



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

Master's Degree programme  
in European, American and Postcolonial  
Languages and Literatures

Final Thesis

**William Shakespeare's *A  
Midsummer Night's Dream*:  
Adaptations for Children  
through the Centuries**

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**Academic Year**

2022 / 2023



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## INTRODUCTION

The idea for this final thesis was elicited by the desire to study Shakespeare from an unconventional perspective, in order to offer a different insight into the immensely vast world of his plays and poetry. From this originates my will to analyse ten prose narrative rewritings of the same comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, from the point of view of how the characters are portrayed. Moreover, all of these adaptations were written through the course of three centuries for the purposes of children's reading and usability. This dissertation will also hopefully contribute to the study of literary adaptation, a genre which, as some may know, has not always been treated positively, but, especially in the past, was oftentimes considered a degenerative form of literature that deprives the original of its dignity.

The impulse to rewrite, or retell, old stories has *always* been part of literature. Popular folk tales, which are part of the oral tradition alongside poems, prose, songs, and ballads, can be considered as first examples of reworkings of pre-existing stories before adaptation was even theorized as a literary technique. In the past, many critics and authors such as, for example, Virginia Woolf – who argued that the cinematic transposition of a literary text had to be seen as a 'parasite', and literature its 'prey' and 'victim' (Hutcheon, 2006:3) – believed that adaptations and appropriations should be treated as unrightful, pointless copies, aiming at repeating already acknowledged literary works, somehow *stealing* stories which only rightfully belonged to the much more dignified originals. Indeed, even Shakespeare himself was an excellent adapter of pre-existing tales and legends, listed among the sources of his plays, which became well known precisely because of his adaptations. One famous example concerns the pre-text behind Romeo and Juliet's worldwide-famous love story, adapted by Shakespeare from Luigi Da Porto's 1529 tale *Historia Novellamente Ritrovata di Due Nobili Amanti* on the tragic fate of two young star-crossed lovers. Additionally, as will be discussed in this thesis, with a

particular emphasis on adaptations for children, since the nineteenth century a large part of retellings has concerned exactly the works by Shakespeare himself. His opus has been varyingly reworked through the centuries according to different ideologies, purposes, audiences, and genres. Despite that, as Linda Hutcheon argues, it is undoubtedly safe to say that retellings, criticised in the past, now permeate many – if not every – aspects of a person's life (Hutcheon, 2006:2), especially because streaming services and entertainment platforms in general, amongst which adaptations and appropriations are very popular, are intrinsically part of the daily routines of the new generations. It could be affirmed that there exist several mainstream and world-famous movies and TV-series whose notoriety far exceeds that of their source texts; maybe audiences do not even know that they are adaptations – either because the source texts are so well-disguised or because they are not recognisable. An example of this case concerns the fairy tale genre, which, since the early twentieth century, has been adapted as a cartoon mainly by Disney. There is no doubt that the version of *Cinderella* which everybody possibly remembers the most is the one in which the stepsisters do *not* mutilate their feet: this is a slight alteration of the Grimm's literary version which is far more suitable for children. This version is in fact believed by most people to be the original story of poor Cinderella.

Two other predictable and yet very significant examples of multi-millionaire adaptations are the much-acclaimed *Harry Potter* movies, which are the cinematic transposition of a series of seven novels written by British author J. K. Rowling (of which a brand-new TV remake has recently been announced by HBO) or the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise, which brings to the big screen the adventures of famous superheroes such as Iron Man and Captain America. These modern cult classics saw hordes of devoted fans strongly demanding for highly detailed and faithful transpositions of their beloved originals, often showing open disapproval for the variations the screenwriters were forced to make in the plots or subplots. This is very similar to what happened in the past with cinematic



transpositions of canonical authors' novels such as Jane Austen's (Hutcheon, 2006:29). Nevertheless, especially when switching from the written word to cinema, it is inevitable to sacrifice certain elements of the original due to various reasons, one of which could concern the film's length.

The retelling impulse is also linked to another important reason, which is strictly financial. Starting from nineteenth-century Italian operas, rewritings and retellings of various types have often been carefully and clearly money driven. It was financially safe to invest in the adaptation or appropriation of classics, meaning books of high literary standard and reputation, as they were largely known and adored by the audiences of the time (Hutcheon, 2006:5). Centuries later, British television and Hollywood often chose to adapt eighteenth- and nineteenth-century classic novels. Filmmakers then began to focus their attention on children as a possibly prolific audience, which could be the reason why a massive revival of live actions of classic fairy tales (the newest and much awaited is the 2023 cinematic transposition of *The Little Mermaid* by director Rob Marshall) is now taking place. In this case, though, it is important to specify that by "adapting fairy tales" we mean the retelling of literary versions of them, such as Perrault's or Andersen's. That is because it is not so easy to determine the precise origin of a fairy tale, given its oral and highly mutable nature.

Economically speaking, movie adaptations in particular have been of great help to the publishing industry. When a novel is announced to be made into a film years after its publication, that transposition can cause the books to be sold again, thanks for example to the book covers portraying the actors playing the main characters (Hutcheon, 2006:90). The same happens for the stories which are transposed into videogames, and the fruitful merchandising projects that come along with them.

One downside of adaptations and appropriations is, together with plagiarism, the risk of copyright violation, which is regulated by law and can

guarantee legal safety to both the author and the adapter. This is always subject to the will of the copyright holder, who can be more or less open to this kind of negotiations. It is the case of the aforementioned *Harry Potter* franchise. It is well known that, before appropriating anything created by J. K. Rowling, a long debate on copyright terms and conditions has to be faced, each detail meticulously agreed with her and her legal team. This obviously does not concern long-dead authors such as Shakespeare and Austen, as their opus is now considered to be of public domain (Iyengar, 2023:48).

This dissertation is divided into three chapters; a list of illustrations is also provided in order to picture the evolutions of the characters both from a visual and textual points of view. For the sake of a broader understanding of the ever-changing adaptation and appropriation theory, the first chapter of this thesis is devoted to a thorough definition of terms related to this literary genre, of which a particular emphasis is put on the process of narrativization. Julie Sanders' detailed studies on adaptation and appropriation theory have constituted a resourceful basis to define their boundaries and grasp their true meanings, as the naming of such procedures often generates confusion and misunderstandings. This is then followed by a necessary overview on the intricate origins of the multifaceted concept of intertextuality, to which adaptation is strictly correlated, guided by Julia Kristeva's, Gérard Genette's and Linda Hutcheon's takes on the definition of *intertextualité*, source text, and the many terms which can stem from the word "adaptation". In "From drama to prose narrative" I also worked to delineate the complicated aspects of narrativization, a mode of adaptation which implies the switching from drama to narrative as well as a change in the mode of engagement (from showing to telling), supported by Hutcheon's, Tosi's, Rokison's, and Marchitello's studies on the matter. An outline of some of the major reworkings which occur during the narrativization process is given – that is, the insertion of the figure of the narrator, together with some eventual linguistic, plot (*sjuzet*), and story (*fabula*) modifications.

The final section, “History of Shakespearean prose-narratives for young people”, deals with some introductive notions on how Shakespearean prose fictions developed through the centuries, starting with the late eighteenth-century interest in the “child-reader” to end up with twenty first-century adaptations.

Chapter 2 offers an overview of the plot, the sources, the main topics, the play-within-the-play, and the critical history of Shakespeare’s celebrated comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – the chosen target of the present comparative study of children’s adaptations of this very play. Numerous scholars – amongst which Fretz, Forey, Kehler and Mebane – concurred to delineate a more or less clear list of possible sources employed by the dramatist to create the four lovers’ chaotic misadventures in fairyland: from the classics (such as Ovid and Apuleius) to sixteenth-century religious thinking, animal symbolism, and other folkloristic elements, all of them analysed in the section “Sources: myths, magic and folklore”.

In “Worlds colliding” I investigate the clash between the two opposing forces of the play: human mortals and supernatural characters. Some references to the principle of *discordia concors*, which was part of Renaissance cultural debates, are present, as well as an exploration on the mathematical regularity which regulates the lovers’ mis-matchings, as argued by Baldwin and Welsford. The world of *MND* is also ruled by another force, namely, the oneiric dimension, which is analysed in “The meaning of imagination and the oneiric dimension” concurrently with the theme of imagination and the fundamental question of metatheatre.

Subsequently, the section called “The love theme” follows the peculiar treatment of the romantic sentiment as it was portrayed in the play: firstly, it focuses on the figures of Hermia and Hippolyta, two strong-willed women who actually happen to be silenced by their male partners and family members; in the second place, it delineates the question of the so-called “mimetic desire”, supported by the studies of René Girard in *A Theater of Envy* (1991).

The subchapter entitled “The play-within-the-play: *Pyramus and Thisbe*” discusses the love-tragedy which in the original play is performed by the troupe of Athenian workmen. A brief summary of the sources possibly employed by the Bard is given in “Definition and sources”, followed by “A tragedy disguised as comedy”, in which the discourse reconnects with the meta-theatrical dimension of the play.

Finally, Chapter 2 closes with a useful recollection of the critical history of *MND*. For this section, Nicolas Tredell’s volume *Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream. A reader’s guide to essential criticism* (2010) has been of great help to delineate a resourceful timeline which covered the whole critical history of the play. Starting with some detractors from the seventeenth century (e.g., Samuel Pepys) and those who enthusiastically supported Shakespeare’s choice of employing the supernatural theme (Dryden and Johnson), this subchapter then moves to the romantic interpretations of the late eighteenth century (Tieck and von Schlegel). From what it concerns the early 1800s, we take as our most prominent representatives the studies by Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, to be later echoed by Coleridge, Knight, and Snider. The twentieth century finally opens the way to even more various topics of academic discussion, of which we cited G. K. Chesterton’s, J. B. Priestley’s, Enid Welsford’s, and David Marshall’s among others, which exploded in the twenty-first century with the highly debated questions of race, queer theory, and ecocriticism to be found within *MND*.

The third and final chapter of my thesis deals with the comparative study of a selection of ten different prose fiction adaptations of *MND*, taken from the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries. First and foremost, in “The pioneers of Shakespearean adaptations for children”, a brief but effective analysis on Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) opens the way to their successors’ take on the ambitious task of adapting *MND*, which was carried out by more or less following the siblings’ path. Contributions by scholars Miller, Dryden, Addison, Pask and Rawnsley can be found, leading up to the very first conspicuous analysis – that of the paratexts taken from the selected retellings (carried out in

“Different approaches: an overview of the paratexts”). Here, we investigate the aims and techniques each author used to give birth to his or her own interpretation of *MND*: this works as prelude to the subsequent analysis of the portrayals of some of the most child-friendly characters – the fairies, Robin Goodfellow, and Nick Bottom. Moreover, a brief overview of Propp’s theories on the *conte merveilleux* will be fundamental to designate the pivotal points for fairytale, or “fantastic”, adaptations of *MND*.

In “The evolution of fairy beings” we analyse how the fairy characters from *MND* have been treated by adaptors from different time periods. From being represented as tiny butterfly-winged innocent creatures during the Victorian Age, to become shapeshifting lords and ladies of the darkness in the twenty-first century, this subchapter also depicts the ancient origins of such mysterious supernatural beings, drawing from Diane Purkiss’ and Katharine Briggs’ fascinating studies on fairy lore. Some illustrations extracted from the books will also guide the reader through the visual journey of how the fairies’ appearances have transformed throughout the centuries.

Chapter 3 then takes up on an investigation of another fairy, including, in the in the section called “Puck in mischief”, a study of the play’s most comic and mischievous deeds. Like the other fairies, in children’s adaptations the character of Robin Goodfellow underwent a similar mutational process, but somehow retained his own peculiar characteristics which distinguished him from other representations of fairies in *MND*. His obedience towards Oberon has been subject to many interpretations, as well as his more evil side: in many cases, as will be argued in this section, it has not been possible to definitely classify Puck among the good characters, nor among the bad ones – which is what possibly constitutes his most likeable and captivating feature.

