oberon appears in the romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, in which he is “an Eastern fairy from the farthest steep of India” ruling over a wood (Tanner 120-121).

In the past, it has often been argued that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was written for and first performed at a wedding, yet more recent critics appear to be less convinced of this idea. The first play about which critics are certain that it was written for a wedding stems from 1614 – almost two decades after the *Dream* (Holland 111), and “elaborate courtly entertainments were far more common in the Jacobean period” following the Elizabethan period in which the *Dream* was first performed (Davies 296).

Exact details as to how the play was first received are absent, but it appears to have

been popular: it appeared in print in 1600, 1619 and 1623, was performed at court in 1604, and even survived during the 1649-1660 Interregnum, during which theatre was banned (Davies 296, 298). In the following Restoration, however, the play suddenly appeared to be old-fashioned – in 1662 after watching the play Samuel Pepys called it "the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life." Despite its outmodishness, the *Dream* did not disappear from the stage completely in the following centuries. The versions that did appear, however, were all adaptations: "until well into the nineteenth century, the play was known only in the form of one opera adaptation or another, and Shakespeare's text of the play was not restored to the stage until 1840" (Williams 40). One of these adaptations is of course *The Fairy Queen*. Ralph Foakes argues this conversion of the play "into an operatic spectacular was the theatre's way of coping with fairies, an inadequate way" (24). The play's fantastic aspects were dominant, and performances of it therefore for a long time foregrounded these aspects, perhaps overshadowing some other meanings present in the play.

When Shakespeare's text finally was restored, Felix Mendelssohn's 1826 *Overture* and following 1842 *Incidental music* were "almost inseparable from Shakespeare's vision … for the greater part of the 133 years since then" (Williams 40). Unfortunately, since there is only limited room in this thesis, Mendelssohn's music will not be discussed in it. In having to decide which of three brilliant works of music to include, my choice has fallen on the two operas, since they are more obviously new imaginings of the original play, and as they interweave music and language more closely than incidental music can do.

Since the 1840s, many more productions of the *Dream* have appeared, often trying to outdo each other in their ever more lavish stagings, and several films based on the play have appeared (Davies 298-299). When Benjamin Britten wrote his opera in 1960, different interpretations of Shakespeare's text were starting to emerge as well. The *Dream* was not only seen as a lovely comedic fairy tale anymore, on the contrary; C. L. Barber "was arguing that

Shakespeare's comedies were Saturnalian rather than romantic" (Brett 116) and Jan Kott, in his 1961 book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, sees something dark in all aspects that are often perceived as light: Puck is "the devil" and the lovers' awakening is "brutal and bitter" (171, 179). Although Kott's book appeared a little too late directly to influence Britten, his opinion is a famous one and one very much of the period, representative of sentiments important at the time Britten composed his opera. As a whole, Kott perceives the play to carry out the idea that "The world is mad and love is mad. In this universal madness of Nature and History, brief are the moments of happiness" (190). Major productions, such as the one by Peter Brook (1970), were strongly influenced by such ideas (Foakes 28).

Where Kott's interpretation of Shakespeare highlights, emphasises, and perhaps even exaggerates all the dark aspects of the play, William Empson nuances his ideas; he agrees with Kott that "the Victorian attitude" to the play "feels oppressively false, and has a widespread influence" (224), yet also calls Kott's interpretation of the dream as an orgy "a wild degree of misreading" (230), and there are indeed no clues in the text from which such a conclusion can be drawn. Influenced by Kott and Brook, therefore, modern productions of the *Dream* are more diverse: sometimes the dream is "turned into a nightmare" as in Robert Lepage's 1992 production (Foakes 46), yet more often than not "the play remains, deepened but unscathed in its marvellous drive on stage towards a festive conclusion that is enhanced by laughter" (Foakes 48).

In order to investigate different stage interpretations that have appeared of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is best to examine only a selection of productions of the play, as it has been reinvented so very frequently. For this thesis, the selection of the two musical adaptations appeared to me to be a sensible one: since the original play is filled with music and rarely performed without it, music plays a vital role in the audience's perception of the play. The selected works are the two that have proven to be most popular with audiences and

critics and most frequently performed of all musical adaptations, apart of course from Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music to the play.

As described above, Henry Purcell wrote the music for his *Fairy Queen* at a time when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was considered old-fashioned. It was therefore no more than logical at the time to alter it drastically in order to make it more contemporary (Radice 13). For this reason, *The Fairy* Queen has long been despised by critics, but more recently it has been appreciated as an independent adaptation, rather than "a waste of time" (Savage 203-204). Unfortunately, it remains unknown who made the alterations that created the libretto that Purcell worked with, or whether this was even one single person (Savage 206). The genre used by Purcell is that of the semi-opera; he does not set any of Shakespeare's words to music, but rather creates masques that appear in between the play's acts. Nevertheless, in the music he wrote, he still "clearly possessed that instinct for the fresh innocence of fairyland that was to be reborn in Mendelssohn and Britten" (Hartnoll 115).

Benjamin Britten chose *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as his subject for a pragmatic reason: he had less than a year in which he needed to produce the opera, since it was to be performed at the reopening of the Aldeburgh Jubilee Hall. An existing text therefore had to serve as the libretto, in order to save valuable time, and Britten had always had an interest in literary texts as bases for his music; he had already composed the operas *Peter Grimes* (1945), *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), employing libretti based on works by authors such as Herman Melville and Henry James. Out of all available existing texts, the *Dream* is a logical choice; Britten admired poetry, finding it "in a way, easier to read than prose" (Kildea, *On Music* 179), and the poetry of this play in particular seemed to him to be "amazingly beautiful" and "already intended for singing" (Kildea, *On Music* 190). Furthermore, Philip Brett points out Britten had a great number of unused libretti, and never "had an apparent necessity ever prevented him from doing exactly as he pleased, at least in

terms of artistic decisions" (109). The choice for the *Dream* was therefore a very conscious one, and turned out to be a very fortunate one as well: it was "an international hit" that was staged in ten cities around the world within its first year (Kildea, *A Life* 446).

In order carefully to compare and contrast the play and the operas, this thesis will employ a formalist approach, close reading both the play's text and the musical scores. Furthermore, the cultural and historical contexts in which each of the works was written and first performed will be considered, since together they span a period of almost four centuries, during which society has changed greatly. Moreover, I shall draw upon feminist readings of the play, since it will be argued that all three works contain critique on the customs of patriarchal societies. Finally, since the operas form a wholly different genre than the *Dream*, theories of adaptation will have to be taken into account.

The first major book on Shakespeare and feminism appeared in 1980: Carolyn Swift Lenz et al.'s *The Woman's Part* (Traub 8). The authors of this book describe how they:

> Assume that women are equal to men but that their roles, more often than men's and in different ways, have been restricted, stereotyped, and minimized; their aim is to free women from oppressive constraints. (Swift Lenz et al., 3)

In trying to achieve this aim, the authors emphasise that feminists do not only examine women, but rather "both men and women and the social structures that shape them" (3). The definition of "equality" is not specified, but it can be deduced to imply equality in intelligence, rights and in powers, and will be taken to mean precisely that in this thesis. One may rightly ask whether it is ever possible to achieve this, but this thesis will argue that there are plenty of ways in which – if not complete equality – at least a greater equality can be achieved.

In her 1981 article on the play, Shirley Nelson Garner argues that a patriarchal society oppresses all kinds of love: in the relationships between Titania and her Indian votress and that between Egeus and Demetrius, she sees forbidden and threatening homoeroticism (49, 55). Even Titania's attachment to the Indian boy is "clearly erotic" (49), and thus another threat to patriarchy, while Oberon is also "attracted to the child" (50). Her reasoning behind these arguments is not very convincing – any kind of loving relationship is immediately transformed into a sexual one – and her arguments have therefore not been echoed frequently by other scholars. Another one of her arguments, however, has often been reaffirmed: the female lovers do not talk anymore in the final act of the play, suggesting that "women's bonds with each other" need to be severed in order for men to remain in control (61). Other influential critics, such as Louis Montrose, have agreed with her that "the marital couplings dissolve the bonds of sisterhood" (61). In this thesis, while this point of view will be acknowledged, I shall also argue that the female friendships do not disappear as drastically as critics often claim.

Another frequently presented critical argument is that the marriages in the *Dream* involve "an orderly subordination of the female and her passions to the more reasonable male" (Olson 101). On closer examination, however, it has also become clear that this may not be true to the play's methods and strategies:

> It is in its intermittent ironies, dissonances, and contradictions that the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* discloses – perhaps, in a sense, despite itself – that patriarchal norms are compensatory for the vulnerability of men to the powers of women. (Montrose 75)

An example of such a contradiction can be found in the portrayal of the male and female characters; Theseus, for example, "is characterized from the beginning as owning a sort of

insensitivity that is perhaps peculiar to males" in his bragging speeches (Nuttall 122). Hippolyta, on the other hand, is connected to the moon, which "will never dominate as the sun does, but she is there" (Nuttall 125). Moreover, the female characters are remarkably more constant in their desires than the male ones, at a time when "'Constancy' is an important notion" (Tanner 131). The female characters might present themselves in a subtler manner than their male counterparts, nevertheless, they cannot be ignored or avoided and are therefore not necessarily less influential. In the following chapters, I will give many examples of how this intricate balance between male and female power exhibits itself.

The fact that Shakespeare was a man living in a patriarchal society ought not to be downplayed; with this in mind, how realistic would it therefore be to expect him to have any anti-patriarchal sympathies? Feminist critics acknowledge the force implicit in this question, yet they also "recognize that the greatest artists do not necessarily duplicate in their art the orthodoxies of their culture" (Swift Lenz et al. 4); it would be unrealistic to expect Shakespeare to have been a radical proto-feminist, yet there will always be people – open-minded artists in particular – living in a society which might be advantageous to them, but which they will nevertheless examine critically. Shakespeare is likely to have done so, since women's struggle against patriarchal values and the "high cost" of these values appear frequently throughout many of his plays (Swift Lenz et al. 6).

Unfortunately, there are no feminist readings of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* as yet. There are, however, general theories about women in opera: the most well-known one is by Catherine Clément in her influential book, *Opera: The Undoing of Women (L'opéra ou la défaite des femmes*) (1979), who argues that female characters in opera are "preyed on by their womanhood, adored and hated" (9); operas only tell of women's misery, and most female characters are based "on one of a limited number of stereotypes of womanly behavior" (Locke 35). Moreover, Clément adds that a "prima donna is the prisoner of a machinery …

[who], in her womanly weakness, will never get away" (26), and argues that "in blind pleasure it [opera] maintains the harsh laws of family and politics" (178). Female characters in operas, in other words, are often in the exact same position that Nelson Garner perceives the women in the *Dream* to be: that is, constrained and oppressed by men. In this thesis, however, I shall argue that women's positions in Purcell's and Britten's works are not as hopeless as Clément believes.