Ultimately, after having dealt with magic, the present comparative study addresses the most comical human character in the play: Nick Bottom. In fact, in

“Bottom and the mechanicals” we dedicate some space to the foolish clown of the play, trying to interpret the reasons that some adaptors might have had to choose to include – or not to include – such a double-faceted character (and his fellow companions) in an adaptation written purposely for child readers, especially when considering the problematic aspect of sexual allusions which so characterise him in the original play.

# CHAPTER 1. THE MEANING OF ADAPTATION AND THE TRADITION OF SHAKESPEARE’S STORIES TOLD TO CHILDREN

## 1.1 Terms and origins

As is well-known, “adaptation” and “appropriation” are often used as umbrella terms for many others, which include, for instance, “paraphrase”, “version”, “variation”, “pastiche”, or “revision”. At the same time, as Hutcheon declares, many negative terms are often employed to refer to them, such as “interference”, “violation”, or “desecration” (2006:2).

### 1.1.1 *Adaptation*

Etymologically speaking, the Latin root of the verb “adapt”, *adaptare*, means “to make fit” (Sanders, 2005:46). For example, when it comes to adaptations, one of the reasons a classic is taken and brought to life in a freshly new version is that it can be addressed to a totally different public than the original was – as in the case of Shakespeare’s iambic verse rearranged for children – so it can fit its needs in a better way, thanks to linguistic changes or cuts and simplifications in the plot. This is well-explained by Stephens and McCallum, who argue that adapting ‘adult high culture texts [...] for children is to popularize and make more accessible those cultural values seen to be embodied in those texts’ (1998:254).

Adaptations are said to purposely trigger the audience’s memory and awareness of the source texts, whose presence is usually openly acknowledged – which is what makes adaptations a perfect manifestation of intertextuality (Sanders 2005:2), a multi-faceted concept that will be furtherly analysed later in this chapter. In John Ellis’s words, ‘adaptation enables a prolonging or extension of pleasure connected to memory’ (Sanders, 2005:24). Adaptations, deriving from one or more source texts, are called by Gérard Genette texts ‘in the “second degree”, created and

then received in relation to a prior text' (Hutcheon, 2006:6). In that sense, adaptations could be somehow described as homages to the originals. At the same time, though, according to Hutcheon, adaptations should also be considered as original works on their own, not just repetitions of the originals, worth of having their moment of recognition as works of art *per se* (2006:6).

As already stated, adaptations often involve a transcoding, therefore a transition from a genre (e.g., a poem to a short story) or medium (a book to a musical) to another, but also a change in context, time, or perspective. For instance, when a book is transposed into a movie, and its medium has been replaced, the final product is defined as a *re-mediation* (Hutcheon, 2006:16). On the contrary, the movement from a visual art (e.g., a movie or a television show) to the written word, specifically a novel, is called *novelization*. *Dramatization* occurs when a prose narrative is transposed into theatrical drama. In Chapter 3, the switching from drama to prose narrative, or *narrativization*, will be addressed and investigated as one of the processes which many Shakespearean plays underwent throughout the centuries, of which one famous example is Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories* (1985).

When we talk about length, an adaptation uses the device of *reduction* when a lot of the major elements of the original are logically selected and compressed in order to make the story more understandable (such as classics adapted for children). On the other hand, when many new elements are added, there is the use of the *expansion*, or *addition*, device, which produces prequels or spinoffs, explaining the reasons behind the main characters' actions. One famous expansion (and narrativization) of this kind is Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1851), which offers the reader a detailed and invented account of the childhood of some of the female characters of Shakespearean drama.



### ***1.1.2 Appropriation***

Dictionaries offer many negative definitions of the word “appropriation”, usually referring to something belonging to someone else which has been taken without the consent of the beholder. Jean Marsden, for example, describes it as ‘theft, or seizure for one’s own purposes’ (Iyengar, 2023:12). Appropriation is also frequently correlated to dominant groups stealing minoritized groups’ practices, appearance and artforms for personal benefit (Iyengar, 2023:56). This is nowadays known as “cultural appropriation”. In literature, this negative connotation may be linked to the fact that the journey of the source text through the process of appropriation is sometimes complicated. For example, the presence of the original could be much more shadowed and not as explicitly signalled as in an adaptation. This is one of the reasons which underline the very fine line between appropriations and the dangers of plagiarism, of which one of the most famous examples is the 1996 Booker Prize winner *Last Orders* by Graham Swift, which was accused of having been inspired by William Faulkner’s 1930 classic *As I Lay Dying*. The influence and factual presence of elements from the latter book was seen as something which made Swift’s work unworthy of the prize, as it was seen as a substandard derivation of Faulkner’s novel and, therefore, not an original, an inauthentic text only appropriating something which belonged to another (Sanders, 2005:33).

*West Side Story* is a 1950s musical which appropriates a lot of elements from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and presents a kind of overlapping of the two texts. In this musical, the Shakespearean subtext is explicit from the beginning. A lot of its scenes are reminiscent of the tragedy, as for example the presence of a conflict between two parties; the Montagues and the Capulets come back as two rival gangs, the Sharks and the Jets. Shakespeare’s dramatic story has been wholly reworked and musicalized; for this reason, given the sustained rethinking of the original, and even though many agree that *West Side Story* can exist as a musical in its own right, it also has to be regarded as an appropriation loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet* (Sanders, 2005:23).

Sanders argues that appropriations could transform the informing source into ‘a wholly new cultural product and domain’ (2005:26), ‘creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts which have inspired them, enriching rather than “robbing” them’ (2005:41), as in the case of *West Side Story*, universally recognized as a modern retelling of a classic which focuses on the social issues of 1950s New York.

### ***1.1.3 Intertextuality***

The rewriting and retelling impulse leads to what has previously been cited as intertextuality or *intertextualité* (Sanders, 2005:2), a term which links together all the texts ever produced. Intertextuality finds its theoretical roots in 1960s structuralist and poststructuralist France and was first used by philosopher Julia Kristeva in her 1980 essay “The Bounded Text” to describe the phenomenon by which any text is ‘a permutation of texts, an intertextuality’ (Sanders, 2005:2). This definition comes from semiotics and is also often employed into literary practice. Roland Barthes has argued that ‘every text is’, somehow, ‘an intertext’ that alludes to a previous one that has been assimilated and reworked in accordance with the changes in society or in literary trends (Sanders, 2005:2 quoting Barthes, 1981:39). From semiotics to anthropology, *intertextualité* has by now assumed a meaning which, as Sanders argues, is mainly associated to a ‘far more textual [...] notion of how texts encompass and respond to other texts both during the process of their creation and composition and in terms of the individual reader’s or spectator’s response’ (2005:2). It is therefore strictly related to the adaptation process in particular: the act of experiencing a well-acknowledged pre-text in its adapted form is a kind of intertextuality, as all the known elements of the previous story suddenly click in the mind of the receiver, even though under new garments, and they are finally able to connect the two texts together.

## **1.2 From drama to prose narrative**

Since the primary aim of this thesis is to investigate the different outcomes of ten prose fiction adaptations of Shakespeare’s comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

for children, some observations on the widely employed process of *narrativization* appear necessary. First, this term must not be confused with the *novelization* procedure, which occurs when a novel is written on the basis of a screenplay, a comic, or a videogame, and is then published at the same time as its source text's release date (Baetens, 2005:46, quoting Virmaux, 1983:70). One famous example of this kind are the novelizations of the worldwide-famous *Star Wars* movies, which were very popular at the time of the films' distribution in the cinemas.

### ***1.2.1 The aims of narrativization***

There are three modes of engagement, that is to say, three ways in which the audience can feel, in different ways, "immersed" into stories, part of them and to what happens to the characters. They are the *showing* mode (concerning cinema, musicals, and theatre), the *telling* mode (novels, tales, poetry, and so on), and the *participatory* mode (videogames or role plays), which implies a physical interaction with the story (Hutcheon, 2006: 22). A narrativized adaptation offers both a shift in the medium (as far as this thesis is concerned, from drama to narrative) and in the mode of engagement (from *showing* to *telling*). Moreover, the focus is on the adaptation of the mimetic mode into the diegetic one, two concepts which are close to the modes of engagement upon which the ways in which one experiences a story are based. In the case of adaptations for children, narrativization usually aims at simplifying the first-ever encounter of young audiences with high-culture authors, easing their understanding of otherwise complex texts by stimulating their imagination skills through the act of reading, or by being told a story. The latter is an important concept to highlight, as the role of the child as an active reader of a story depends on how the narrativized adaptations have been structured, or if their author has been clear from the preface on how to deliver their work, with or without "adult narrators" as intermediators or supervisors. During the Victorian Age, a period in which children's literature and Shakespeare's adaptations for children were reaching their peak in terms of popularity, it was frequent to find moralizing intentions in-between the Bard's adapted lines. As Tosi states, 'these adaptations

construe an adult controlling narrator who speaks from a position of experience and knowledge' (2020:14).

### ***1.2.2 The language***

Children's author Leon Garfield famously stated that, when adapting Shakespeare's plays for children, his language is primarily – and quite obviously – what makes this process so painfully challenging, ironically saying that it is like 'trying to play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a penny whistle' (Tosi, 2017:11, quoting Garfield, 1990:92). In this regard, Marchitello adds that it is precisely his language the element that usually undergoes the most significant alterations, sometimes by being wholly revised and re-negotiated (2003:182). In fact, many adapters usually choose to update the Bard's language, seen as an obstacle, through the employment of modern English, making it more understandable for those who want to engage in the difficult journey through his multitude of plays and poems. With narrativization, this does not always concern only the simplification of outdated words and archaisms, as it involves the additional procedure of switching from verse to prose narrative. For this matter, Rokison affirms that rhyme and metre, which are what distinguish the two media (that is, drama and prose narrative), are erased during the process of narrativization, as well as 'all significant features of characterization, and transmitters of meaning' (2013:70).

Shakespeare's verse can be variously reworked: for example, it can be appropriated in a prose dialogue, with fragments of the original text dispersed here and there in the narrative. In Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories*, the rhythm of the Shakespearean dialogue is isolated within bits of narrative interruptions (Rokison, 2013:70), which can be said to alter its peculiar musicality:

*"Not for thy fairy kingdom!"* vowed Titania. And, with her gossamer train attending, swept from the glade, leaving her shadowy lord to brood angrily on his disappointment.

*"Well, go thy way,"* he murmured at length. *"Thou shalt not from this grove till I torment thee for this injury."*

(Garfield, 1991:255)

This passage is Garfield's retelling of Act 2, Scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, recounting the royal fairies' quarrel. As is highlighted in italics, Titania and Oberon's words precisely correspond to those of the play, but are then abruptly cut down: Oberon's dreamy, highly allegorical monologue on his revenge against Titania is wholly condensed and put in simpler words by the narrator, only to quickly skip to him fetching Puck for his service:

Presently the notion of a strange revenge came into his ranging thoughts. There was, he knew, a certain purple flower that grew far, far away in the west, that was possessed of an uncanny power. If the juice of this flower was dropped upon sleeping eyelids, then the sleeper, on awakening, would fall wildly, madly in love with the very next living creature – be it a lion, bear, wolf or monkey, no matter how vile – that the magically anointed eyes beheld.

*"Fetch me this herb,"* commanded Oberon to Puck, his lurking henchman, *"and be thou here again ere the leviathan can swim a league."*

(Garfield, 1991:255–256)

Following this example there is the Lambs' portrayal of the exact same scene, where a modernisation of English is quite striking:

"Give me your little changeling boy to be my page."

"Set your heart at rest," answered the queen; "your whole fairy kingdom buys not the boy of me." She then left her lord in great anger. "Well, go your way," said Oberon: "before the morning dawns I will torment you for this injury."

Oberon then sent for Puck, his chief favourite and privy counsellor.