Ralph Locke, in reviewing Clément's theory, adds how more equality can be achieved: by viewing the female characters with their specific traits not so much as women, but as people: if a despairing woman singing a lamenting aria is not seen as "a despairing *woman*," but rather as a despairing human being who also happens to be a woman, a major change can be made (36). Some of the meanings conveyed by works of art, therefore, are not necessarily inherent to the works themselves, but imposed upon them by their audience. Some of the feminist currents in the play that contemporary critics highlight from the play and operas, therefore, are likely to be noted specifically because of our modern day perspectives, and it is therefore important not to assume anything was specifically intended by its author to mean what we think it does. The author's intentions are in any case lost to us, and very hard to discern; all we have is the play as a place open to our interpretations, and open too (as for Purcell and Britten) to our reinvention.

In the case of Britten's *Dream*, another aspect of equality should be considered: the status of homosexual characters. Where Nelson Garner's theories about homosexuality in Shakespeare's *Dream* have not become mainstream readings, they can hardly be denied in Britten's version. Britten himself was homosexual, and throughout his career, many references to his sexuality appear; his earlier operas (*Peter Grimes, Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw*) can all be read as covertly gay texts; Britten frequently wrote for his romantic partner: – and, in the case of the *Dream*, co-librettist – tenor Peter Pears, and had often shown

a particular interest in young boys (Kildea, *A Life* 116-118). His portrayal of Oberon as a countertenor and his casting of boys as fairies are therefore often seen as related to his own preferences (Kildea, *A Life* 274, 399). Moreover, by making these two decisions, some of Britten's major male characters are not stereotypically masculine, but rather more similar to women; not the female, but the male characters change in order to achieve equality.

Purcell and Britten could have worked with new texts, but Shakespeare's text was preferred. John Ellis argues this is because: "Adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a memory" (4-5). While this may be true for audiences to Britten's opera who often know the original play, at the time of the Purcell adaptation, Shakespeare's original was never performed, and audiences could therefore only have known it as a reading text. Nevertheless, the presence of a well-written story was apparently attractive to *The Fairy-Queen*'s producers. In order to keep the new works relevant, however, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could not simply be transformed to another medium, changes had to be made. Deborah Cartmell argues there are three rough categories of adaptation: transposition, commentary, and analogue (24). Works falling in the first category merely transform their source to a different medium, while works belonging to the second add something to the original (Sanders 21-22). Lastly, analogue works are completely new and can be enjoyed separately from their precedent, although it is often argued that knowledge of this original enriches the experience of the adaptation (Sanders 22-23). The works discussed in this thesis largely fall within the categories of transposition and commentary. Both works transform *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to an opera, as well as making additions to the original text, and therefore fall in both the transposition and commentary categories.

In the above discussion, some aspects typical of opera have already been mentioned: the casting of different voice types, for example, is determined by the composer, while the

playwright usually does not include this in his character description – with the exception of Flute, perhaps. Moreover, because it takes more time to sing words than to speak them, and instrumental music is added as well, the new work either becomes very long – as is the case with *The Fairy Queen* – or many lines need to be cut – as is the case with both adaptations.

With all the aforementioned information in mind, there are plenty of topics which are further discussed and discovered in this thesis. First of all, the feminist theories about the play are examined in more detail; I will argue, for example, that the female lovers' friendship has not been ended so drastically as is often claimed. Moreover, there are plenty of the "intermittent ironies, dissonances, and contradictions" that Montrose mentions, and these are interesting to explore. In particular, it will be interesting to see how Purcell and Britten deal with these topics; whether they highlight or reduce them, and how and why they do so within their own genres. In order fully to cover these topics, this thesis will discuss each of the works in a separate chapter, and do so chronologically. Chapter 2 therefore examines Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; chapter 3 explores Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, and chapter 4 investigates Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Finally, the resulting findings will be summarised in the Conclusion.

Chapter 2: William Shakespeare – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

"Reason and love keep little company together nowadays"

Bottom, 3.1.120-121

2.1 A Patriarchal Society

It is sometimes presumed that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed for the occasion of a wedding (Olson 95), although no concrete evidence appears for this assumption (Davies 296). Nevertheless, "there can still be no doubt that love in relation to marriage is the dramatist's subject. It is the theme stated, along with the goal – a wedding – of the dramatic action, in the opening speech" (Brooks lxxxix).

At first sight, the love story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may appear to be a happy one. It contains many comical misunderstandings, but by the end of the play, all four of its couples appear to be happily married. On closer examination, however, the love story is not so straightforward. In the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it immediately becomes clear how the play's powerful male characters view love; not so much as a romantic issue, but as something much more violent, bound to rules, and – in their own minds – rational: "The will of man is by his reason swayed" (2.2.121). Additionally, female characters are not recognised as having "a capacity for volition" and their thoughts and feelings are therefore not relevant (Montrose 70). Theseus declares how he won Hippolyta's love "with my sword" and "doing thee injuries" (1.1.16-17). Simultaneously, Egeus condemns Lysander's romantic attempts to win his daughter's love as "feigning", i.e. both singing softly and being deceitful (Foakes 56), and "cunning" (1.1.31,36), even threatening to have his daughter killed if she does not obey him (1.1.44). Theseus agrees that Hermia should either obey her father, die, or become a nun and remain a virgin forever, while advising against the

latter options (1.1.65-78). Demetrius is "worthier" (1.1.55) than Lysander, simply because Lysander is "wanting your father's voice" (1.1.54), or support, while Demetrius possesses it. The Athenian law states a daughter belongs to her father, and he may do with her what he pleases (1.1.41-42). With all these factors in mind, the love stories in the *Dream* suddenly appear to be much less innocent, and are instead disturbingly bound by patriarchal rules.

The male characters have a rational rather than romantic view of love, which might not be what people dream of in the twenty-first century, but appears to be very effective at a time when irrational love is viewed as doting "in idolatry" (1.1.109). Moreover, it could still be argued that the love story has a happy ending. Does it matter how the characters view love if they ultimately attain it? Perhaps it does not, but it is questionable whether all female characters do attain love. Hippolyta, for example, never signals that she is happy about her fast-approaching marriage. While Theseus is impatiently awaiting "our nuptial hour" (1.1.1), Hippolyta does not agree, but merely reminds him time will pass quickly (1.1.7-11). Furthermore, Theseus was not only known as "the reasonable man and the ideal ruler of both his lower nature and his subjects" (Olson 101), but also as a "notorious rapist and ravisher" (Tanner 120), while the character list states Hippolyta to be the Queen of the Amazons (52). The Amazons had "an obvious delight in subjecting powerful heroes to their will" (Montrose 66), making Hippolyta "the ruler of a nation which overturned the fixed hierarchy of wedlock" (Olson 102) now marrying somebody who proudly recalls he "wooed thee with my sword" and "doing thee injuries" (1.1.16-17). Similarly, Titania returns to Oberon, but only because he forces her to do so with the power of the herb: "Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower / Hath such force and blessed power" (4.1.70-71). The male characters' power appears to be necessary and essential in the love between these two powerful couples.

Before the young couples have the chance to marry, the female characters in particular have to endure great agonies. Although Demetrius is not the object of Hermia's love, as he

would like to be, this does not seem to make him consider his own relation to her; he is happy to marry her even if she does not love him back. He only speaks affectionately of Hermia when he realises he might lose her through her escape from Athens, by calling her "fair" (2.1.189). Before this moment, his argument only concerns his "certain right" (1.1.92). Moreover, he has already "made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena" (1.1.107), yet this does not have any consequences for his rights or duties towards women, since Theseus, "being overfull of self-affairs," forgot about it (1.1.113-114). Demetrius, like Theseus and Oberon, has every chance to do as he pleases.

While Demetrius is thus free to change his mind, Hermia is bound by her father's will, as mentioned above. Simultaneously, Helena is driven crazy by the loss of her lover. She clings to him desperately, and even betrays her dear friend's flight to him (1.1.246). Scholars have tried to give a satisfactory explanation for this seemingly unkind betrayal to such a dear friend. Samuel Taylor Coleridge argues it is because of "the lax hold which principles have on a woman's heart," since women "feel less proportionate abhorrence of moral evil in and for itself, and more of its outward consequences … than men, - their natures being almost wholly extroitive" (111), i.e. "directed to external objects" (*OED*). Although not employing such an explicitly antifeminist wording, W. H. Auden also appears to think Helena has no moral compass, arguing "she betrays Hermia to make everyone as unhappy as she is" (58). Both men, however, fail to listen to Helena's own words: "I only mean to enrich my pain" (1.1.250). While we have just seen that Demetrius is willing to marry Hermia whether she loves him or not, thereby pursuing power more than love, Helena's actions are driven by love. She immediately realises that, although she might have a slight chance of eventually marrying Demetrius if he remains in Athens, she cannot make him love her. Rather than staying and watching her beloved pine for somebody else, she endeavours to help him: "in love unto Demetrius, I told him of your [Hermia's] stealth unto the wood" (3.2.309-310), even though

she hurts herself in doing so. Finally, she has no choice but to further enlarge her pain: "for love I followed him" (3.2.311). The difference between the male and female lovers therefore becomes apparent in this seemingly strange betrayal: the male characters are driven by their thoughts and the idea of power, the female characters by their emotions.

After the men have changed their minds several times and the women have endured the resulting agonies, all appears to end well in their marriages. The desired marriages, however, perhaps merely reaffirm the structures of a patriarchal society: in marriage "the male ruled his mate in the same way that reason was ordained to control both will and passions" (Olson 99). Simultaneously, Lysander and Demetrius' friendship is restored. Now that they are both happily in love, they may comment on the workmen's play together. Hermia and Helena, on the other hand, do not speak anymore at all. It therefore appears to be the case that "the marital couplings dissolve the bonds of sisterhood at the same time that they forge the bonds of brotherhood" (Montrose 69). Marriage therefore aids in upholding the patriarchal system, and the conclusion of the play in marriage therefore can be seen as an approval of this system.

2.2 Critiquing Patriarchy

From the above, it has often been concluded by critics that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a very conservative play, only reaffirming the existing "patriarchal order and hierarchy" (Nelson Garner 47). While it cannot be denied that the play does so in letting the couples marry, this however does not imply Shakespeare therefore intended the audience to understand that these norms should be upheld. On the contrary, the play contains many critical notes towards this system. Firstly, from the above paragraphs it becomes apparent that "the young women do not fluctuate in their desires for their young men" (Montrose 69). The young men, on the other hand, are not constant. Demetrius loves Helena, then Hermia, and

finally Helena again "as in health come to my natural taste" (4.1.171), while this "health" is induced by a drug, and Lysander begins and ends with loving Hermia. Moreover, the men's desires are frequently ridiculed throughout the play. Lysander, for example, claims "The will of man is by his reason swayed" (2.2.121), after just having radically changed his mind about whom he loves with no rational reason at all. Bottom in his famous quote confirms the satire of this idea: "reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (3.1.120-121). The powerful male characters are convinced of their reasoning, yet the conclusion of the play reaffirms the young women's desires more than the young men's, suggesting that the patriarchal ideal of reasonable men who rule over women may not be so ideal after all.

Hippolyta and Titania are not as happy with their marriages as Hermia and Helena are with theirs. Titania is already married at the start of the play, and Hippolyta's engagement is equally pre-established. Interestingly enough, however, their (approaching) marriages do not guarantee their husband's power over them. After Theseus has announced the options Hermia can choose from, he says: "Come, my Hippolyta; what cheer, my love?" (1.1.122). Harold Brooks thinks she does not like the fact that love is "threatened with death or a compelled celibacy," and sees it as an ill-omen for her own wedding (12). Nelson Garner goes even further in saying that Theseus "undoubtedly notices her frowning", and this frowning implies that "she sides with Hermia and Lysander against Egeus and Theseus, when he sanctions Egeus's authority" (52). Hippolyta may be marrying Theseus, this does not mean she will always listen to and agree with him. Moreover, she is already shown to be the wiser partner at times in the play, for instance when Theseus claims he "never may believe" the lovers' stories, while we "meanwhile have *seen*" them happen, and Hippolyta acknowledges their truth (5.1.1-27, Nuttall 122).

Similarly, Titania states about Oberon that she has "forsworn his bed and company" (2.1.62), because he has been "away from Fairyland" loving a shepherdess and Hippolyta

(2.1.65-71). Oberon immediately opposes her claims with a similar accusation of Titania's "love to Theseus" (2.1.76). While their relationship thus appears to be rather equal in a way – with both partners spending time with other lovers as well – on closer examination, this does not appear to be the case. Where Oberon does not deny Titania's claims, nor apologise for his behaviour or repeat his accusations, Titania immediately denies her own affair with Theseus, calling Oberon's ideas "forgeries of jealousy" (2.1.181) and repeating it was Oberon's behaviour that has "disturbed our sport" (2.1.87). Moreover, Titania goes on to list all the consequent problems brought about in the natural world, worrying about them, while Oberon does not show any concern for these disturbances. His only concern is for the Indian boy that Titania will not give to him, and he thus tells her the problem "lies in you" (2.1.118). Both fairies thus see very different reasons for their fight: for Titania, it lies in Oberon's infidelity, while for Oberon it is crystal clear that Titania should never "cross her Oberon" and always give him what he wants (2.1.119). Titania's argument already appears to be more reasonable, and becomes even more so when the partners discuss the Indian boy. Oberon wants to possess him "to be my henchman," (2.1.121) while, as Brett points out, he "already has a henchman in Puck" (118).

Titania gives legitimate reasons why she should not give up the Indian boy, in explaining her relationship with his mother. This argument is not relevant to Oberon. He is preoccupied with gaining possession, "not only of the boy but of the woman's desire and obedience; he must master his own dependency upon his wife" (Montrose 71). Oberon concludes he can only win Titania back by force, and has to humiliate her in the process, partly in order to recompense for the humiliation he feels through having lost her love, and in order to "make her render up her page to me" (2.1.185). He therefore first ensures she falls in love with "some thing vile" (2.2.40), and then taunts her so that she gives him the boy (4.1.47-57), before eventually making her original love for him return. While Oberon may

ultimately get what he wants, the facts that he has been unfaithful to his wife and wanted to possess a child that was hers demonstrate this achievement is perhaps not quite deserved. He manages to restore Titania's original love by employing the flower, just like he does in order to restore Demetrius' original love. The major difference is that Demetrius was distracted by the prospect of a powerful position, while Titania distracted herself after her husband had been unfaithful to her. Moreover, while the love juice usually results in a sudden infatuation for a random person, for Demetrius, "it does not alter the object of his affection," but only makes him "more intensely in love with the person with whom he is actually in love" (Holland 68). The juice, in this case, is employed in order to make his emotion more important than the prospect of power, and that is why it is not a problem that Demetrius is still under the influence of the juice at the end of the play. Again, the irrational women suddenly appear to be more reasonable than the rational men.

Oberon's desperate measure employed to regain his wife's love does not stand on its own. Hardly any mothers appear in the play; a relative absence that is, of course, not without significance. As can be seen in Oberon's behaviour, and the men's fraternal commenting on the mechanicals' play, the male characters "need to maintain their ties with other men and to sever women's bounds with each other" (Nelson Garner 60-61). Why would they feel the need to do so? Underneath their theories about men being rational, a fear of losing power to women may well be hidden. As Montrose points out, while women are certain they are a child's mother, men never can be (72). In order to compensate for this uncertainty and their dependency on women in the creation of children, they cut ties with mothers where possible, and claim they are the makers of their children; Hermia is "but as a form in wax / By him imprinted" (1.1.49-50), while the Indian boy's mother "is represented as a *vessel*, as a container for her son, she is not his *maker*" (72). His maker never appears, and Oberon cannot accept the idea that the boy is raised by a woman only. If they had not thought women

capable of overthrowing their establishment, there would not have been such a need for the male characters to exaggerate their importance. “The implication is that men fear that if women join with each other, they will not need men, will possibly exclude them or prefer the friendship and love of women” (Nelson Garner 61). Patriarchy may still be predominant at the end of the play, but it has been severely challenged, and powerful women are likely to challenge it again in the future.

Interestingly, although he conquered Hippolyta, Theseus also appears to criticise the system that has allowed him to do so. Immediately after he has discussed Hermia’s approaching marriage with Egeus and Demetrius, he takes these two men apart for some “private schooling” (1.1.116). Although tyrannical fathers often appear in Shakespeare’s plays at this time, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Paul Olson notes that there were popular manuals people looked at for advice, and these state that parents should not force their children to marry, but respect God’s will in this, and have the consent of both parties (101). It is therefore not unlikely that Theseus reminds Egeus and Demetrius of this commonly known advice. At the end of the play, the advice has not had any effect on Egeus or Demetrius, but it has influenced Theseus himself. While he initially follows Egeus in his reasoning about the Athenian law, by the end of the play, he exhibits “a more profound understanding of the principle of consent as the basis of marriage than he exhibited in the first scene” (Olson 117-118). Theseus’ overruling of the law may seem arbitrary, but Leonard Tennenhouse sees his action as prompted by “the power of legitimate authority” rather than that of patriarchal authority, in that Theseus is able to forgive the lovers, where Egeus “would be penurious and harsh” (74). Although Theseus may not be ready to consider the importance of mutual consent for his own marriage yet, by stressing its importance for others, he has taken a first step. In doing so, he undermines part of the patriarchal society, while it is precisely this society that authorises his own position.

Several critics have commented on the difference in friendship between the male and female characters, noting the women are so strongly connected at the start of the play, while they are rivals at the end, and vice versa for the men. The lovers are happy and have acquired the lover they desired, but with this acquisition, the friendship between the female lovers appears to be sacrificed. It can be doubted, however, whether this is actually the case. It may be true that Hermia and Helena do not speak anymore during the final act, but they do talk shortly after waking up:

Hermia Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.
Helena So methinks;
And I have found Demetrius, like a jewel,
Mine own, and not mine own.
Demetrius Are you sure
That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. Do you not think
The Duke was here, and bid us follow him?
Hermia Yea, and my father.
Helena And Hippolyta.

(4.1.185-193)

This may not be an over-joyous conversation in which they proclaim their love for each other, nevertheless, it does demonstrate that Hermia and Helena harmoniously complement each other's sentences. Throughout the play, the characters' language is relevant: they speak in a musical duet like form when in love, e.g. ll. 1.1.135-141 (Foakes 60), or in two different styles to show discrepancy, for instance between Titania and Bottom in ll. 3.1.112-136 (Foakes 92). When characters complement each other's sentences, this therefore appears to be a sign of harmony between them. Moreover, the fact that these women do not talk anymore afterwards does not mean they are not friends. Partly, speech codes at the time prevented them from talking, and more importantly, their silence may actually indicate they do not need to use many words to confirm something they know to be right, while the male characters need to talk excessively in order to establish their emerging friendship and confirm the

powerful status in which they feel the female characters threaten them. The women's friendship can from now on only appear in a different form because of the society's norms, but these norms cannot end it.

2.3 A Precarious Balance

One may justly ask why Shakespeare, after the criticism that the play offers of patriarchal societies, would not give the play a different ending, one that does not confirm the status quo. There are several reasons why he could have done this. First of all, such a conclusion may not be a very popular one that should be stated explicitly. The presence of a dreamlike fairy world, and all the comic aspects of the play, are therefore perfect covers underneath which a critical note can be presented. With an explicit meaning, people are likely to feel directly attacked in their behaviour, and respond by reaffirming it. When strong patriarchal behaviour is ridiculed and placed in a more fanciful setting, however, the idea is more likely to reach its audience. Simultaneously, Tennenhouse argues, in order for the play to end as a comedy rather than a tragedy, it requires "either the independence of the law or the generosity of the father" (73). The comic aspects of the play therefore also provide a reason for it to ignore one of these two aspects of patriarchal societies.

It is in the dreams or the fairy world that all relationships are mended. The authenticity of the characters' experiences is questioned by Theseus, who determines their stories to be "more strange than true" (5.1.2). In this determination: "the rational Theseus who rejects the imaginative irrationalities of the lunatic, the lover and the poet is, quite simply, wrong" (Holland 55). Hippolyta, on the other hand, points out that the lovers' accounts of the night's adventures are remarkably coherent and "of great constancy" (5.1.26), indicating that these dreams may contain some important truths. The dreams continue to influence reality and are indispensable for the young lovers in attaining their happiness, because Theseus allows the

lovers to marry after hearing their story, even though he does not believe it. A world so very antagonistic to that of Theseus' rationalism nevertheless influences his patriarchal society.

Within the fairy world, the relationships between male and female characters are more equally balanced than in the rest of the play. The legitimacy of Oberon's ultimate power over Titania is questionable, almost automatically leading to the idea that perhaps these "Platonic archetypes" and "global powers" should be more in balance (Empson 224, Olson 112). The other male characters treat Titania with respect: her fairies do so, and even Puck calls Titania "my mistress" after he has just made her fall in love with Bottom (3.2.6). Moreover, Titania always ensures she gets what she wants, regardless of whether she wants it voluntarily, with the Indian boy, or involuntarily, with Bottom. Bottom gives no signs of loving her, yet she decides they will be lovers: "Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no" (3.1.127). Her powerful determination signals clearly that women can act on their desires just as men can. Furthermore, Titania's love for Bottom is perhaps not even as humiliating as Oberon wants it to be; Bottom comes from a lower social class, but he remains confidently true to himself and his "down-to-earth ordinariness" and is not tempted by the prospect of power, unlike Oberon (Holland 81). Therefore, in this world that influences the patriarchal society of the play, the standards of this society are partly undermined, perhaps indicating something should change in the humans' patriarchal society as well.