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:21)

As is typical in the Lambs' retelling of Shakespeare's plays, the narrator usually intrudes in the narration with sometimes lengthy comments. For example, after the abovementioned passage they included a long, funny description of Puck's naughtiness.

### ***1.2.3 The fabula and the sjužet***

As previously stated, when a change of both language *and* medium is employed, there is a switch from the mimetic to the diegetic mode and Shakespeare's verse is not only paraphrased, modernised, or simplified, but extensively "narrativized". This implies that, apart from the language, new features of the text come into play,

as ‘the medial change alone [...] requires a significant divergence from the source medium’ (Schober, 2013:90). The disappearance of actors performing on a stage is the most obvious, and maybe least interesting, aspect of this kind of manipulation.

First, there is an important difference between the concepts of “story” and “plot”, which are often used interchangeably and undergo many changes during the process of narrativization. When an adaptation takes place, there can be an alteration in the chronological order of events, together with cuts and simplifications. This occurs, for instance, in Adelaide Gordon Sim’s narrativization of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, included in her book *Phoebe’s Shakespeare* (1894): unlike the original, which starts with Helena and Egeus before Theseus’s court, Sim’s version opens with Oberon and Titania’s quarrel over the Indian boy. In some cases, some parts of the story (usually subplots), or, in other cases, minor characters, are wholly erased, like in Edith Nesbit’s 1897 retelling of the same play, where Theseus and Hippolyta are never mentioned. One of the reasons why adapters choose to manipulate and rearrange the chronological sequence of scenes is possibly their will to obtain a more linear narration, which does not continuously jump back and forth between the characters and events that are part of the Bard’s plays – which could cause the young reader’s misconception of the story.

In the Russian Formalists’ words, Sim’s and Nesbit’s are alterations which regard the *sjuzet*, namely the “plot”, which is described as the ‘discursive arrangement by which the story is told’ (Marchitello, 2002:183). On the other hand, the *fabula* – or, the “story”, which refers to the actual content – basically stays the same (Marchitello, 2019:144), as all the love intrigues and final happy ending are present in both cases. For this reason, as Tosi argues, when the relationship between *sjuzet* and *fabula* is applied to a dramatic text, ‘prose narrative adaptations for children can be considered as a variety of plots which depend upon the same *fabula*’ (2017:15). Curiously enough, when it comes to Shakespeare’s adaptations, it often is the *fabula* which reminds the readers of its original author – even though it is the ‘least part of Shakespeare’ (Nesbit, 2000:10), being itself the product of

rearrangements of antecedent texts (Marchitello, 2003:182). In other cases, though, it can also be the mixture of plot and story which gives way to the canonical idea of what a “Shakespearean tale” is in the eyes and minds of many people.

#### ***1.2.4 Role and function of the narrator***

The most prominent prose narrative feature which noticeably differentiates it from a dramatic text is the employment of a voice who reports the story to the reader: the narrator. It is defined by Köppe and Stühling as ‘someone who utters’ a story, an ‘agent’ through which the author unfolds the events from beginning to end (Patron, 2021:14). Nevertheless, the word comes from the Latin verb *narrare*, which actually means ‘to tell’. The narrator is a feature which could drive the reader’s understanding of the *fabula* by using the narration as a sort of filter through which the audience can feel engaged, and, sometimes, manipulated, by unconsciously following his/her influence and comments. The narrator’s chosen perspective (which could be told in the first, second or third person) can highly affect their relationship both with the characters and the readers. Gérard Genette famously distinguished the narrator’s degree of involvement in the *fabula* in two ways: if they are one (or more) of the story’s characters describing the events from their own points of view, they are called homodiegetic narrators; on the other hand, a heterodiegetic narrator is not one of the characters, but knows everything about them and the story (Genette, 1980:50–51) and is famously called “omniscient narrator”.

In the case of adaptations for children, the narrator frequently has the function of mediating violent actions, intense feelings, and innuendos – elements which are very much present in Shakespeare’s plays. In the nineteenth century, Charles and Mary Lamb decided to employ this kind of “invasive” narrator in their long-acclaimed *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807): everything in their narrativized plays was described so that ‘there is no ambiguity or subtlety for the reader’, literally intruding ‘with their interpretations and opinions’ (Tosi, 2013:59). This is

how they described Ariel and Caliban in their adapted *Tempest*, immediately underlining their strikingly different personalities:

The lively little sprite Ariel had nothing mischievous in his nature, except that he took rather too much pleasure in tormenting an ugly monster called Caliban [...]. This Caliban, Prospero found in the woods, a strange misshapen thing, far less human in form than an ape [...]. [...] but the bad nature which Caliban inherited from his mother Sycorax, would not let him learn anything good or useful.

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:5)

Since his first appearance, Caliban's inhuman features are highlighted and his "bad nature" appears in strong contrast with Ariel's not mischievous one; it is like the heterodiegetic narrator chose to delimit the ways in which the reader could have had any positive thoughts towards Caliban, who is here designed as a negative character.

When a narrator like the Lambs' is employed, what goes on in the characters' minds is usually accurately filtered, expanded (or cut down) and reworked, and very little is left to personal interpretations, as the narrator usually gives explanations and clarifies interpretations (Tosi, 2020). The narrator can appropriate the characters' words or add elements and descriptions who help to portray the characters' personalities in an unambiguous way. This tendency, even though in a less prudish and moralizing way, still characterizes contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare, which are 'still inclined to censor the texts according to what they consider suitable for the young reader' (Rokison, 2013:74). For example, Terry Deary's narrator does not leave any doubts about Lady Macbeth's wicked personality, as he simply but effectively describes her as follows:

The Lady of Macbeth she smiled and showed /Her teeth, as glittering as  
a hungry wolf.

(Deary, 1998:163)

Deary compresses her first appearance in two lines and compares her to a 'hungry wolf'; in this way, the narrator quickly comments on her lust for power and evil plotting against King Duncan, implicitly asserting that she must be listed among the bad characters.



What distinguishes contemporary adaptations from the ones written between the nineteenth and the early twentieth century is that today's authors 'do not always simplify things for child readers' (Tosi, 2020), like Garfield's choice to preserve archaic English for the dialogues. The narrators' function to offer young readers added explanations about the context or the characters' backstory is yet another way to ease their first acquaintance with the Bard, as child readers usually encounter these prose narrative adaptations *before* his plays. As obvious as it may sound, it is important to remember that a child does not possess the same level of cultural knowledge of an experienced reader (Tosi, 2020).

### **1.3 History of Shakespearean prose-narratives for young people**

#### ***1.3.1 Early stages: the child-reader***

The mid-nineteenth century saw lots of authors willing to adapt Shakespearean plays for the benefit of children. The interest towards the Bard's tales, though, began some time earlier than that. In the late eighteenth century, scholars like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, in England, John Newbery, the first publisher of children's literature, started to address their attention to the figure of the child-reader, and books explicitly written for the entertainment of the little ones started to appear. Thomas Boreman (who published in 1740-43 the book *Gigantick Histories*, which depicted a series of London landmarks illustrations in order to instruct children on basic geography) and Mary Cooper (the bookseller who in 1744 printed *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song-Book*, a collection of 39 nursery songs) were active in the same period (Grenby, 2010), but John Newbery's celebrated *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744), which included a series of rhymes for each letter of the alphabet, is considered the first-ever modern book aimed at children solely for their amusement and personal entertainment.

Shakespeare appeared among children's literature sometime later, when John Marshall, from Newbery's publishing firm, incorporated a selection of the Bard's most child-friendly songs among the 1760 edition of the famous anthology

of old nursery rhymes *Mother Goose's Melody; or Sonnets for the Cradle* (Frey, 2001:148), to be read by parents and nannies as lullabies before bedtime.

### ***1.3.2 Adaptations from the nineteenth century***

As mentioned before, the nineteenth century is the period in which Shakespeare began to be seen as a possible source of delight for young readers before the direct employment of his original texts, but rather by introducing them to his plays rewritten in new, simplified ways. In 1807, siblings Charles and Mary Lamb, thanks to publisher William Godwin, came out with a collection of tales called *Tales from Shakespeare*, which established a sort of 'model of adaptation' (Hateley, 2009:32) and a new fashion for future prose narrative retellings of the Bard's tales. As their preface announces from the very beginning,

The following Tales are meant to be submitted to the young reader as an introduction to the study of Shakespeare [...].

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:1)

In order to make the text sound like a prose as much as possible, the musicality of the iambic verse had to be somehow sacrificed. They write in the preface:

[...] the beauty of his language is too frequently destroyed by the necessity of changing many of his excellent words into words far less expressive of his true sense, to make it read something like prose.

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:2)

This came together with other needed linguistic changes, which resulted in adapted texts far more suitable for children – for this reason, explicit puns and sexual references were carefully rephrased or erased. Despite this 'sexual sanitizing', Frey praises the Lambs' 'delicacy of wording', arguing that they were capable of retelling the stories 'without undue sentiment or judgement' (2001:149).

The Lambs were active during the mid-Georgian Era (1714–1837), a period in which formal education was still only available to boys, and for little girls it was almost impossible to autonomously read the classics without any safe "mediation" (Tosi, 2020). For this reason, one of the Lambs' concerns was also to include females among the consumers of the Shakespearean stories and, at the same time, in their Preface they strongly encouraged brothers to read aloud the *Tales* to their

sisters. Even though this obviously reinforced the patriarchal ideal, as males still stood in a position of superiority to females, ‘bringing Shakespeare in line with Victorian domestic mores’ (Lanier, 2002:35), the siblings’ intention can possibly be considered somewhat innovative for their time, as they write in the preface:

[...] and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister’s ear) some passage which has pleased them.

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:2)

The Lambs end their preface by praising Shakespeare – they define his plays as ‘enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue’, ‘a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity’ (Lamb & Lamb, 1973:3). It is known that the Lambs stood against didacticism and, like the Romantics, believed in the unlimited powers of imagination, but, as Hateley argues, ‘even as they contest didacticism, they didactically affirm the value of literary Shakespeare for cultural and personal improvement’ (2009:26), as they thought that the reading of Shakespeare could have a profound impact on child-readers and their future understanding of life. As Hateley points out, this sort of ‘competition between entertainment and education in children’s literature’ is particularly evident when it comes to Shakespeare, as he is ‘perceived by “adult culture” as serving both needs’ (2009:3).

It is worth mentioning Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler’s *Family Shakespeare*, which also appeared in 1807 and consisted in heavily expurgated abridgements of the plays. Meticulous censors, theirs is a sort of family’s approach to textual editing which actually coined a verb, “to bowdlerise”, to indicate the expurgation of a book ‘by omitting or modifying words or passages considered indelicate or offensive’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). In this case, the basis of the Bowdlers’ thought indicates that literature could factually morally influence children.

In the following years, Mary Cowden Clarke, born Mary Novello, invented some of Shakespeare’s female characters’ biographies and backstories (by this last

term we mean a set of events which have occurred in the past and led up to the main stories narrated in the plays) and gave *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* to the world in 1851. Cowden Clarke expanded Shakespeare's portraits by imagining prequels describing a plausible childhood for those captivating and sometimes ambiguous characters – often stressing (or inventing) on the mother-daughter relationship – which produced narrations ending with the characters' debut-scenes in the plays. By taking a look at Cowden Clarke's biography, it can be said that women certainly had an impact in Mary's scholarly life. For example, as Hateley argues, she described her mother as the person who originated her deep devotion towards Shakespeare studies (2009:36). Having also been taught Latin by Mary Lamb herself, whom Cowden Clarke sweetly recalled as a 'gentle voice' resonating in her heart (Hateley, 2009:37, quoting Cowden Clarke & Cowden Clarke, 1969:179), the latter positioned herself upstream 'the textual emphasis on a patrilineal inheritance of Shakespeare' endorsed by the Lambs and the Bowdlers, as she saw women as instructors having a greater influence than men (Hateley, 2009:37). Hateley also points out that Mary Cowden Clarke's *Girlhood* inherited 'the Romantic "spirit" of Shakespeare for girls rather than [being] a direct product of the Lamb preface' (2009:37), as she chose not to rewrite Shakespeare's plays in the Lambs' style, but sustainably created new Shakespearean texts.