Although Oberon still focuses on power more than love in his own relationship, he is concerned with love for others. When he first hears Demetrius and Helena quarrel, Oberon immediately decides to restore their relationship. He tells Helena: "Ere he do leave this grove, thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love" (2.1.245-246). Similarly, although finding the confusions hugely entertaining as well, Puck aims to restore the loves, so that "all shall be well" (3.2.463). Oberon and Puck immediately realise love is more important than the law,

providing Theseus with the right example to follow. Once more, a non-patriarchal example is set in the fairy world that influences our own social reality.

Oberon appears to be the most powerful character in the play; he decides with who the characters fall in love. In doing so, he depends on herbs; the "little western flower" hit by Cupid's arrow has the power to make people love "the next live creature" they see (2.1.166, 172). The business of love is therefore a male one, even the flower's power was provided by a male character. Interestingly enough, however, Cupid who provides the power is the son of the female love goddess Venus, and moreover, the herb that restores the damage done by this first flower is Diana's: "Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower, Hath such force and blessed power" (4.1.70-71). Historically, Titania is related to Diana (Holland 32-33), and the play is filled with "imagery of the moon and moisture and Diana, all of which militate against the fire of love" (Auden 58). In restoring the damage he has done, Oberon therefore needs to employ Titania's power; he is not as almighty as he appears to be.

Not only the intangible dreams aid in conveying the play's discourse, the down-to-earth mechanicals' play does so as well. As Holland points out, the play could have ended perfectly well after scene 4.1, yet Shakespeare decided to add two more scenes (106). By adding these scenes, Shakespeare adds to the comic effect of the *Dream*, and also creates another opportunity to convey a more serious meaning. While the mechanicals take their attempt at performing a play just as seriously as the other characters take their own affairs, their clumsiness in the execution of this job is entertaining. Workmen at the time sometimes played for the queen, but never performed plays for such major occasions (Holland 92), and Shakespeare made fun of "old-fashioned and primitive examples" of his own literary form in adding the extra play (Talbot Donaldson 9). The play the mechanicals perform is a tragedy, but they "cannot turn their attention away from the noble spectators, and this attitude of theirs helps to turn the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe into the wild parody of a play" (Righter 19-

20). Like the fairies, the mechanicals are not part of the social order in which the upper-class lovers live – like the fairies, therefore, the mechanicals are able to critically comment on this world from a distance.

The workmen, unlike the aristocratic men, are very respectful to the upper-class women. They rid their play of anything that might "fright the ladies out of their wits" (1.2.64-65), and even include a maternal reference, the only one in the mortal world: they repeatedly refer to their colleagues as "every mother's son" (1.2.63, 3.1.56-57). In doing so, the mechanicals acknowledge the power these women have over them, and they appear to have no problem with this situation. On the contrary, they make every effort they can to please these women, and in return receive similar respect from the upper class. While Theseus still has some difficulty appreciating women's opinions in his private life, he urges the other characters to appreciate the workmen's effort: "For never anything can be amiss / When simpleness and duty tender it" (5.1.82-83). The low and high classes are respectful of each other, indicating that a logical next step would be that high class men would respect high class women in equal measure.

Pyramus and Thisbe can be seen as representative of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Pyramus and Thisbe* is described as "Merry and tragical" (5.1.58) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is just that. While it is funny, dreamy, and containing a happy end, its tragedy is that its female characters still cannot possess both love and some freedom – a liberty equal to that of their husbands. Furthermore, the play within the play concerns itself with finding "concord of this discord" (5.1.60), which is the main theme of the main play as well: "the discords of Oberon and Titania and the lovers having been resolved into concord in 4.1, the play of Pyramus and Thisbe offers a new set of incongruous conjunctions reflecting as in a distorting mirror aspects of the earlier discords" (Foakes 126).

In one aspect, the embedded play differs significantly from the main one: its lovers do not receive their longed-for happy ending, but die because the law mercilessly forbids their love. With this storyline, the play represents what could have happened to the protagonists of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had the fairy world not intervened with their patriarchal society. That does not mean, however, that *Pyramus and Thisbe* implies perhaps this is what should have happened to Helena and Demetrius as well. On the contrary, it took their children's deaths to make Pyramus and Thisbe's fathers realise love is more important than the law: after the deaths, "the wall is down that parted their fathers" (5.1.332-333). Luckily, Theseus has this insight sooner than the fathers of Pyramus and Thisbe did. In giving this insight into what could have happened if all patriarchal rules had been followed, *Pyramus and Thisbe* perhaps forms the most direct signal in the entire play that something should change within this patriarchal society.

It can be concluded that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an intricately layered play providing a sketch of patriarchal society and highlighting the flaws it contains. Its conclusion appears to reaffirm "patriarchal order and hierarchy, insisting that the power of women must be circumscribed" (Nelson Garner 47). However, the many critical notes given to this order and hierarchy question their durability. The presence of a fairy world, references to dreams, and the play's comic aspects allow Shakespeare to give his critical notes on patriarchal society. Even though the status quo is reaffirmed at the end of the play, it has been severely challenged, and even Oberon and Theseus have at times learnt to acknowledge the value of love over power. Moreover, it is likely that the patriarchal society will be challenged again in the future: the play has shown it can be questioned even within marriages, and it "ends upon the threshold of another generational cycle, which contains *in potentia* a renewal of the strife with which the play began" (Montrose 74). The underlying conclusion is surprisingly simple: if marriage is "relatively unselfish" (Olson 119) and formed based upon mutual consent and

love, they are more likely to be successful than if they are governed by patriarchal norms which are “compensatory for the vulnerability of men to the powers of women” (Montrose 75).

Chapter 3: Henry Purcell - *The Fairy Queen*

'Tis Fairy Musick, sent by me;
To cure your Incredulity.
All was true the Lovers told,
You shall stranger things behold
Mark the wonders shall appear,
While I feast your eye and ear.

Oberon, xx

3.1 A Unique Genre

Henry Purcell wrote the music to the 1692 semi-opera *The Fairy Queen*, and in doing so, created a spectacle that focuses on the possibilities that imagination and the fairy world can provide in a patriarchal society. While the work's genre is not well known anymore currently, at the time, this kind of production was more popular in England than the continental opera tradition that has survived since (Price 6). As its name suggests, the semi-opera contains more music than a play, but less than an opera, with the acting and singing parts not necessarily being equal or performed by the same persons: "the actors being the most important, the singers and dancers being only added … to make up the whole hybrid spectacle" (Barclay Squire 25). In *The Fairy Queen*, some songs are sung, but most of the music appears in masques added to the end of each act, which partly further tell the story and partly reflect on that of the preceding act. The masques are typical for their genre:

> The characters and settings were usually classical or mythological, the poetry ornate and refined, the scenic art astonishing, the dance reflecting the latest in the highly refined language of courtly gesture. (McDermott, 2)

While the spoken parts of the play retain a relatively large part of Shakespeare's original text, none of the work's songs employ his words. Why the libretto appears in this form remains unknown, just as, although several suggestions have been made, does the identity of its author (Price 321-322). The changes ultimately result in a semi-opera that focuses more on the supernatural world, and in doing so, also places more emphasis on the possibilities of a non-patriarchal society.

A remarkable change from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is of course the work's title: *The Fairy Queen*. This title is not likely to have been a homage to Spenser's work, because he was no longer very popular in the 1690s; the change of title may have a rather more practical reason, in bringing to the audience's mind such well-known works as *The Indian Queen* (1663), *The Maiden Queen* (1667) and *The Rival Queens* (1677) (Savage 206). Regardless of the reason behind this change, the effect is that the work's focus lies on a female fairy's power. Perhaps this was the case because – with some exceptions (notably in masque) – women first appeared on the stage in 1660, and because their presence was so new and exciting, more women's roles were added, and existing roles often became more important (Marsden 25). A further important note on the semi-opera is that it exists in two versions, a 1692 and a revised 1693 version, hereafter called Q1692 and Q1693, after the quartos they appear in. The reason behind the revisions is unknown, (Wood and Pinnock 45), but the most significant change between the two versions is that of the deletion of Shakespeare's first scene; while in the 1692 version Act I is the only act not followed by a masque, in Q1693, it consists of just one scene and a masque set in the fairy world.

3.2 Increased Distance and Familiarity

Purcell and his librettist make changes to Shakespeare's play that have two seemingly opposing effects: on the one hand, they place more emphasis on the fairy realm and dream

world than Shakespeare does, making their work less realistic, while on the other hand, the semi-opera is brought closer to home through the addition of English folkloric elements, and thus becomes more familiar for a seventeenth-century audience. In this section, I will demonstrate how these seemingly paradoxical elements appear together, and how they help to make *The Fairy Queen* a semi-opera that explores alternatives to patriarchal societies.

First of all, Purcell makes some changes in the semi-opera's cast. He omits the first twenty lines of the play and with this deletion, Hippolyta is removed from the semi-opera completely, not returning in later scenes either. The semi-opera is thus bound less to the earthly realm by omitting the relationship between the powerful earthly couple and only establishing that of the fairy rulers. Moreover, it is inherent to the genre of the semi-opera that emphasis is placed on the fantastical, due to the nature of its masques. An example of the increased importance of these elusive elements of fantasy appears in the second masque, where two sopranos, a male alto, and a bass representing Night, Mystery, Secrecy, and Sleep each sing a song in order to make Titania fall asleep. In turning these concepts into characters, Purcell increases their importance, and the idea that they are capable of influencing people. With each entry, "the fairy music becomes harmonically lusher" and "ever softer and sweeter", ultimately leading to Titania's sleep (Price 338, 336). Although Shakespeare's words have not been used, their meaning is transported to and expanded upon in these characters' songs. By creating "the longest imaginable 'so good night with lullaby' and the most beautiful" (Savage 215), Purcell and his librettist place even more emphasis on the dreamy aspect of the semi-opera than can be found in the play, thereby transporting the audience into this fantastic realm that can be as surreal as the fairy world.

Another example of Purcell's emphasis on the dreamlike world can be found in the extravagant Chinese scene appearing in the fifth masque. The Chinese garden, next to being an interesting exotic décor for the audience, "in accordance with the taste of the day for

'Chinoiseries'" (Barclay Squire 29), could also be seen as a new dreamlike world; at this point in the semi-opera, its mortal characters have managed to become part of the dream, since Oberon, Titania, Puck and the fairies have entered Theseus' court. By adding a new, even more distant layer, Purcell ensures that there is always a world that remains inaccessible for the audience. By providing such magical distant worlds, Purcell does not only provide his audience with imaginative entertainment, but also creates room for himself in which to work outside of his society's norms.

While the semi-opera is thus very distant on the one hand, Purcell and his librettist also add in elements that make it more relatable for a seventeenth-century English audience. Theseus, first of all is never mentioned by his name, only as the Duke. By changing his name and deleting all other references to Greece, including his wife, *The Fairy Queen* is not firmly settled in Athens. Purcell does not specify an alternative location, and audiences thus have no reason to assume the human characters live far away from England. At a time when Greece was still a very exotic place few people would ever visit, this makes the lovers and their problems more relatable, and the contrast with the magical forest deepens.