The nineteenth century closed with Edith Nesbit's *The Children's Shakespeare*, first published in 1897 and then reprinted in 1900, almost a hundred years after the Lambs' *Tales*, with a new title (*Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare*). Nesbit's adaptations follow the model set by the Lambs, but the short introduction places children in a different position, not as simple receivers of a new story, but as active participants. It is the two children, Rosamund and Iris, who ask the adult narrator for a simplified version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as they did not understand much of the original. The conversation leads to the highly debated question of the "originality" of Shakespeare's stories:

"It is a lovely story," he said; "but it doesn't look at all like that in the book."

“It is only put differently,” I answered. “You will understand when you grow up that *the stories are the least part of Shakespeare.*”

“But it’s the stories we like,” said Rosamund.

(Nesbit, 2000:10)

Other famous prose narrative retellings from the late-nineteenth century include Mary Seymour’s *Shakespeare Stories Simply Told* (1883) and Adelaide Gordon Sim’s *Phoebe’s Shakespeare* (1894), which will be further analysed in the third chapter of this thesis. They also describe a kind of storytelling situation in their prefaces, with the narrator addressing ‘with different degrees of formality’ the adults who will give or read the stories to their children (Tosi, 2020).

### ***1.3.3 The twentieth and twenty-first centuries***

Rokison argues that, even though the censoring tendency was still present, starting from the twentieth century the plays’ moral teachings no longer represented the principal aim of children’s narrative remediations; indeed, there was a shift in focalization, as authors began to wonder about ‘what narrative form is able to offer the young reader that dramatic form cannot’ (Rokison, 2013:68). In the nineteenth century, Charles Lamb famously defended the superiority of *reading* over *performing* Shakespeare because he believed that ‘the art of acting in the context of Shakespearean tragedy would appear [...] to betray the very end of art by compromising the artifice of imaginative form’ (Park, 1982:167). In this regard, for example, all the supernatural elements (ghosts, fairies, witches, goblins and so on) impersonated by actors on stage would lose their mysterious aura, and somehow would break up the “magic” surrounding them. Only one’s vivid imagination could visualize those imaginary worlds filled with curious creatures.

Fay Adams Britton wrote at the start of the new century and, in 1907, published a collection of short stories entitled *Shakespearian Fairy Tales: Tragedies and Comedies of William Shakespeare Told for Children* (also simply known as *Fairy Tales from Shakespeare*). As the title clearly suggests, she chose to adopt the fairytale structure, together with classic openings (such as “once upon a time...” or “a long, long time ago...”) and the presence of several stock characters

which are typical of the genre (e.g., the fairy godmother). She clarifies her choice in the Author's Note, in which she writes:

The minds of children dwell in realms of fancy. With magical eyes they see the things which are read or told to them, and retain the pictures in memory ever after.

(Adams Britton, 2014, Author's Note)

Imagination is again said to be what defines child-readers. According to Adams Britton, they are capable of picturing invented worlds which will acquire a more authentic meaning once they have grown up and they have encountered the original texts.

Marchette Gaylord Chute, mainly known for *Stories from Shakespeare* (1956), pointed out that, if it was of no use to him or to the story's development, Shakespeare's dramatic verse often left out – with very rare exceptions – the details of the physical appearance of characters, or the descriptions of places and locations: a gap that the adapters' narrative could easily fill (Rokison, 2013:68). Their words become yet another way through which child-readers can improve their imagination skills even better – with the assistance of detailed descriptions of the characters and settings. Theatricality was sometimes kind of preserved through a massive employment of dialogue, as in the case of Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories*, published in 1985, which incorporated various illustrations by Michael Foreman.

The mid-twentieth century offered a rich world for Shakespearean adaptations, as cinema and other media started to be more and more employed in the genre. Prose narrative, though, with the advent of the new millennium, experienced 'little if any cessation in the publication' (Rokison, 2013:71). Rokison argues that in the early 2000s there still was an inclination to adapt the more child-friendly stories, of which *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* possibly were the most popular ones (2013:71). Shakespeare's character and work was by then fully established as 'the repository of Western culture and aesthetic value' (Marchitello, 2002:185), and twenty-first century adapters almost never fail to highlight this aspect in the prefaces to their collections, especially of

those aimed at children aged 8-12 such as *The Usborne Illustrated Stories from Shakespeare*, which depict his life and success with a tone of total reverence while completely modernizing the original dialogues.

Twenty-first century authors, though, usually distance themselves from ‘any assertion of the strengths of narrative over dramatic form’ (Rokison, 2013:72), often inviting the young readers to bear in their mind the theatricality which is intrinsic of Shakespeare’s stories. An example is provided by Andrew Matthews’ foreword to his *Shakespeare Stories*:

Shakespeare did not intend people to sit down and read his plays, nor for reading the glorious language of the poet himself.

(Matthews, 2001, Foreword)

Matthews is also one of the few authors who preserved the play-within-the-play and the mechanicals’ funny scenes in his adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, possibly as another way of reminding the reader of the theatrical essence of Shakespeare’s tales.

## CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION TO *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the most adapted Shakespearean comedies for children, as well as the 'most widely circulated across the globe' (Chaudhuri, 2017:1), and the 'most Ovidian play in a broader sense' (Fretz, 2023:10). The great fascination it still provokes possibly derives primarily from its dreamy atmospheres and the employment of supernatural beings such as fairies, which are commonly listed among fairytales' typical characters and irremediably exert a great deal of enthusiasm in children. On the other hand, though, the *Dream's* dialogues present an extensive range of sexual references and explicit puns – which is what children's adapters mainly censor.

### 2.1 The plot

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed around 1595-96 by the Lord Chamberlain's men (Gui, 1952:251); it was published in Quarto in 1600 (Patterson, 2001:165) and first performed at court in January 1604. Later, it was included in the First Folio of 1623. It was probably also performed at court for the wedding celebrations of a noble couple, possibly the Countess Southampton's and the Queen's Advisor's, Sir Thomas Heneage (Shahly Hartman, 1983:355), or for the nuptials of the Earl of Derby or the Earl of Sussex (Olson, 1957:95). Its plot is one of the richest among the Bard's plays, as it follows many different characters whose adventures continuously intertwine with each other, generating highly hilarious situations that alternate with more serious scenes.

The marriage between Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, is the event around which the subplots revolve. There are three groups of characters: 1. the courtiers and the four lovers – Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus, Philostrate, Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius; 2. the artisans (or, the mechanicals) – Nick Bottom, Peter Quince, Snug, Francis Flute, Tom Snout, and



Robin Starveling; 3. the fairies – Oberon, Titania, Robin Goodfellow (Puck), Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote (or, Moth), Mustardseed, and other minor fairies.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* depicts an escalation of funny, chaotic events which extend from comic misunderstandings to unrequited love intrigues and magical hallucinations, all of which will be thoroughly resolved through the employment of a supernatural agent, and a seemingly happy ending will finally reconstitute the initial harmony. The main setting of the play is the city of Athens and its wooded surroundings. Preparations for the four-days-long royal wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta are taking place, when Egeus abruptly arrives at court to accuse his daughter, Hermia, of going against his wishes to marry Demetrius, whom she does not care for. In fact, Hermia desperately loves another man, Lysander. Facing Hermia's possible death sentence or retirement from social life, the two young lovers plan to flee the city through the woods on that very night. Helena, to whom Hermia has revealed her plan, tells her friend's secret to Demetrius, whom she is deeply in love with, apparently hoping that he will stop caring for Hermia and will turn his attentions to her; Helena then decides to follow Demetrius, who sets out to find his fugitive betrothed, into the woods. In the meanwhile, deep into the forest, a group of aspiring actors is discussing the final details of the play they intend to perform during the feast in honour of Theseus' wedding, which is the love tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Nick Bottom, the weaver, continuously interferes with Peter Quince's directorial choices, as he thinks he is the most suitable actor to impersonate each of the characters. After a quarrel, he decides to go wandering through the trees, distancing himself from his companions. In the very same forest, Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of faeries, are fighting over the custody of a little Indian boy, whose mother, a votaress, has recently died. Oberon wants him to become his personal valet, but Titania does not want to give up the child so easily. The King then decides to take revenge on his wife and sends Robin Goodfellow (also known as Puck), his faithful goblin-servant, to search for love-in-idleness, a magical flower which will make Titania fall in love with the first creature she sees,

‘be it [on] a lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, [on] meddling monkey or [on] busy ape’ (Shakespeare, 2.1.180–181). The three groups’ storylines connect as soon as Puck erroneously pours the flower’s juice on Lysander’s eyes, who instantly falls for Helena the minute he wakes up in the middle of the forest and sees the girl, who is passing by looking for Demetrius. Puck was supposed to follow Oberon’s order to help Helena, whom he saw mistreated by Demetrius, but mistakenly takes Lysander for the other man. Before that, Puck also transforms Bottom’s head into an ass’s out of fun; awaking from her sleep, Titania falls for him because of love-in-idleness. Oberon then plans on stealing the changeling boy from his wife by exploiting the ridiculous situation his servant has caused. In the meanwhile, Hermia feels abandoned by Lysander, while Helena starts thinking she is being fooled by the two men and is subject to Hermia’s jealousy. Feeling guilty, both Oberon and Puck try to make amend and restore peace; Bottom’s ass-head spell is reversed, his memory erased, and Titania no longer languishes for the foolish weaver. The four lovers are driven to a forced sleep by Oberon’s magic, and when they wake up everything has fallen back to place: Lysander and Hermia love each other once again, and Helena’s love is finally reciprocated by Demetrius. At the end the Duke and his spouse, after they find the four lovers in the woods, decide to bring them back to Athens to celebrate three weddings, all of them finally living happily ever after.

## **2.2 Sources: myths, magic, and folklore**

### ***2.2.1 Ovid, animal symbolism and Latin deities***

A lot of different sources were possibly used by Shakespeare for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare was inspired by various classics, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8<sup>th</sup> century BC) and Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass* (late second century AD), and also used North’s translation of the *Life of Theseus* by Plutarch (Mebane, 1982:255). Sixteenth-century religious thinking and animal symbolism (Fretz, 2023:17) are also listed among the comedy’s sources. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* (the first of his *Canterbury Tales*, dated c. 1387-1400), which was in turn inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio’s epic poem *Teseida* (c. 1340-41), can

be also said to figure as a source. In fact, Chaucer's tale shows some similarities with Shakespeare's *Dream*: for example, the most obvious one concerns the opening scenes, as both texts start with Theseus and Hippolyta's nuptials, where the 'festive mood' is suddenly 'interrupted by problems which have resulted from arbitrary and irrational human action' (Mebane, 1982:258). Another example concerns the episode about Demetrius and Lysander's fight for the same woman, Helena, which actually recalls Palamon and Arcite's skirmish to obtain the love of Emelye, the disputed girl from Chaucer's tale (Chaudhuri, 2017:63). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and their extensive employment of animal imagery also had a great impact in the composition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Shakespeare read them both in Latin and in the 1567 translation by William Golding (entitled *Metamorphosis*). Moreover, as argued by Forey, Shakespeare borrowed extensively from Golding's translation, 'some [borrowings] of which have not yet been recognized' (1998:321). Another element which derives from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the fact that animals are everywhere to be found in Shakespeare's play, and animal symbolism is connected to many characters: Hermia dreams of a serpent devouring her; Bottom is transformed into an ass-head; Snug plays the part of the lion in the play-within-the-play. The *Dream*'s animal imagery can be defined as an 'extension or amplifier of the human world' (Fretz, 2023:11), as it 'describes, amplifies, and symbolise aspects of human behaviour' and is quite essential for a correct understanding of the play (Fretz, 2023:2). Shakespeare also connects Ovid to the Bible, as he drops explicit links between Hermia's dream and the connotation of the serpent as a symbol of sin and vice (both for its phallic shape and because it recalls the biblical image of the Garden of Eden). This is a perfect example of an intertextual use of the serpent imagery, as Shakespeare connects 'earlier cultural and artistic renditions' to late 1500s society, when serpents were central icons in the bestiaries, but also a bad omen according to the pagan art of interpreting dreams, also known as "oneirocriticism", which deeply influenced early modern dream manuals (Fretz, 2023:13-14). Furthermore, as the serpent makes its appearance in a dream (in which Lysander does not