Within his treatment of the fairy world, Purcell manages to make this world itself more recognisable; where Shakespeare removes the English fairies' traditional pinching behaviour (Holland 33), Purcell reintroduces it, drawing on a characteristic familiar to his audience. Similarly, in the third masque, green men chase fairies away with their dance. These green men can be seen as another folk element added to the semi-opera, like the pinching fairies. While he thus increases the fantastic elements enormously in a way, Purcell also brings the semi-opera closer to home, in ensuring the added elements are familiar ones from the English folklore tradition.

Finally, *The Fairy Queen becomes* more familiar for contemporary audiences by the references to current affairs Purcell adds. First of all, there is the appearance of the Drunken

Poet in the very first masque. Although the fairies are rather unkind to the poet, the scene has much more of a comic than a threatening effect, due to Purcell's inventive setting, which betrays the poet's state through stammers, arbitrary changes of time signature and rhythm and randomly jumping intervals reminiscent of hiccoughs. It is often argued that the drunken poet may – whether intended by Purcell or not – reminded the audience of a real stammering poet: Thomas Durfey (Wood and Pinnock 47). Similarly, the Chinese garden is likely to have been a reference to Queen Mary, who had a collection of china that was put on display, thereby gaining fame, and the garden's orange trees refer to King William of Orange's ancestry (Muller and Muller 668). Moreover, any reference to flirtations or adultery between the royal couple and mortals is cut. Curtis Price points out this may have been done "to avoid unflattering parallels between the fairy rulers and William and Mary" (324). These positive royal references in a masque celebrating monogamous love were employed to gain the new royal couple's support and approval (Muller and Muller 668-670), as one would expect, since masques were so frequently performed at court. Furthermore, they form a much-needed link with reality that aids with conveying the meanings of a work that is – partly due to the inherent nature of its masques of course – so surreal and fantastical. *The Fairy Queen* adds something Shakespeare, of course, could not have brought in – a reference to current affairs of 1693, making the semi-opera relevant and interesting for its audience, and more open to ideas and meanings expressed in the work.

3.3 Fairy Power

Where Theseus and his court remain relatively powerful in Shakespeare's *Dream*, Purcell and his librettist heighten the fairies' power, while simultaneously lessening the importance of Theseus' patriarchal society. At their first entry, Titania and Oberon would perhaps not be taken very seriously by an audience, since, as Michael Burden points out, these

"two most important spoken roles in the opera were performed by children" (597). Burden argues this casting choice is mostly helpful in making them appear as realistic, small fairies, in contrasting their diminutive size with that of the human characters, played by adults (606). Moreover, ll. 2.1.88-117 of Titania's speeches to Oberon are omitted, and thus the idea that Titania and Oberon influence the seasons disappears. It would therefore appear to be the case that the royal fairy couple's power is diminished here, both through their diminutive size and their decreased influence. Size, however, is not very important when it becomes apparent throughout the semi-opera that the fairy couple are extremely important and influential, and their being children will therefore not make a significant difference in how audiences perceive them. Likewise, in the celebration of the seasons after the couple's reconciliation in the fourth masque, the connection between their behaviour and the seasons is re-established, be it in a slightly less direct form than in the original (Savage 213). Finally, Oberon and Titania's quarrel can even be seen as representative "of the strife disrupting all earthly order and fertility," and their reunion is celebrated extensively with three other renewals: a new day, when "night is chas'd away," a new year in life, since "'Tis the birthday of King Oberon" and new life and spring that "great parent of the earth" Phoebus provides (xviii). Oberon and Titania already can be felt to have an archetypal function in the *Dream*, and this function is only strengthened by Purcell's dedicating an entire masque to their reunion.

In the very first masque, Purcell immediately establishes Titania's power; she commands her fairies to "Sing, and entertain my Dear", i.e. the Indian boy, and declares that any mortal who dares to approach the area should be pinched "till he confess his Sins" (Purcell xi). Here, her love for the Indian boy is established as it is in Shakespeare, and a new element is added: while the fairies in Shakespeare clearly have power over the mortals and their love lives, this is not mentioned explicitly. In *The Fairy Queen*, however, Titania leaves no doubt as to who has a superior role. Her status, moreover, is confirmed in the second

masque, in which the fairies' purpose is first of all to entertain Titania, and to emphasise her superior status in doing so, by invoking all the "songsters of the sky" to aid them (xiii), and asking the "God of Wit" to inspire the muses and heavenly choir to show "the utmost of their art" (xiv).

Not only Titania is influential, other fairies and supernatural creatures are so as well. The final masque, for example, opens with Juno's entry, and Oberon explains that her presence is required since she presides "Over the Sacred Nuptial Bed" (xx); where the lovers can proceed to marry in the *Dream*, they cannot do so without supernatural blessings in *The Fairy Queen*. The weddings in the temple are omitted from the semi-opera, but the process is captured in an extravagant ceremony with the help of the gods Juno and Hymen and Oberon and Titania in the final masque; even the wedding ceremony no longer solely takes place in the patriarchal society anymore, but is rather officiated by these supernatural creatures, who give the "thrice happy lovers" advice and solemnise the marriages (xx), an ultimate sign of their dominance.

Another clear sign of the fairies' importance is given by the fairies themselves. After the Duke has declared he does not believe the lovers' stories and likens them to lunatics and poets, Titania, Puck and the fairies enter, and suddenly the fairy and human worlds are merged. This is a remarkable feature drastically departing from Shakespeare and even *The Fairy Queen*'s own conventions. In the first masque, the human intrusion in the fairy world is very unwelcome, while the fairies here decide to enter the mortal world themselves. Why would they do so? In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even though the fairies certainly have the power to decide over people's love lives, they remain mysterious creatures belonging to the night, ungraspable for the other characters. In *The Fairy Queen*, the fairies seem more concerned with bringing the truth to light in contradicting the Duke, and with receiving credit for their deeds. They are willing to aid mortals, but not if their importance is not recognised.

Adding to the fairies' previous interruption, *The Fairy Queen* ends with an epilogue by Oberon and Titania, in which they restate how powerful they are, and how they are willing to fulfil dreams of even the neediest people, as long as they stay true to them. Purcell does not attempt to reproduce the play's end, and *The Fairy Queen* therefore gives its audience a very different final consideration; where Puck reminds the audience the play is "no more yielding but a dream" and tells them "if you pardon, we will mend," (5.1.406, 408), Oberon and Titania do not suggest the semi-opera is a dream, or surreal, at all. Rather, they "become a pair of cynical Dorset Garden players" (Price 355) – Dorset garden being the theatre in which *The Fairy Queen* premiered (Cudworth 56) – who do not remind us of the fantastical nature of the play, but only become more realistic. Furthermore, they do not excuse themselves, but demand to be taken seriously: "Oberon: We'll try a Thousand charming Ways to win ye. Titania: If all this will not do, the Devil's in ye" (xxii). Purcell thus appears to be telling his audience: do not concern yourself with the reality of your own society, but be aware of the supernatural world, honour it, and your dreams may come true.

3.4 Balance Between the Sexes

Purcell portrays both the play's and the masques' male and female characters in such a way that they become more "equal" than in Shakespeare's *Dream*. By "equal" in this case, I suggest that power does not solely lie with male characters, that the men become more reasonable, and that female characters become less innocent and naïve. Through these portrayals, whether he intended to do so or not, Purcell displays what a society less patriarchal than that of the *Dream* could look like.

First of all, by removing Hippolyta from the semi-opera, Purcell omits an important, strong female character, which could, if one wishes to interpret it that way, be seen as his getting rid of a difficult woman. With her disappearance, however, the idea of a male ruler

conquering a rebellious woman also disappears, and so the vanishing of this unbalanced relationship goes hand in hand with the erasure from the text of a patriarchal norm. The one exemplary relationship that remains present in *The Fairy Queen* is now that between Oberon and Titania, and this relationship is already less disturbed initially than it is in the *Dream*; the omission of all references to flirtations or adultery between the royal couple and mortals makes that the powerful fairy couple's relationship is less disturbed, and stands a better chance of being repaired. Moreover, Titania's ll. 124-135, in which she explains why she is so fond of the Indian boy, disappear as well. These lines previously provided her with a legitimate reason for her steadfastness, and without them, her sturdiness in the discussion appears to be much less reasonable. Thus Oberon appears more positively through the omission of his adultery, while Titania is not only a victim of his whims, but rather whimsical herself as well. In several ways, the archetypal couple therefore becomes more equal, and their relationship less ruined.

Not only does the relationship between Oberon and Titania change, the extent to which each of them has power alters as well. Firstly, Oberon calls for Juno's presence, rather than for her "mighty" husband Jove (xx). Oberon explains he needs her help by giving this explanation; the almighty fairy king acknowledges he needs the help of a goddess, and is therefore not ultimately almighty himself – a remarkably humble acknowledgement Shakespeare's Oberon never would have admitted. Furthermore, Titania firmly establishes her power throughout the masques, more so than Oberon. Here, another remarkable difference with the original play appears: while Oberon's power is clearly present in the play scenes, Titania's is more dominant in the masques, and they are thus more equally in possession of power. It could even be argued that Titania's power is greater than Oberon's, since the masques in their lavishness are likely what the semi-opera's audiences will remember, and the work's title already emphasises her importance as well.

The balance between the power of both sexes is different in the human world as well; here, it is not so much the case that the female characters gain power, but that of the male characters is reduced. Especially in Q1693, in which Purcell probably deliberately omitted the play's first scene (Price 328), the emphasis on power is diminished; not only does the opening of the semi-opera in the fairy world emphasise the importance of this setting over that of the Duke's court, but with the omission of the lovers' problems, Egeus' patriarchal power and Demetrius' longing for such power disappear as well. Purcell ingeniously reintroduces the coherency of the story by adding a duet in which an unnamed soprano and bass resolve to leave the town and "spend our days … in some lonely place," (xi) but without the link to the patriarchal norms that caused the lovers to flee in the first place. Moreover, this early song already invalidates the often-heard argument by sceptical critics such as Charles Cudworth that *The Fairy Queen* "contains some magnificent masque-music, but nothing that has much to do with Shakespeare's play" (56). Finally, by the end of the semi-opera, "*The Fairy Queen*'s Theseus is educated out of his mistake by being shown the fairy world" (Holland 55); even the Duke can no longer pretend he is almighty.