intervene to save Hermia from the beast, foreshadowing their future separation) also implies the symbolism related to the dreamlike dimension of the play. Another example of intertextuality concerns Puck's characterization as a clumsy Cupid, the Latin god of love, which may have been inspired by Shakespeare's reading of Seneca's *Hippolytus*, 'taking Helena's pursuit of the unwilling Demetrius from Phaedra's pursuit of Hippolytus' (Purkiss, 2007:180), and also reversing the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne. Moreover, Latin deities come back once again in Titania's portrayal, as she is modelled upon the goddesses of the night: she in fact shares many features with Diana (as well as Circe, Latona, and Pyrrha), evoked by the Ovidian myth (Fretz, 2023:11). At the same time, Titania carries some features which recall some of the characters from Spenser's 1590 *The Faerie Queene* (Kehler, 1998:16). In 1591, John Lyly dramatized *The Fable of Midas*, a character who is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This may have given Shakespeare the idea for Bottom's ass-head (in the myth, Midas is given ass's ears as a punishment by Apollo; similarly in the play, Bottom shows a very poor taste in music), together with Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), as noted by Geoffrey Bullogh (Forey, 1998:322). As Fretz points out, Shakespeare's deep understanding of the *Metamorphoses* can also be seen in the fact that he even worked in a typical Ovidian fashion: for example, he ensures that 'Bottom's body changes, but his mind does not' (Fretz, 2023:20). Bottom appropriates the main properties of the supposedly priapic animal, as he embodies its physical characteristics (but miserably fails to be a good lover, or, as Fretz states, a "womanizer"), while retaining the silliness commonly attributed to the ass, which Fretz identifies with desire, stupidity, folly, and vanity (2023:20).

### **2.2.2 Folkloristic elements**

Shakespeare took inspiration from creatures and beliefs belonging to folklore. This mixed legacy appears in the play in the representation of Oberon, Titania, and their faerie servants, who inhabit the forest around Athens and probably embody the most captivating, and at time mysterious, feature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. First,

it is important to remember that the very title of the play seemingly (and erroneously) hints at the fact that the story takes place during a “Midsummer’s night”, so somewhere near the summer solstice. In reality, the events actually occur on the day before May Day (May 1<sup>st</sup>). Both the festivities of Midsummer and May Day used to rely on pagan fertility rites and were connoted with magic and, as Schanzer argues, Shakespeare possibly chose to use “Midsummer” in the title of his play because of this festivity’s connection with flower magic, which gave him the idea for the love-in-idleness (Schanzer, 1951). Theseus helps setting the precise moment of the year during which the play’s events are taking place only at the end of the play, because, when he finds the four lovers asleep in the woods, he says:

No doubt they rose up early, to observe /*The rite of May*; and hearing our intent, /Came here in grace of our solemnity.

(Shakespeare, 4.1.131–133)

Concerning pagan ceremonies, Sagar highlights the fact that ‘the rites of May and Midsummer were not always regarded so tolerantly in Shakespeare’s England’, as in that period the Church was trying to eliminate every trace of paganism from the land, also because ‘to the Puritans these were abominations’ (1995:34). Such festivals as May Day, Midsummer, and Saint Valentine’s Day, which all underlie *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, were typical of the countryside and had ‘strong magical and supernatural associations’ (Chaudhuri, 2017:88-89).

Queen Elizabeth I was still on the throne at the time *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was written; in that period, which preceded the early Seventeenth-century witch-hunt, fairies were frequently associated with little imps and were accused of being the direct representation of the devil, as James I wrote in his *Daemonologie* (published in 1597). Despite the negative connotation they were given in that historical period, the creatures appearing in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* never act so wickedly, as ‘Shakespeare goes out of his way to remove all sense of evil or threat from his fairies’ (Sagar, 1995:36). They only play the part of the flowery tricksters who can do magic, singing and dancing most of the time, and who are also benevolent towards humanity. For instance, Oberon instantly wants to help

Helena as soon as he acknowledges her unfortunate situation, and he hopes to make Demetrius fall in love with her through his enchantments, showing sympathy for the girl.

Titania and Oberon's fight over the Indian Boy hints at what people believed was one of the fairies' cruellest habits, that is, to steal babies from their mothers and leave them with a substitute, called the fairy changeling, whose origins date back to the twelfth century with the chronicle of Ralph of Coggeshall (Briggs, 1978:100). Sometimes, as argued by Mary Ellen Lamb, fairy lore was exploited by Shakespeare in order to create allegories referring to socially unacceptable situations, such as Bottom and Titania's romantic endeavour; as 'Titania is another name for Diana, hence applicable to the Queen' [Elizabeth I], it would have been a 'political blasphemy' to allude to the possibility for an ass-headed artisan to entangle a relationship with an upper-class lady (Lamb, 2000:303 & Chaudhuri, 2017:96). Robin Goodfellow, also referred to as Puck, is one of the most appreciated characters of the play and is himself the repository of fairy mythology of Celtic and Teutonic origin. He is described as a mischievous shapeshifter who deceives travellers, plays naughty tricks, and also performs household chores – all elements which are modelled upon various folkloristic creatures such as the so-called hobgoblin, the Will-o'-the-Wisp, or the brownie (Chaudhuri, 2017:44). Various accounts of Goodfellow's funny misconducts followed the success of Shakespeare's comedy, as several chapbooks (small publications containing tales, ballads, or tracts) like *Robin Good-Fellow, His Mad Pranks, and Merry Jests* (1628) were published in the following years. King Oberon constitutes yet another example of Shakespeare's use of sources; Chaudhuri points out that he possibly derived from a character named Alberich (a dwarf who can be found in the early Thirteenth-century German epic poem *Nibelungenlied*), as well as from other fictional characters of 1200s French courtly romance, of which the most relevant is John Bouchier's English translation of a famous *chanson de geste* called *Huon of Bordeaux* (c. 1540) (Chaudhuri, 2017:50–51). Here, Oberon is represented as a

deformed, three-feet tall fairy king who traps into the woods whoever speaks to him and gives aid to the protagonist, Huon (Purkiss, 2007:188 & Tredell, 2010). Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Robert Greene's *The Scottish Historie of James the Fourth* (c. 1590) are also listed among the sources Shakespeare may have used for the depiction of the King of Fairies (Hendricks, 1996:45).

## **2.3 Worlds colliding**

### **2.3.1 Fairies mirroring human flaws**

This comedy displays a world in which the interaction between human mortals (using Titania's words) and supernatural characters represents one of its main focuses. One aspect which connotes both humans and supernatural beings is their similar behaviour. Shakespeare offers his audience two fairy sovereigns who explicitly embody basic human flaws (e.g., Oberon openly shows his jealousy, and Titania can be said to be quite a stubborn woman), even though they are the rulers of the fairy world. Gods and goddesses from mythology, who also happened to stand in an upper social position like Oberon and Titania, were usually conceived as perfect beings, but nevertheless experienced strong passions and emotions which drew them closer to their human worshippers (a concept which often returns in Ovid). The same happens with *Dream*'s quarrelling rulers, whose passionate fights influence and disrupt the human and the natural world. Oberon, Titania, and their fairy trains are usually benevolent towards humankind, but they cannot escape their own feelings: the dispute over the Indian changeling is the spark that unleashes all future natural disasters (such as bad weather and crop failure), chaotic wrongdoings and misadventures.

### **2.3.2 “*Discordia concors*”, harmony and (dis)order**

During the Renaissance, the principle of *discordia concors*, which can be translated literally as “harmonious disorder”, was one of the most debated cultural discourses. It was originally applied to the cosmos, but it also permeated literature, philosophy, and many works of art in general. The concept originally stems from Empedocles'

vision of the world, which he believed was split into two opposing forces fighting each other (namely, love and discord). To put it in simpler words, it can be said that the world could not exist without the perfectly balanced union of these “discordant” counterparts. John Mebane, who investigates the existing similarities between *The Knight's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, notes that Chaucer and Shakespeare applied this principle in their works in a similar way, especially because all future actions take off (and come to an end) from a similar situation of discord between two parties (1982:258). The two authors solve the initial upheaval of the human world through a seemingly accidental, but in fact pivotal, supernatural agent, as they both apply the principle of *discordia concors* through ‘apparently discordant and fortuitous occurrences’ that finally re-establish order and harmony (Mebane, 1982:258). In fact, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* peace is restored at last thanks to Oberon's benevolent intervention who, through his magic, reconstructs the four lovers' pairings, only taking into consideration the women's desires (he reunites the two unfortunate lovers Hermia and Lysander, while Helena's dream finally becomes reality, and she marries Demetrius). Nevertheless, in both Shakespeare's and Chaucer's works, the final speeches (by Oberon in *MND* and by Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*) ‘evoke a feeling of reconciliation between the human characters and a benevolent spiritual order’ (Mebane, 1982:258). In *MND*, Oberon states:

So shall all the couples three /Ever true in loving be, /And the blots of nature's hand /Shall not in their issue stand.

(Shakespeare, 5.1.397–400)

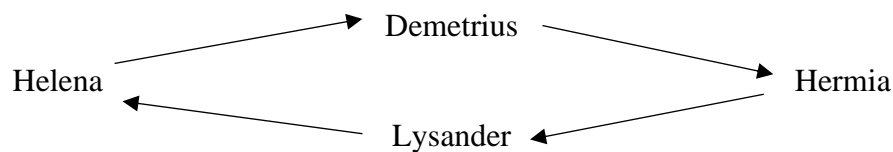
[...] And the owner of it blest /Ever shall in safety rest. /Trip away, make no stay, /Meet me all, by break of day.

(Shakespeare, 5.1.409–412)

After having blessed the couples' future together, Oberon summons his and Titania's fairy trains and rushes back to the forest, from which they will peacefully, selflessly, and benevolently observe the progress of the human world and, if needed, will provide ‘their aid invisibly throughout’ as they always did, except for their appearance to Bottom, who posed no dangerous threat to their secrecy (Hutton,



1985:301). At a first glance, the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might seem chaotic, but it nevertheless reveals quite a symmetrical and ordered structure. Mebane mentions scholars Baldwin and Welsford's studies on the almost mathematical regularity of the play's construction. Welsford compares it to a dance, which characterizes the four lovers' tormented movements towards each other throughout the unfolding of the events in the woods; Baldwin comments on the fact that the initial harmony, which he defines as an 'antecedent square', has been destroyed by Demetrius's loss of interest towards Helena, which causes the dissolution of the two pairings and generates a love triangle (with Demetrius in love with Hermia, and Hermia in love with Lysander) that later once again turns out as an imbalanced square when Lysander is bewitched with the love-in-idleness (Mebane, 1982:259 quoting Baldwin, 1959:472–480). This pattern, as suggested by Baldwin, can be depicted as follows:



Demetrius's infatuation for Helena then restores the love triangle, leaving Hermia out, but this newly-formed geometry vanishes as soon as Oberon finally decides to re-establish the pairings accordingly (Mebane, 1982:259 quoting Baldwin, 1959:472–480). Mebane also notices that these harmonious movements are only perceived as such by the theatre audience, while the four characters are facing desperation and loss, as they are preys of their own passions and desires until the very end of the play (1982:259).