In the masques, several songs appear that implicitly or explicitly tell of similarities between men and women. The third masque performed for Bottom's entertainment, for example, contains a song in which bass Coridon, a classical shepherd familiar from many contemporary plays, appearing as "Corin" in the *Dream* (2.1.66), tries to seduce alto Mopsa, who calls him "Sir Clown," a reference to shepherdess Mopsa who is seduced by the clown in *The Winter's Tale*. Mopsa advocates a policy of "no kissing at all" because "should I give you an inch, you'd soon take an ell" (xvi). The song is already ingenious because it reminds of the scene where Hermia refuses to sleep next to Lysander, and duplicates "the dramatic topsy-turvydom displayed in the spoken parts of the play" (Degott 429), but has a very comic effect as well; partly because Mopsa appears to be overly prudish while simultaneously using words

that are very likely slang terms for the male genitals, and even more so because Mopsa's part is sung by a man. He/she may therefore not be so prudish after all, and the duplicity of his/her sex seems to suggest that both men and women are capable of making such jokes.

Even more explicit in its comparison of the sexes than Mopsa's piece is a following song in the same act: "When I have often heard young maids complaining." This song offers a rather different view of love than the *Dream*: not only do men know how to "deceive" women to gain pleasures, women are perfectly capable of doing this as well (xvii). Through this song, it becomes apparent again that women are not solely innocent and naïve creatures, but may use men just as well as vice versa. Together, both this and Mopsa's songs indicate that not only men know what they want and how to attain it, but women do so as well.

Finally, the new placing of the workmen's play in the third act, "the only major structural alteration of the *Dream*" (Price 323), may appear because it is less essential as an opposition to the work's main storyline. Critics agree the play-within-the-play was moved to the third act because it would not be a suitable finale "with which to conclude these festivities" (Williams 42, Price 326). Price even argues that by moving the play to the third act, "it occupies the most important position in the play – the centrepiece of the spacious, almost leisurely dénouement" (323). There is some truth in this; *Pyramus and Thisbe* here receives the attention it deserves, being the main work's one anti-masque competing with all the spectacular masques, while room is left at the end of the semi-opera for a grand finale in line with "the musical theme of both original and gently reworked operatic version" (Price 326). The anti-masque, however, while still containing a relevant meaning, is perhaps not as crucial to *The Fairy Queen* as it is to the *Dream*; as is being argued in this chapter, many patriarchal elements have already been omitted from the semi-opera, and in their absence, contradictory elements automatically become less essential as well. The new position *Pyramus and Thisbe* occupies therefore on the one hand ensures it does not become buried

completely underneath all the masques' spectacles, yet these spectacles will bury it somewhat anyway, and this is in line with its function within *The Fairy Queen*.

In conclusion, it can be said that *The Fairy Queen* is an ingeniously structured semi-opera elaborating greatly on Shakespeare's magical world. At first sight, it may sometimes seem to differ radically from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, because it adds masques to the story and sometimes omits important aspects. On close examination, however, it becomes clear that all essential lines that have been cut reappear somewhere else in a musical form. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the discourse conveyed by *The Fairy Queen* is exactly the same as that of the original, but rather that different aspects have been highlighted.

First of all, *The Fairy Queen* places much more emphasis on the supernatural world than the *Dream*, and the dreamlike aspect of the semi-opera is less abstract. Rather than leaving implicit whether one should take one's dreams and fantasies seriously and take advice from or find insight in them, the semi-opera appears to say that this should really be done. Not only do the play's characters become part of the dream, the play also ends with an epilogue that particularly advises people to listen to the Fairy King and Queen. Moreover, the fairy world is more predominant and important than Theseus' court, and English folkloric elements are added, both deepening the work's magical side and making it work familiar to its seventeenth-century audience. With these changes, Purcell's semi-opera diminishes the importance of the patriarchal society that has been home to the lovers.

Furthermore, there is a more equal balance in power between men and women: Oberon and Titania's relationship is more equal than in the *Dream*; Purcell pays respect to William and Mary; the semi-opera's title places emphasis on the queen; several goddesses appear; and the third masque argues that male and female lovers are equal in their needs and means of fulfilling these.

Last of all, *The Fairy Queen* remains highly engaging. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a brilliantly entertaining comedy, but by adding spectacular songs, dances, decors and references to reality and naming their importance, sometimes at the cost of Shakespeare's marvellous words, *The Fairy Queen* ensures that the spirit of Shakespeare's story is preserved at a time when his own words are not fully appreciated. Moreover, despite the semi-opera's persistent arguing on this fact, audiences will not suddenly believe fairies exist – rather, the importance of the values carried out by these fairies may be what they remember: be aware of and respect the fact that life depends on many unpredictable factors you cannot influence. *The Fairy Queen* does not appear to carry out any specific anti-patriarchal meanings, but subtly removes some patriarchal elements or, for a time, diminishes their importance.

Chapter 4: Benjamin Britten – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

> "I haven't tried to put across any particular idea of the play that I could equally well express in words, but although one doesn't intend to make any special interpretation, one cannot avoid it."
>
> Benjamin Britten, "The Composer's Dream," 178

4.1 From Play to Opera

Benjamin Britten rightly notes it is impossible not to interpret a play when adapting it, yet his intention is relevant: the opera he creates is not a rewriting, but his musical interpretation of Shakespeare's words. Britten also notes that "the sung word takes so much longer than the spoken word" ("Composer's *Dream* 178). In other words: about half of Shakespeare's text had to be cut in order to create a libretto Britten could set music to. Britten and Peter Pears, his partner and co-librettist, do so in several ways: descriptions of events the audience have just witnessed or are about to witness are excised; events are re-ordered; some minor characters do not appear in the opera; and speeches are considerably shortened. While this may appear to be a great bereavement, in opera, "music is arguably as important a narrating component as are the words" (Hutcheon 41), and critics agree Britten has found a way to represent any lost profundity in music, creating a "coherent and powerful" opera (Hutcheon 45). Nevertheless, it still remains interesting to see which words Britten and Pears decide to omit and to what effect, and what music Britten decides to add. The resulting opera, it will be argued below, takes further the critique of patriarchy already present in Shakespeare's *Dream*, and elaborates on that critique through its focus on the woods and fairy world, and the subtleties of its characterisation. Taking his cue from Shakespeare's *Dream*, Britten makes use of music in various ways in order not only to compensate for the play text

that is lost in the libretto, but also to make an even more decisive break from patriarchal societies.

First of all, individual characters and groups of characters can be recognised by their own particular musical themes and keys; through this means, audiences quickly recognise who they will be dealing with as soon as familiar music appears. The fairies and Tytania, for example, often sing in the keys of F-sharp major and minor, increasing the unity between these characters, while Like Tytania, Oberon has his own key as well: he frequently uses E-flat, and so does his fairy queen when she is under his spell (Cooke, "*Dream*" 144-146). Similarly, played by a fifteen-year-old boy in the first production, Puck receives his own "gay" trumpet melodies (17). Puck does not sing, but speak, and will continue to do so throughout the opera, forming a good match with Oberon:

> The timbre of the spoken voice balances and combines with the counter-tenor tone in the same way that the fluently melodic faery chorus is matched with the coloratura role of Tytania. (Howard, 167)

The bonds between the fairy king and queen and their servants are thus reinforced by their musical matches. Finally, the lovers have three keys that reappear frequently throughout all their scenes: C major, its dominant G major and its parallel C minor (Cooke, "*Dream*" 143). Through the recurrent use of these related keys, Britten creates an extra sense of unity throughout those moments in which the lovers engage with each other.

Apart from the major characterisations, Britten employs music in order to establish more subtle details of the story as well. In Helena's description of her role as an obedient dog, for example, she sings mostly in A major, and Demetrius tries to avoid this key in his attempt to escape from her. Tytania, on the other hand, struggles with love like Helena does, and uses A major as well, and the fairy key of F-sharp minor is, of course, its relative (Cooke,

"*Dream*" 145). Similarly, Britten sets Bottom's song as Shakespeare intended it: "heavy and rough" (196), with Bottom singing a melody that jumps around in both notes and rhythms "very loudly," accompanied by equally low and loud instruments (197). The contrast with Tytania's quiet and beautifully "flowing" reply accompanied by harps and flutes is thereby automatically highlighted, enhancing the comical effect of this unlikely love (201). The fairies enter accompanied by "brilliant" high woodwinds and Tytania "gracefully" orders them to take care of Bottom, both things enhancing the contrast between these unlikely lovers (204, 206). With these orders, Tytania sings in C major, "indicating her abandonment of her fairy key (F-sharp) as she falls in love with a mortal" (Cooke, "*Dream*" 146). The meanings produced by the play's story lines are thus reinforced in the music; subtle (dis)connections between characters never escape Britten's attention.

Britten's music strengthens the story lines, marking for the audience interpretations of action and character. In the four lovers' fight, for example, many lines are cut, yet their onstage conflict preserves its intensity; it first does so through the building up of the instrumental music, then through the vocalists' lines that become more and more interwoven into a musical quartet, in which the four lovers are all able to proclaim their anger simultaneously, something that can only be done in song. The intensity of the lovers' fight is thus preserved, and perhaps even heightened; where its seeming endlessness almost becomes comical in the play, the shortening of the text ensures this effect disappears, and the intensely interwoven music heightens the fight's dramatic effect. With these changes, the lovers become more realistic and relatable: they truly care about each other and therefore fight passionately as well. Similarly, when Puck applies the juice in order to repair the damage he has done, the fairies sing the words accompanying his application of the juice, rather than Puck himself (314-320), making the incantation even more powerful through its setting to music. Finally, each time any other musical theme in the opera reappears, it remains "largely

unaltered" and is yet "slightly modified" as well (Cooke, "*Dream*" 138); by applying these slight modifications, Britten ensures that there is a musical build-up throughout the opera that goes hand in hand with the dramatic build-up, creating "a feeling of unity and a sense of dramatic progression" (Cooke, "*Dream*" 138). Britten's music is thus essential in telling a story that – intentionally or not – offers imagined alternatives to the constructions of patriarchal societies, as will be demonstrated extensively below.

4.2 Shifting the Focus

Within his opera, Britten, like Purcell, focuses more on the fairy world than on that of the human characters; Britten's emphasis, however, is not so much directly on the power certain characters may or may not possess, but rather on the opera's setting in the woods, and relative absence of Theseus' court. First of all, the opera opens with Shakespeare's second act. The entire first act has been omitted, and the opera does not contain an overture. By beginning the opera with these two major omissions, Britten immediately sets its tone: the original play's first act is set in the mortal world and introduces the play's main plot, while overtures contain elements of many pieces of music that will appear later on in the opera in a similar introductory manner. By leaving out both introductions, Britten emphasises the current scene, and audiences are less aware of what to expect from the opera, both features enhancing the mysterious and magical effect of the fairy world in which it is set. Moreover, the wood, rather than the court, is now established as the normal world for the characters (Cooke, "*Dream*" 134).

The opening music consists of glissandi in the low strings, played in a "slow and mysterious" way (Britten 1). The unfixed tones and many accidentals added to the original key of G major give an unsettled feeling, in line with the magical world, and the technique needed to play the glissandi means that "slight creaks and sighs" may be heard coming from

the instruments, "creating a 'woody' sensation" (Larson and Wiliford 903). The glissandi will reappear frequently throughout the opera, representing the woods, and therefore are musical phrases that "make a story all by themselves, which informs the ear about the event in process" (Clément 166).

Britten does not talk of Shakespeare's "rude mechanicals," (3.2.9) but of "rustics"; Katherine Larson and Lawrence Wiliford suggest this choice of name "draws Bottom and his company closer to the natural world and forest" (906), since it is mostly associated with the countryside (*OED*). Moreover, a "mechanical" is an "a manual worker, an artisan" (*OED*) and "rude" meant "uneducated," or "unsophisticated" at the time (*OED*). These characters' new name therefore bears a less directly negative connotation and does not focus so much on their class or education, but rather on their location. In order further to increase the relation to the countryside, the rustics' rehearsal from 1.2 is moved to the woods.

Britten does not only omit the play's first scene, but the royal couple and their hunt as well, diminishing Theseus' power and importance once more. The attentive listener with knowledge of the play, however, may associate the "off stage (very distant)" horn theme accompanying the lovers' awakening with the royal hunt, since horns are commonly used to represent royals (341, Cooke, "*Dream*" 134). The first time the opera leaves the fairy realm and is set in a place where a mortal duke rules now appears at the end of the opera, with the transition from the woods to the royal court. Mervyn Cooke sees a lessened "dramatic justification" for this final scene at the court ("*Dream*" 129), but it remains relevant, because this is the world the lovers fled from initially, and ultimately will have to live in. The horns already linked to the royal hunt previously play fanfares, and the instruments representing the other characters react: "the Duke can speak at will, but one does not address him unless spoken to" (Godsalve 177); Theseus is introduced as a traditional powerful figure. The music settles in a bright F major when Theseus first speaks, using the opening lines of the play, with

some changes made in time. One thing that is lost by this reordering is the credibility of Theseus' impatience; he only has to wait twenty minutes before his "nuptial hour" (Cooke, "Cohesion" 254, 1.1.1). Moreover, Theseus' development from a conservative to a more liberal ruler is lost by his late introduction, and he appears out of nowhere as a new supposedly authoritative figure near the end of the opera, which makes his authority less convincing than in the play, where he appears at the start. These three factors together ensure that Theseus himself is not so much the dominant all-important character he was in the play.

The fairy couple's influence even becomes more important than the lovers' wishes: Britten omits from the opera the fact that Demetrius originally loved Helena, even though this is an important feature of the original play. William Godsalve argues this may be the case because the lines stating this fact are "repetitive and retrospective" and thus not very relevant to Britten (82), yet their contents are crucial in understanding Helena's motif. On noticing the absence of Demetrius' original love, Patricia Howard therefore interprets it as a sign of the "domination" of the fairy king and queen (169); the original wishes of the lovers are less relevant in the opera, which is more concerned with establishing the fairy world and its power. Her observation on the importance of fairy power may be correct, but it is important to note that this power is employed to aid the lovers, rather than for the sake of power itself. Where Theseus brags about his power in Shakespeare's *Dream*, and the fairies demand attention for theirs in *The Fairy Queen*, Britten's opera appears to suggest it is not relevant who is powerful, but how power is used.

4.3 Decreased Gender Relevance

Britten can be seen to take the concept of gender equality even further than Shakespeare and Purcell; he does not overtly express ideas concerning such equality , but rather he subtly changes the concepts of masculinity and femininity. He may very well not

have done this with explicit ideas on gender in mind, but the result is that Britten's *Dream* contains hardly any generalising ideas on gender. First of all, in the first production, all the fairies were trebles. Britten intends the fairies to be "very different from the innocent nothings" they often are in Shakespeare productions, because he perceives them as having "a kind of sharpness" (Kildea, *On Music* 188). The high-pitched voices and instruments, unusual unison introduction, changing time signatures, and harmonically unresolved ends of phrases all successfully contribute to this purpose, and when they take over some of Puck lines in the second and third acts, the fairies become more involved in the play's morally questionable – and powerful – actions as well. Furthermore, using trebles for the fairies becomes even more logical when keeping in mind that actors in Shakespeare's age were all male and the original fairies, likely were boys. Besides, Britten's contemporaries were arguing that "Shakespeare's comedies were saturnalian rather than romantic" (Brett 116), so his ideas are not too surprising in this light; Britten perceives sharpness at a time critics were highlighting darker aspects of Shakespeare's comedies. Finally, Britten's romantic interest in boys may also have played a role in this casting choice – Paul Kildea points out he probably and fortunately never acted on this interest sexually, but the attraction he felt makes them a logical casting choice (*A Life* 117). Therefore, contrary to what happens in the play, the first power relation that is established in the opera is that of male characters serving a woman and this is consequently set as the norm, even though Britten's casting choice is likely to have been inspired by many other factors. Moreover, the fairies are not purely good or evil, but balanced characters.

While the fairies have thus gained some less pleasant characteristics, the opera reduces Puck's role as wilful mischief-maker; to Britten, he seems to be "absolutely amoral and yet innocent" (Kildea, *On Music* 188). This idea of Puck's innocence recurs throughout the opera, as some of his most vile lines are cut. This happens, for example, in his reply to the fairies, which only preserves his introduction of Oberon and Tytania (2.1.58-59). In two consecutive

paragraphs, therefore, Britten describes the fairies as "very different from the innocent nothings that often appear" and Puck as "innocent." Although these statements appear to be contradictory, they may be representative of a more general aim that will appear throughout the opera: by toning down Puck's mischievous side and highlighting that of the other fairies, they become more equal in their behaviour. This is equality in a new sense that does not appear in Shakespeare's play, yet appears to be a logical continuation of the concept as it operates here.

When Oberon and Titania first enter, they simultaneously exclaim, "Ill met by moonlight Jealous Oberon / Proud Tytania" (23) in their high soprano and countertenor registers. Countertenors are not typically cast as powerful characters, but rather as the "masculine victim" (Clément 67), as they have an "association of unmanliness, and thus of gender liminality" attached to them that does not attach to deep, authoritative voices (Brett 118). With the "unmanly" association, an association with homosexuality may appear as well; again, Britten's casting choice may partly have been prompted by the nature of his sexual and romantic desires – although he may also have been inspired by Purcell's frequent use of countertenors, since Britten greatly admired Purcell (Kildea, *A Life* 189). Moreover, since Tytania is cast as a coloratura soprano, "her voice physically overwhelms Oberon's" at the start of the opera, while it "does not do so dramatically" (Howard 169); she sings in such a high register that her "voice can do no more than emit – meaningless syllables, note after note" (Clément 73). At the end of the opera, Tytania's songs are no longer as excessively lyrical, and this is often taken to mean that Tytania is now "under Oberon's rule" (Howard 170). It could, however, also indicate that Oberon and Tytania are now equals again in terms of their power; Oberon was literally more powerful at first, and he has lost some of this power while Tytania has gained some. Simultaneously, Tytania was vocally more powerful at first, and this initial power has been reduced in order to make it more equal to that of Oberon.

In their fight, Tytania and Oberon's accusations of each other's adultery are omitted, making Tytania's decision to forswear Oberon's presence appear more arbitrary than it is in the play. The explanation that the boy's mother belonged to Tytania's order, however, remains intact, where it was omitted in Purcell's semi-opera. While the first omission makes Tytania appear less reasonable, it could also indicate that the couple's marriage is not as damaged as it is in the play, because neither character has gone so far as to commit adultery. A reason for their argument nevertheless still appears, with both monarchs perhaps being slightly unreasonable: requesting something that does not belong to you is not logical, but neither is denying this person not only that one thing, but everything. In their stubbornness, the fairy king and queen are equals. Moreover, Billy Wayne Shaw points out that, "Britten and Pears eliminate all references to Oberon's lordship over Tytania" (48), further equalising them, this time not in terms of the power they possess, but of their character traits. Equality here proves to be not only a matter of promoting female characters' positions, but rather a means of ascribing complex human character traits to both sexes. Britten is therefore doing something Ralph Locke would ask for thirty-two years later: "transcending, though not denying, gender" (36).

Tytania and Oberon both become kinder than in the play, and Tytania is humiliated less as well. When some of Tytania's lines are cut, these are the cruel ones: "pluck the wings from painted butterflies" (3.1.150) disappears, for instance, and Tytania appears to be kinder for its loss. Moreover, Bottom remains the only character who is "undiminished" by the contact with the fairy world; he is not "at the mercy of the magic," which is even more powerful and dominant here than in the play due to the opera's setting, but always remains himself (Howard 165). This concept of himself, I would argue, can be taken to be more positive than in the play, because the rustics as a group carry a more positive connotation, as I described above. Similarly, with the omission of Demetrius' original love to Helena,

Oberon's willingness to help Helena is now not so much a case of righting Demetrius' "wrongs" (2.1.240), but rather of a powerful man aiding a woman in her choice of marriage partner, instead of the patriarchal opposite; the first time match-making appears in the opera is now through what Godsalve calls Oberon's "pro-feminist" sympathy rather than Egeus' "patriarchal" stubbornness (53), deconstructing the stereotypical patriarchal image of men appearing in the original play. Tytania thus becomes a kinder character and her humiliation is not as profound as it is in the play, and both alterations ensure that she becomes more of a respectable fairy, and less of a playball at the mercy of her husband, while this husband himself also appears in a better light.

Britten changes the relationship between the lovers in several ways as well, making it more balanced. First of all, Hermia's "I swear to thee" declaration (1.1.169) has been transformed into a duet, bringing about yet another sense of equality: both characters adore each other equally. The music is suddenly "with spirit" and the lovers try to outdo each other in modulating major keys (55). Hermia and Lysander remind each other of their sexes' weaknesses with the lines: "By all the vows that ever men have broke / (In number more than ever women spoke)" (1.1.175-176). These lines slightly temper the lovers' enthusiasm, and again remind the audience that men and women are similar, not only in their good habits, but also in their bad ones.

Another way in which the lovers become more similar is in their reasonableness; where Helena's unconditional devotion to Demetrius appears to be much more arbitrary in the opera than in the play, Demetrius' himself becomes more reasonable in the omission of his suggestion that he might be a threat to Helena or her virginity. Similarly, Lysander does not object against Hermia's wish to lie apart, and his line "The will of man is by his reason swayed" (121). Women's motives are not always relatable, even as they become more complex and interesting, and male characters appear to be less concerned with wielding

power and more with reasonableness – assuming this reasonableness is sincere, and not another subtler means to enforce dominance. With their behaviour throughout the rest of the opera in mind, however, it may not always be easy for the men, but their sincerity appears to be genuine, while the female characters gain some whimsical characteristics.

Finally, the four lovers firstly become more equal in their fight – in which many of the women's lines are cut, creating a better balance between the fighters – before awaking in a very harmonious manner. The following lines were cut in the first production, yet are still given in the score, with the comment that the cut is optional:

Lysander	Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that we yet sleep, we dream.
Hermia	Methinks I see these things with parted eye, When ev'ry thing seems double.
Demetrius	These things seem small and undistinguishable Like far of mountains turned into clouds
Helena	So methinks;

(343-346).