### ***2.3.3 The meaning of imagination and the oneiric dimension***

Even though the presence of various comic elements and events (such as the chaos caused by Puck's pranks and errors) sometimes caused *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* to be 'dismissed as a piece of fluff' (Miller, 1975:254), Miller argues that,

by exploiting Ovid and British folklore, Shakespeare's intromission 'into the doings of the nobles and the workmen of Athens' turns the play into a 'study in the epistemology of imagination' (1975:254). Furthermore, Mebane adds that it is precisely imagination (and intuition) which helps the characters achieve the 'awareness of life's beauty and value', as it offers infinite possibilities of interpretation which reason, embodied by the balanced Theseus and described as a 'limited faculty', cannot (1982:256–257). Surprisingly, *Dream* depicts a world in which imagination is more powerful than reason. At the same time, within this complex context, Shakespeare exploits the fairies as 'reminders of indefiniteness in the world of the play' (Miller, 1975:254–255). Robin Goodfellow's final monologue is permeated by this sense of vagueness:

If we *shadows* have offended, /Think but this, and all is mended: /That you have but slumbered here /While these *visions* did appear. /And this weak and idle theme, /No more yielding but a *dream*, /Gentles, do not reprehend: /If you pardon, we will mend.

(Shakespeare, 5.1.413–420)

Robin is here insinuating that what has just been witnessed may in fact have been mere 'visions', a word which often recurs throughout the play: but is it Puck-the-character or the-actor-playing-Puck speaking? Moreover, he also adds that if what has been performed has not been of any pleasure, the audience should take it just as an illusion, or a collective hallucination, and go on with their lives as if nothing really happened. As Miller continues, Robin's monologue irreparably compromises the frame of dramatic illusion:

[...] the fairies obliquely hint that our own offstage existence may be touched by the mysteries no less genuine than those that disrupt the world of Theseus, Hermia, Bottom, and the rest.

(Miller, 1975:255)

Once again, the dichotomy between reality (in this case, represented by the spectators' "real" lives) and imagination, which is what strongly characterizes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is underlined. Therefore, it can be affirmed that Puck's monologue epitomizes the metatheatrical dimension of the comedy, something which recurs in many other Shakespearean plays. Metatheatre – also known as

metadrama or meta-play – is a term coined by Lionel Abel in his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963). It represents yet another typical Renaissance notion according to which the dramatic action that is being performed explicitly admits to the audience its artificial nature and demands the same audience to be thoroughly aware of it. In Thomas G. Rosenmeyer's words,

In metatheatre, the characters show themselves to be aware of being on a stage; they are self-conscious, both about themselves as characters and about their status as actors playing characters [...].

(Rosenmeyer, 2002:88)

Moreover, 'in metatheatre, the action is marked by a dream or has the quality of a dream' (Rosenmeyer, 2002:88). Puck's allusive words precisely correspond to this definition of the metatheatrical dimension which thoroughly permeates the dramatic action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This certainly contributes to add even more complexity to the real meaning of the play, which has been perfectly hidden behind its only seemingly silly characters taking onstage silly love intrigues. In addition to this, Mebane furtherly suggests that it is the play's emphasis on the importance of imagination, with its insistence on conveying 'a sense of wonder and astonishment at the blessings of life', that inevitably intertwines with metadrama on one hand, but also with the other highly debated topic of the comedy, that is, the oneiric dimension (1982:256–257). In Act 2, Scene 1, Hermia's dream is interpreted as an anticipation of what will happen in the future (that is, Lysander's change of heart). Hers is not the only episode in which references to dreams are conveyed, which is quite obvious, considering that the play's very title clearly insists on this element, contributing to its 'visionary and philosophical dimension' (Mebane, 1982:261). Dreams are part of the collective imagination as unsubstantial experiences which can give way to one's wildest desires, as well as to subconscious passions and deepest fears, providing people with some sort of illusory alternative reality where everything seems possible, both in a positive and negative way (as in the case of the unfortunate Hermia). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though, Shakespeare reverses this concept, as sleep – and the dreams that come with it – here is 'the gateway, not to folly, but to revelation and reordering' (Garber, 2013). For instance,

it is indeed a forced sleep what provides the two couples with the final resolution of their love intrigues and awakes Bottom from his crazy ass-headed adventure. As argued by Falk, in this play ‘dream offers the illusion that we are seeing or participating in “the direct expression of unconscious psychic activity”’ (Falk, 1980:268 quoting Jung, 1933:2), letting the audience enter the irrational world, embodied by the quarrelling fairies: a world which takes over rationality. Nevertheless, towards the end of the play, the only human character who has physically met these mysterious creatures, also dizzily awakes from his “dream”, but calls it a “vision” instead:

[...] I have had a most rare *vision*. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream.

(Shakespeare, 4.1.203–206)

Similarly, the very same word is used by Shakespeare in Act 4, in the scene of Titania’s awakening (‘My Oberon, what *visions* have I seen!’, Shakespeare 4.1.75) and, before, in Act 3, when Oberon gives Puck instructions on the reunion of the four lovers (‘When they next wake, all this derision / Shall seem a dream and fruitless *vision*’ – Shakespeare, 3.2.370–371): as Garber cleverly points out, it is as if “vision” had become the ‘code word for the dream understood, the dream correctly valued’ (Garber, 2013). This oneiric dimension, which only operates in the woods, collides with the nearby practical Athenian reality, where the rational Theseus stubbornly denies the existence of “fairy toys” and dutifully follows the law, in strong contrast with the other influential ruler, Oberon, who in parallel acts out as a sort of god of love, governing over imagination, nature and chaos (Garber, 2013).

## **2.4 The love theme**

### ***2.4.1 A not-so-classic romantic comedy***

Love seemingly represents the chief force which influences and deconstructs the numerous plotlines which animate both the dreamy fairyland and the human world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; this theme is also what, over the centuries,

probably granted the play such a great success. But, as Marshall points out, we should ask ourselves whether love is represented positively, or if it would be more proper to call *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a 'most lamentable comedy' (Shakespeare 1.2.11), if not a 'very tragical mirth' (Shakespeare, 5.1.57). On this matter, Chaudhuri argues:

The reality of love in *Dream* is depressingly unedifying. For a classic 'romantic comedy' featuring four couples, there is little amorous sentiment, let alone insight into the psychology of love.  
(Chaudhuri, 2017:78)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the treatment of love can raise many questions, such as whether love should be considered a true feeling, given its magical-driven nature. One should also consider that the Queen of Amazons ends up marrying the man who defeated her in battle. These are aspects which 'are not presented by the traditional view of the play as a "wedding present"' (Marshall, 1982:548), nor as a typical, romantic love-story. Maybe this is the reason why critics have interpreted the multifaceted aspects that characterise this impetuous feeling in different ways. In fact, through the centuries, the treatment of love in the play has been described as both an enhancing or disruptive power and has often aroused highly contrasting considerations.

#### **2.4.2 The silenced women**

The depiction of love as an irrational power in the play is more evident when the characters move farther from the city and deeper into the forest, where the 'disparity between Reason and Love' reaches its peak, influenced by the fairy inhabitants (Olson, 1957:96). Some scholars focus on the parallelisms existing between two of the main female characters' relationships with their male partners or family members, that is, Hippolyta's with Theseus and young Hermia's with her father Egeus (and, consequently, with his protégé Demetrius). Hippolyta and Hermia's lives are affected by these powerful male figures, who can be said to behave both in an ambiguously loving and tyrannical way, and do not let the women free to decide for themselves. The first example is represented by Hippolyta, whose

imminent marriage to Theseus, among other things, will downgrade her social status, from Queen of the Amazons to Duchess of Athens. Moreover, as noted by Olson, long before Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hippolyta was already remembered by many as 'the ruler of a nation which overturned the fixed hierarchy of wedlock' (1957:102), since the Amazons did not marry and represented one very peculiar kind of females, very different from the typical good Renaissance wife – 'chaste, silent and obedient' (Buccola, 2010:152 quoting Ferguson, Quilligan & Vickers, 1986). Hippolyta's supposedly inadequate, unwomanly, and over passionate behaviour needs the intervention of a rational counterpart, embodied in the play by Duke Theseus, who is particularly proud of the fact that he is to wed his royal war prisoner, and never forgets to remind the audience of the context in which he met Hippolyta:

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, /And won thy love doing thee  
injuries; /But I will wed thee in another key, /With *pomp*, with *triumph*,  
and with *revelling*.  
(Shakespeare, 1.1.16–19)

In this way, Theseus is placing himself above his soon-to-be wife, who does not seem as enthusiastic of the imminent nuptials as he is and does not speak another word until Act 4. Instead of a reassurance of good and loving intents, as Marshall argues, Theseus's choice of words ("triumph", "pomp", "revelling") sounds more like a 'military celebration' of a victory over his enemies than a love declaration (1982:549). In this regard, for long time critics have misinterpreted Hippolyta's prolonged silence, usually matching her state of being with that of her husband, without taking into account her possible inner feelings, 'acting as if they knew what was going on in her mind' (Marshall, 1982:548). Hippolyta's silenced condition recalls that of another woman, whose misplaced feelings cause the rage of her father. In Hermia's case, we see a daughter who is treated as Egeus' private property. This can be said to be the prototypical representation of Athenian patriarchalism, where the father freely disposes of his daughter's destiny but then becomes enraged as soon as the daughter does not want to submit to his orders. Even though Lysander and Demetrius are in the same economic and social position,

Egeus cannot tolerate his daughter's rebellious behaviour, and needs to re-establish his jurisdiction, finding no other way than going before Duke Theseus and asking for his immediate intervention. He is showing no sign of repentance even when the ruler threatens to kill his daughter as the Athenian law commands. On the other hand, Theseus only apparently offers Hermia the opportunity to choose her own destiny, but each of the three alternatives he gives her only reinforces the fact that she actually cannot do *anything* without male consent. As Marshall brilliantly sums up:

Hermia is told to "choose love by another's eyes", to see what others have figured for her fantasy –just as Hippolyta is asked (or assumed) to see her wedding from Theseus' point of view.

(Marshall, 1982:552)

The only drastic solution Hermia is left with is to elope and try to marry Lysander illicitly, thus initiating the long series of misunderstandings which characterise the play. It can be affirmed that, at the end, the two heroines face a very different fate: Hermia can finally have her Lysander, but Hippolyta is ignored up until the final act, when no one answers the very few words she speaks, and is forced to wed Theseus anyway.

### ***2.4.3 The mimetic lovers***

The lovers' chaotic movements in fairyland (a forest which seems to have the power of enhancing one's passions and irrational thoughts) are depicted with an almost mathematical harmony. The continuous separation, division, parting, and mismatching of the pairs gives space to the comic incidents and love intrigues which grant the play its possible connotation as a comedy of errors (Marshall, 1982:557), which is by definition characterised by a succession of similarly chaotic events and clumsy mistakes. One interesting aspect of this feature of the play is that it seems that it is the men's irrational behaviours to cause the discord between the female characters, who start as close friends and almost end up as bitter enemies. Moreover, it has been argued that Shakespeare offers a better insight of Hermia and Helena, describing their physical appearance and temper: an aspect which stands in

contrast with the remarkable similarity existing between the young men, even though, overall, ‘neither temperament is explored in depth’, and ‘we learn nothing of the nature of their affection’ (Chaudhuri, 2017:79). As Chaudhuri observes, Demetrius and Lysander look a lot alike: they both belong to a wealthy family, and they both fall in and out of love quite passively, ‘under the effect of the love-juice; the women remain constant’, but similarly ‘accept their changing status helplessly though under strident protest’ (2017:79–80). This last observation on the women’s “constancy” of affection, though, is only true for Helena, who never falls out of love for Demetrius. It is in fact important to remember the existence of a backstory in which it is said that Hermia once was in love with Demetrius, but then had a change of heart and fell for Lysander. In Lysander and Demetrius’s defence, except for the latter’s abandonment of Helena at the beginning of the play, it is safe to say that their actions do not really depend upon their choices, but are always magically driven by Puck’s mistakes, so there is no ‘direct ethical “relevance”’ to be found in the love intrigues generated by the male lovers’ changes of heart (Girard, 1991:29). This aspect is highly criticised by scholars; on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1662, Samuel Pepys famously wrote in his diary that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was ‘the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life’ (Pepys, 1930:290). But, as Girard argues, Shakespearean comedies are not a mere mingling of pointless random occurrences, as some critics have suggested, and Pepys seems to allude – but carefully follow ‘a perfect continuity between concord and discord’ (Girard, 1991, Introduction). What Girard is implying in his book *A Theater of Envy* is that this comedy in particular, because there is no “ethical relevance” to be found behind the characters’ actions, as they act under the influence of a magic potion, needs to be evaluated in its own different way. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Girard argues, the four lovers’ apparently meaningless misadventures are employed by the author expressly for their “mimetic” function, leaving aside whatever possible moral reason for their change of hearts or “unethical” choices, which the audience could enjoy in Shakespeare’s tragedies instead. But the lovers’ mindless adventures are far from being chaotic for no reason, as ‘their genius for desiring at cross-purposes



is too infallible to result from chance' (Girard, 1991:30). In particular, the key concept Girard is addressing is the so-called "mimetic desire" – a 'desire which is imitative of the desire of another, and which directs itself towards the same object which that other desires' (Tredell, 2010). In this way, it is as if the same scheme is repeated more and more times, switching the protagonists of the love triangles each time: for example, for some time in the play, both Demetrius and Lysander desire Helena, and then they both desire Hermia at the same time. Moreover, the audience is also informed of the fact that Hermia once loved Demetrius, who therefore betrayed Helena for her, but then, when Hermia had no interest for him anymore, she turned to Lysander instead. In this case, love-in-idleness was not responsible: 'everything can and must be explained mimetically, that is, rationally' (Girard, 1991:35). Then, during that infamous May Day's night, once Hermia's love has been reciprocated, Lysander himself falls for another woman, Helena, as well as Demetrius. 'When mimetic desire is thwarted', writes Girard, 'it intensifies and, when it succeeds, it withers away' (1991:34). In other words, 'mimetic or imitative desire can [...] unite and divide people – and literary characters' (Tredell, 2010). Given the existence of these backstories, throughout the duration of the play each of the four young adults find themselves in both the position of lover and enemy, each time united, but only for a very short period, and subsequently divided once again. As Girard argues:

Just like the boys, the girls are rivals first and lovers second and, just like the boys, the girls end up at each other's throat. At bottom there is no difference: each lover is a mirror image of the other three, regardless of gender.

(Girard, 1991:35)

Because of the mimetic desire, the love-pattern is destroyed and then reconstructed over and over again, only to reach the final happy ending which reestablishes order and harmony once and for all. It is as if the author is satirizing 'a society of would-be individualists completely enslaved to one another' (Girard, 1991:36), making fun of love-desire itself, in a perfect ironic Shakespearean style.

## 2.5 The play-within-the-play: *Pyramus and Thisbe*

### 2.5.1 Definition and sources

Peter Quince, Nick Bottom, and their fellow wannabe-actors want to perform the love tragedy *Pyramus and Thisbe* before the courtiers, but they are having a hard time rehearsing the scenes. When the characters of a play we are watching happen to become themselves the actors of another play they perform for the stage audience, this translates to what is known as the dramatic convention of the “play-within-the-play”, also known as *mise en abyme*, *Rahmenerzählung*, *Binnenerzählung*, “frame play”, “outer play” or “interior/internal play” (Fischer & Greiner, 2007:12). This dramatic theory has been defined as follows:

Dramaturgically speaking it describes a strategy for constructing play texts that contain, within the perimeter of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance, in which actors appear as actors who play an additional role. This duplication of the theatrical reality is often reinforced by the presence onstage of an ‘internal audience’.

(Fischer & Greiner, 2007:12)

The play-within-the-play is a technique which Shakespeare often exploited in his works (i.e., in *Hamlet*, *The Taming of The Shrew* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*) and was particularly favoured by dramatists during the Renaissance period (Mehl, 1965:42).

Concerning its possible sources and influences, the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* played by the artisans represents yet another link to Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as the same characters appear in both cases. Thisbe is also present in Chaucer’s poem *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386, unfinished), in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (1390), in John Lydgate’s allegory *Reason and Sensuality* (c. 1408) and in other minor works (Chaudhuri, 2017:60–61). Muir adds that Shakespeare was also possibly influenced by Cephalus and Procris’s story as told by Howell (Muir, 1954:145), as Pyramus and Thisbe both refer to Howell’s characters in some of their dialogues. *Pyramus and Thisbe* includes several references to the main plot of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as well as to other Shakespeare’s plays, particularly *Romeo and Juliet*, which was written in the very

same period, between 1594 and 1596. Many scholars have debated whether *Romeo and Juliet* was written before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a position which was supported by Riess and Walton Williams, who believed that 'Shakespeare used the events and the language of tragedy to increase the mirth of comedy' (1992:214). If we take a closer look to the plot of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the resemblance with Shakespeare's tragic masterpiece par excellence seems quite striking. In both cases, there is a couple persecuted by their families, and the male hero takes his life as soon as he witnesses his lover's fake death, leading to the girl's tragic final suicide. In *MND*, having a group of incompetent actors perform such a heartbreaking story arouses the question that Shakespeare partially mocked his own work, exploiting the mechanicals' clumsiness to give life to funny scenes which, as will be later debated in 2.5.3, usually hide deeper meanings. As Siegel also suggests, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Pyramus and Thisbe* portray unfortunate lovers of various kind: overall, they are all recounting events in which, with different degrees of tragedy, as Lysander states, 'the course of true love' did not 'run smooth' (Shakespeare, 1.1.134), since he and Hermia, like Pyramus and Thisbe (and Romeo and Juliet), 'are forbidden by their parents to love' (Siegel, 1953:142).

### **2.5.2 *A tragedy disguised as comedy***

*Pyramus and Thisbe* is presented in the play as a tragedy in burlesque (which can be said to be another typical feature of the play-within-a-play device), which exploits the comic effect given by the mechanicals' inadequate acting skills. Throughout the performance, the actors remind their stage audience that what they are witnessing is not real, as they are worried that the tragedy might frighten them (especially the ladies), thus reinstating the meta-theatricality of the situation. Even more so, as Hutton argues:

[the mechanicals] strive to protect their audience not from illusion but from too clear a confrontation with the terrifying realities of their story.  
(Hutton, 1985:304)

For this reason, they use their imagination and explanations in the middle of their play in order to avoid any possible unpleasant misunderstanding. For example, they naively choose to have one of them physically portraying Moonshine (also in order to make the stage audience aware that theirs is just a travesty), which somehow inhibits the scenic effect at large. In this way, as Hutton argues, Shakespeare ‘confronts many of the problems and paradoxes arising from the art of drama’ and satirizes the ‘overly literal-minded solutions’ that the mechanicals adopt to overcome the problems that their performance might cause (1985:292). For example, Bottom does not want to frighten the ladies with Pyramus’ death scene:

[...] and for the more better assurance, /tell them that I, Pyramus, am not  
Pyramus, but Bottom /the weaver. This will put them out of fear.  
(Shakespeare, 3.1.18–20)

Crosman argues that what the mechanicals do is to ‘prevent their drama from appearing *too* realistic’ (1998:11), ‘creating the illusion that all is well while in reality heads are rolling over the place’ which recalls the definition of this play-within-a-play as a tragedy in burlesque, conveying the atmosphere of a tragic story represented under the guise of comedy (Hutton, 1985:305). The whole performance is conceived so that its stage-audience (composed of the Duke, the Duchess and all of their courtiers, as well as the actual spectators of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) is well aware that they are looking at an artistic illusion – an aspect which is linked with the play’s connotation as a dreamy, metatheatrical experience, also because the artisans’ goal, at first glance, is simply to entertain people during a wedding celebration. But is it really so? Hutton wonders whether instruction has to be listed among the various aims of dramaturgical art, of which one is to entertain. If this is the case, then the Athenian newlyweds watching *Pyramus and Thisbe* do not seem to have absorbed instruction of any kind; as spectators, they clearly fail to acknowledge any similarity between their recent love misadventures and what is going during the mechanicals’ performance (Hutton, 1985:294). For example, Lysander and Hermia’s love story, hampered by the girl’s family, stands in the same unfortunate position as Pyramus and Thisbe’s (but their similarly hampered

relationship clearly undergoes a way more tragic ending). In fact, the lovers never feel ‘taken in by the action’ and never ‘identify with the characters and actions of the play’ (Phillips, 1985:24). During the artisans’ performance, a bored Hippolyta famously comments: ‘This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard’ (Shakespeare, 5.1.209). It has been argued that the inclusion of such a play-within-a-play could be meant as a warning against the dangers of passionate love for the six just marrieds. Hutton adds that, as the theatre audience benefits from a privileged, external viewpoint from which they can observe and be aware of every little detail, the stage audience’s reactions (such as Hippolyta’s) ‘give rise to comic pleasure’ (Hutton, 1985:294), which is what the artisans’ staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* apparently wanted to pursue.

## **2.6 The critical history**

### ***2.6.1 Early criticism from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century***

In September 1662, the diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) wrote his ‘casual dismissal’ of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and seemingly did not show many signs of appreciation for this brilliant comedy – even though it is not clear if the performance he saw was or was not an adapted version of the original (Tredell, 2010). As Tredell further argues, in the seventeenth century the supernatural (and, somehow, “weirdest”) aspects of *Dream* were seen as possibly problematic; their massive presence produced a sense of uneasiness among the audience (Tredell 2010). For this reason, several scholars such as John Dryden (1631–1700) and Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) felt the need to justify the Bard’s extravagant choices by stressing the popular derivation of such magical topics and creatures (the fairies in particular) which, as is known, were based on folkloristic beliefs, and were very common at Shakespeare’s times (Tredell, 2010). The advent of Romantic thinking shifted the way in which the dreamiest, most irrational, and fantastical aspects of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* were perceived by the public. In opposition to the rational thought of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when Shakespeare’s funny comedy hit the German public thanks to the translations by

Johann Ludwig Tieck and August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the emphasis was changed towards a Romantic direction. In fact, according to Tieck, who allusively titled one of his essays “Shakespeare’s Treatment of the Marvellous” (1796), in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* ‘Shakespeare’s purpose is indeed to lull his audience into perceiving things as if in a dream’ (Tredell, 2010 quoting Tieck, 1992:63). This affirmation underlined the dreamy quality of the play’s verses, which would then become a fundamental aspect to be investigated by the criticism from the early nineteenth century. It is important to note that many other aspects of the *Dream* were addressed by eighteenth-century criticism. As mentioned above, Samuel Johnson also first and foremost focused on the importance of the metatheatrical, or metadramatic, dimension of the play, which he thought was what primarily characterized *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Some inferences on the role of women in the play and on the representation of the royal couple of Theseus and Hippolyta were made by Elizabeth Griffith in 1775 (*The Morality of Shakespeare’s Drama Illustrated*) and Edmund Malone, to be followed by a growing interest in the character of Nick Bottom, who was referred to as the “coxcomb” (an archaic word for a “vain” person, someone with a “frivolous” mind) by Charles Taylor in his 1792 book *The Shakespeare Gallery* (Tredell, 2010). As can be easily inferred by the debates that were going on in this period, the growing attraction for the comic aspects of the weaver granted Bottom his never-ending fortune as one of the funniest – and most discussed – characters in the play.