The score suggests these lines can be replaced with a lively and forte "We are awake" sung by all four lovers (345-346, 01.38.20). Immediately afterwards, in all versions of the opera, the lovers embark on a loving quartet in which they only repeat the phrase "And I have found Demetrius / fair Helen / Lysander / sweet Hermia, like a jewel, mine own, and not mine own" (346-352). In choosing this particular line, Britten creates a linguistic and musical equality, and the "glowing harmonic changes refer back to the vows of the first act" (Howard 175). The lines that can be omitted are even more interesting. Even if they do appear, they still omit a significant feature present in the play: Hermia and Helena harmoniously complementing each other's sentences. By changing the order of these lines, Britten has derived the language of its harmony as described in my earlier chapter. While the harmony disappears here, however, another harmony between all four lovers appears in the following musical quartet just described. Linguistic harmony between the female lovers is thus replaced by musical

harmony between all four lovers. No choice has to be made between love and friendship here, and female camaraderie does not have to be hidden as it did in the play. Rather, the two bonds appear to strengthen each other, with all four lovers praising their happiness together.

Ultimately, signs of increased "equality" even appear in Theseus' patriarchal society. I have already described above how Theseus becomes a less authoritative figure due to his late introduction above, and Britten alters Hippolyta's role as well. In the play, her speech could be seen as being rational rather than enthusiastic about her approaching marriage. In the opera, on the other hand, Britten chooses to set her words to happy, major music, making them sound more endeared by and reassuring to Theseus, rather than possibly annoyed with him as suggested in my earlier chapter. The powerful couple's relationship thus appears to be based more on mutual consent than in the play.

Theseus is not the only patriarchal figure whose influence lessens; Egeus does not appear, and his reduction from being present on the stage to being mentioned once, together with Helena's epithet "Nedar's daughter" disappearing altogether, mean that the influence of fathers on their daughters so important in the play itself weakens. Egeus cannot, however, be omitted from the play completely, simply because his will causes Hermia and Lysander to flee to the woods, and there would be no *Midsummer Night's Dream* left without this action. Furthermore, Godsalve argues, this "obsessive patriarchy" and the lovers' initial immaturity "are necessarily there to be overcome as the target of the overall romantic movement" (105). The paternal elements that are essential to the plot therefore remain, but all other traces of that dominance have been cut, resulting in a reduction of the patriarchal power.

In the final scenes of the opera, the female characters express themselves in ways that can be felt to resemble those open to the male characters. Firstly, Hippolyta takes over some of Philostrate's unkinder lines towards the rustics, e.g. calling them "Hard-handed men, … which never labour'd in their minds till now" (412), and becomes less benevolent in doing so.

Moreover, Britten divides the comments the audience give on the rustics' opera differently to how they appear in the play. Where originally, only the men and Hippolyta were allowed to comment, their lines have been distributed more equally in the opera, giving some to all visible principal characters on stage, "enriching the musical sound and avoiding long silences" (Godsalve 48), and equalising the female lovers with their male counterparts. Moreover, Britten removes the idea that the female friendship does not need words, whereas the men need excessive words to reaffirm their attachment, as described in this thesis' chapter on the original play. Male bonds are now as strong as female ones, and female opinions carry the same weight as those given by men.

In conclusion, the most noticeable change Britten and Pears made in writing the libretto is changing the dominant setting from the city to the woods, to several effects. First of all, there is the simple entertainment factor: the audience are immediately drawn into a world far from their own about which they can wonder and marvel. This is a world, moreover, that is often associated with growth and mystery, not just in this play, but in other plays, e.g. *As You Like it*, as well. Secondly, the wood is not a departure from reality, as it is in the play, but the dominant reality in which all action is set, altering the perspective: "we never see the mortals except through the magic that envelops them and us" (Dean 118). The move to the royal court at the end of the opera now appears to be a departure from reality. With this radical turnaround, the ideas touched upon in the woods gain more credibility, and the established patriarchal society Shakespeare could not avoid has been severely undermined.

Although never explicitly set out in the text itself, Britten's opera appears to open up to its audience the idea that a more equal society is desirable. Britten partly already creates an image of such society by setting the opera so far away from the patriarchal society, and further builds on it through the implications set up by his characterisation. Though the audience might rightly feel sceptical about the possibilities of such a society, based on

equality of opportunity and the equal valuing of men and women in early 1960s Britain, yet the opera establishes on stage something like a utopian space, where such possibilities can at least be entertained. Some examples of this heightened equality are the absence of father figures, and all characters' commenting on the rustics' opera in the final act. Moreover, the opera also conveys the idea that nobody, mortal or not, is wholly perfect or wholly evil: "Like the actual world, incidentally, the spirit world contains bad as well as good" (Kildea, *On Music* 188). Britten's fairies are edgier, while Puck has an innocent side, male characters are more reasonable, for instance when Lysander does not push Hermia to sleep with him, and female characters are less innocent, for instance when Hippolyta takes over some of Philostrate's remarks on the rustics. What makes Britten's treatment of the subject so powerful is that he does not pay explicit attention to it: if specific character traits are not linked to one sex only, a discussion of such links becomes redundant.

Altogether, Britten notices Shakespeare's subtle and implicit comments on the patriarchal society, and makes them more explicit through his libretto and music. Britten is able to do so because he lives in the twentieth instead of the sixteenth century, in a society that already is much less patriarchal than the playwright's. This development towards equality, lastly, does not mean the opera is in any way blander than the play. It preserves a careful selection of Shakespeare's wonderful poetry and comic scenes, only reinforcing their effects with brilliant modern music.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The idea for this thesis originated from a passionate interest in both Shakespeare and music. I decided to examine William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, and Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from a feminist perspective, since these three works intriguingly represent the reinvention of one work over nearly four-hundred years. Moreover, all three versions of the *Dream* – on close examination – offer a complex critique of patriarchal societies' values, ambiguously supporting instead a more equal society than the patriarchal one from which the story of the *Dream* originates.

Shakespeare's play is firmly rooted in Elizabethan society in both its opening and closure, yet it also highlights this society's instability; although Elizabeth may be its head, the society named after her greatly appears to depend on men trying to keep control over women. If women are given some power as well, it is suggested, men have to fear for – well, for what exactly? Hippolyta's background as an Amazon queen suggests she may not treat men in a very friendly manner if given the choice, but none of the other female characters appear to be hostile against men – unless given a reason to be so by a particular man, and then only towards this man. Nevertheless, the male characters are afraid of the apparent force of women's power, and perhaps they are right to be afraid: the force of female bonds appears through Helena and Hermia's friendship that does not need words, through the women's thoughts and preferences and the fact that these change so little compared to those of the men, and through their power conveyed by the magical flowers and Titania's control over her fairies and Bottom.

If viewed in the light of this masculine fear, one might wonder why on earth, in their terms, patriarchal societies are not to be preferred over societies in which women's power is

equal to that of men. Luckily, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provides us with an answer to that question as well: in a patriarchal society, the *Dream*'s lovers would, like Pyramus and Thisbe, have ended in death. The play's male characters concern themselves with power and supposedly rational thoughts, while the women are not concerned with these factors. Yes, their power may prove to be strong if they were to gain it, but their interest lies in other matters: with forming loving bonds, not only with each other, but also with their children – in the form of the Indian boy – and with lovers. As the play powerfully imagines it, the feminine therefore stands for nurturance, affection, and mutuality. This conclusion may sound slightly too much like the end of a romantic comedy (a bad-film one), but it is never said that societies should be based exclusively upon these values; a balance between the play's male and female interests may ultimately lead to a balanced society, and proof for this idea is given by the happy end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Henry Purcell's semi-opera *The Fairy Queen* belongs to a different genre than its predecessor, and for this reason alone already has a different effect. The brilliant music Purcell writes aids in focusing the audience's attention on the masques and the meanings they present. Furthermore, its lavish and entertaining masques automatically make the semi-opera more fantastic, if only through the luxuriant extravagance that masques always radiate. This extravagance, however, could still be portrayed in many different ways, and Purcell has decided to focus mainly on the fairies and the power they have. By focusing on these two aspects, he automatically places emphasis on the opposite of a patriarchal society: his Oberon is not necessarily more powerful than Titania, as can already be seen in the work's title, and Theseus' court appears to be less relevant. Purcell then goes on to introduce more and more exotic gods and creatures throughout his masques, only further adding to the work's immersion in the fabulous. The grand scheme behind this focus appears to be that people have to be aware of the fairies' power, but it is unlikely audiences would ever take this meaning

straight. Purcell's audience were not expected to believe in fairies, but rather to accept the force of what the fairy world stands for. In pressing the claims of the fairy realm, Purcell appears to emphasise that not everything can be regulated in a society: plenty of matters, especially the dreams we have, are not in our control, and acknowledging this fact is more worthwhile than stubbornly trying to resist it.

The Fairy Queen may not be directly anti-patriarchal, but it does have some further aspects that diminish the importance of patriarchal societies: Egeus disappears from the text, as does the unequal relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta, and several patriarchal comments vanish. Finally, English folklore elements, such as green men and pinching fairies, are introduced. While these heighten the semi-opera's fantastical nature on the one hand, they also – together with references to William and Mary – provide the audience with a link to reality and to familiar folklore and ritual, perhaps aiding them in accepting the semi-opera's idea that not everything can be controlled.

Almost three centuries after Purcell, Benjamin Britten decided to convert the *Dream* into a modern opera. In order to do so, Britten and Pears cut half of Shakespeare's lines, but Britten ensures their contents are compensated for and elaborated upon in his music. Like Purcell, Britten places more emphasis on the natural world than Shakespeare does, by making it the dominant setting for most of the opera's action and reflecting this dominance in his music. Again, the importance of the lovers' patriarchal society and its powerful figures are hereby reduced, also because these powerful figures only make their first appearance at the end of the opera. Finally, Britten does not focus on the concepts of power or equality explicitly, but his musical treatment of the *Dream* implicitly appears to convey the idea power should be distributed evenly, and characters should not be defined by their gender only.

Breaking from Shakespeare's lead, Britten treats his characters in a new way: they all become more equal. This does not mean the women simply gain more power, on the contrary;

it means that all characters become more rounded, more complicated, and more human. Female characters speak more, but do not only say pleasant things, while male characters appear to be kinder, even feminine in some voice registers, and Puck and the fairies similarly take over some of each other's good and bad character traits. Shakespeare already hands Purcell characters and situations open to diverse interpretations, and Britten further builds upon the opportunities given to him by these characters and situations. Since the cultural conventions and possibilities of Britten's historical moment are less rigid than those of Shakespeare's time, Britten is able to depict his characters as human beings rather than as strongly-gendered men or women. Britten hereby achieves an equality of which Shakespeare never could – and is unlikely to have wanted to – dream.

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