### ***2.6.2 The 19<sup>th</sup> century: ‘rare visions, airy shapes, and dreams’***

In the early 1800s, alongside von Schlegel’s opinions on the dreamy dimension of the play, to be interpreted as an expression of ‘the inward life of nature and her mysterious springs’ (Tredell, 2010 quoting von Schlegel, 1815:180–1), we find the positions held by the renowned writers Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt. In particular, in 1811, Lamb passionately discussed the question of the fitness of Shakespeare’s plays for stage representation. Lamb, a fervent Romantic, was pretty adamant on the superiority of imagination, and of imaginative reading in particular,

over the staging of plays, with particular reference to the enactment of one of the greatest tragedies ever written, *Macbeth*. He essentially believed that it was impossible to put Shakespeare's plays onstage without losing something of the original, as will be discussed in more detail shortly. In *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, published in 1817, William Hazlitt, who also was one of the most admired and influential critics and essayists of the Romantic period, similarly asserted:

Poetry and the stage do not agree well together. The attempt to reconcile them in this instance fails not only of effect, but of decorum. The *ideal* can have no place upon the stage, which is a picture without perspective.  
(Hazlitt, 2009:104)

By the period in which Lamb and Hazlitt debated these matters, Shakespeare's fame was undergoing a seemingly never-ending growth. In fact, throughout the nineteenth century (and up to nowadays), many scholars and critics showed great interest in his plays, and many writers were devoted to the study – and adaptation – of his works. Traces of his legacy can be found in many dramatic works of the period, from Byron to Tennyson (DuBois, 1934:168). In order to ensure that his plays satisfied the new needs and tastes of those years, concerning the adaptations on the market in those years, DuBois further argues:

Shakespeare was romanticized, sensationalized, localized, domesticated, made historical. Evidently, he succumbed to the same influences determining new styles of acting and writing plays.  
(DuBois, 1934:181)

Given that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the most blatant examples of a play conveying 'rare visions, airy shapes, and dreams' (Marshall, 1982:544), the concerns which Hazlitt and Lamb had (about unifying poetry and the stage) can be said to be understandable. They thought that 'in the theatre the vision of a play is expounded and imposed upon' the audience, as if 'the impression of his fantasy has been stolen' (Marshall, 1982:544). With regards to the representation of Prospero's magic in *The Tempest* (which is as filled with sprites and supernatural elements as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), in his famous (and controversial) essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation" (1811), Charles Lamb writes:

Spirits and fairies cannot be represented, they cannot even be painted,  
they can only be believed.

(Lamb, 1818:31)

Even though nowadays some critics disagree with these statements, numerous scholars such as Coleridge, Knight, and Snider later in the century supported Lamb's and Hazlitt's opinions (Kehler, 1998:7–10). It is important to highlight the fact that Lamb was not saying that Shakespeare's plays should *never* be staged. As debated by Roy Park, Lamb's was only a personal preference based upon the fact that he thought that acting was 'intrinsically incapable of reflecting the full moral complexity of lived experience' (1982:167). As the century progressed, a renewed interest for Nick Bottom rose up; some critics supported the theory that he had to be seen as the representative of "Everyman", a symbol for the whole humankind, as exemplified by the writer Charles Knight in *The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare*, published in 1839 (Tredell, 2010). Knight was then echoed by Sir Daniel Wilson in 1873 (Tredell, 2010), who had a similar opinion on the character of the passionate weaver. Following this, the concept of the *concordia discors*, or discordant harmony (to be found in many works of art, from Chaucer's to Shakespeare's), of the *Dream* was at stake. These were the years in which the perfectly balanced (dis)unity of action of the comedy was variously challenged by critics, who found themselves to have disagreeing opinions on the matter. Concerning this, Tredell cites again Charles Knight, as well as Joseph Hunter, Hermann Ulrici, Henry Norman Hudson, and Georg Gottfried Gervinus as the scholars who mainly dealt with this aspect of the play in the 1800s (Tredell, 2010). At the end of the century, the American writer Denton Jacques Snider once again addressed the aforementioned theme of the harmony combining the play's events together. Snider established three groups, or movements, which according to him characterise the dramatic action: 1. The 'Real World', 2. The 'Fairy World, the Ideal Realm' and 3. The 'Representation in Art', where the metadramatic element of the comedy reaches its peak with the performance of the mechanicals' play-within-the-play (Tredell, 2010 quoting Snider in Kennedy & Kennedy, 1999:246). Such a great



variety of debates upon what nowadays can be considered to be the key elements characterising *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the supernatural and dreamy element, the role of Nick Bottom and the metadramatic dimension among others – determined the birth of a recognised critical tradition around this comedy, even though it was not treated by the academy in the same way as his tragedies were.

### ***2.6.3 The 20<sup>th</sup> century: towards an academic literary study of the play***

Generally speaking, argues Nicolas Tredell, while the academic study of English literature slowly continued to develop, scholars from the early twentieth century devoted more interest to the Shakespearean tragedies rather than to his comedies, for which an “official” critical theory began to be discussed from the 1930s (Tredell, 2010). Nevertheless, twentieth century and more recent studies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* showed a thorough interest for many different aspects of the play – some of which conveyed theories coming from the previous years, while others were new and responded to the worries of the people who were living in a world which was changing maybe too rapidly. In 1904 G. K. Chesterton, who was not a man from the academy, but a poet, novelist, journalist, and essayist, defined *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Shakespeare's greatest play, as it was able to portray the characters' psychology better than what *Hamlet* did, but in its own peculiar terms. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he affirms, is ‘a psychological study, not of a solitary man, but of a spirit that unites mankind’ (Tredell, 2010 quoting Chesterton, 1950:10). This seems to be partly reminiscent of old definitions of Bottom as “Everyman”. In his 1925 book *The English Comic Characters*, J. B. Priestley (a novelist, playwright, and broadcaster – someone who was not strictly considered a man of the academy, just like Chesterton) maintained that the figure of Nick Bottom had to be granted his own dignified level of importance within the set of characters of the play as ‘the most romantic character’ of all (Tredell, 2010), therefore echoing Knight's and Wilson's thesis from the late 1800s, as well as Hazlitt's. Priestley's ideas, though, were rejected by the critics in the years to come, as they did not appreciate his ‘focus on character’ and instead analysed the play ‘in terms of its

relationships to genre [...] and to imagery' (Tredell, 2010). Enid Welsford's (whose theory on the lovers' harmonious dance we analysed in 2.3.2), H. B. Charlton's, G. Wilson Knight's, and Caroline F. E. Spurgeon's studies of the play are still of great interest for the critics. Moreover, according to Kehler, in the 1900s scholars such as Bullough, Muir, Lancelyn Green, and Doran started to give more and more attention to the complex study of the sources which Shakespeare possibly employed to write *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, admiring the fact that the play is made of an intricate blend of folk, classical and medieval elements which had been harmoniously joined together by the dramatist (Kehler, 1998:13–14). This certainly represents one of the most fascinating issues, given the mysterious aura of uncertainty that still gravitates today on the sources that the dramatist employed for his work, which can only be presumed. Towards the mid-twentieth century, the question of the play's performative occasion (a court wedding) was tackled by Paul N. Siegel and Paul A. Olson (Tredell, 2010), who took up a more erudite interpretation of the play. By the 1960s, it can be said that the literary criticism on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was more fragmented than ever. In opposition to the harmoniously discordant features of the play which were so appealing to the critics, in these years also the dark and sexual elements of the play captured the interest of some critics such as Jan Knott. His thoughts were at first criticized by the academy but were then echoed in the 1970s by David Bevington and Alexander Leggat (Tredell, 2010). Their position caused the affirmation of a newly established consensus on the ways in which the play was perceived. Even more so, during the twentieth century the play also started to represent a possible topic of discussion for early feminist studies, as between the Sixties and the Seventies the feminist movement itself was quickly moving towards its so-called "second wave", a disruptive force which thoroughly reconsidered the patriarchal values which people were accustomed to. Theseus, in particular, who had been labelled as the proper hero of the play for centuries, the repository of reason and heroism, was recognised by D'Orsay W. Pearson as 'other than admirable', a prototypical man-tyrant (Kehler, 1998:14) treating women as his properties. Other questions on the

submissiveness of the women of the play to their male counterparts were raised as well. As Tredell significantly argues,

The change in attitudes to sexuality and gender which began in the 1960s and which, despite much opposition, have continued in some form ever since, meant that the idea that Shakespeare's comedies ultimately affirmed marriage began to be regarded in a more sceptical light.

(Tredell, 2010)

Not only Pearson, but also Shirley Nelson Garner's "*A Midsummer Night's Dream: 'Jack Shall Have Jill; /Nought shall go Ill'*" (1981) must be cited as one of the most influential critical essays on the matters of gender and sexuality, as well as politics, concerning the *Dream*. Garner addressed the thorny issue of the re-establishment of the patriarchal hierarchy that the women of the play, and Hermia in particular, were so determined to fight at the beginning of the story by disobeying the men's will. Garner argues that Hermia and Helena (and, maybe, also Titania and Hippolyta), by the end, have definitely succumbed to their fates and became perfect obedient, silent wives, observing also that they never utter a word in Act 5 (Tredell, 2010). This interpretation bucks the trend of many scholars who saw the final resolution of the love intrigues, with the consequent marriages of the three couples and the fairy sovereigns finally agreeing with each other, as the rightful restoration of the natural order. Regarding gender and sexuality in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also David Marshall's "Exchanging Visions" (1982), as discussed in 2.4.1 and 2.4.2, addressed Hippolyta's apparent reluctance to marry Theseus and offered a thought-provoking reading of the condition of the women in the play, thus reinforcing a new trend for interpreting it.

As the decades went by, more and more scholars embraced Jon Knott's legacy and sided with a darker, tougher analysis of the play – Louis Adrian Montrose, James H. Kavanagh, and Theodore B. Leinwand, who were working in the 1980s, are considered three prominent voices on this matter, stressing the complex issues of gender relations, hierarchy, and power within the play. Overall, as said before, all these different readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* led to a curious miscellanea of theories, which were then inherited by critics from the

1990s. The major critical exponents from this decade were Renè Girard, whose theory on the “mimetic lovers” we already discussed, James L. Calderwood, who debated his idea on the “anamorphosis” in the play, and Helen Hackett, whose theories also draw ‘on feminism, new historicism, genre-theory, and psychoanalysis’ (Tredell, 2010).

#### ***2.6.4 New challenges from the latest decades: race, queer theory, and ecocriticism***

Slightly before the turn of the new century, Margo Hendricks published her intriguing essay ““Obscured by dreams”: Race, Empire, and Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (1996). This opened a new way for the literary studies on the comedy, as it offered a different perspective on the racial features which are present within the story. Hendricks in particular highlights Shakespeare’s choice of including an Indian changeling as the main cause for all future disasters, as his mother’s death and the problem of his custody trigger Oberon and Titania’s fight in fairyland. Hendricks, considering the many British folkloristic elements which can be found in the play, wonders why the author did not choose to include an *English* page instead of an *Indian* one, a choice which thus provided the play with a touch of exoticism (which is common in several Shakespearean plays). Hendricks’ theory is that this was an escamotage elusively hinting at the dominance of the British imperialism of that time. In her words,

The figurative evocation of India localizes Shakespeare’s characterization of the fairies [in the *Dream*] and marks the play’s complicity in the racist ideologies being created by early modern England’s participation in imperialism.  
(Hendricks, 1996:43).

As Tredell notably adds, Hendricks’ work is an example of how far the criticism had come from the 1950s, during which time such topics (race and class) were not taken into account by the academy (Tredell, 2010). As far as the twenty-first century is concerned, it can again be said that the criticism around the *Dream* found itself to be quite self-established and shared by the majority of scholars, even though new voices were arising. Since the late twentieth century finally started to give voice to

an always stronger and more and more felt activism in defence of gay rights, it should be of no surprise that also literary studies of the decades to follow were increasingly imbued of said themes – including studies on Shakespeare. Douglas E. Green in particular gave a peculiar interpretation, which Kehler defines ‘a particularly important revisionist reading of gender’ (1998:47), of the homoerotic elements which are present in the *Dream* in his essay “Preposterous Pleasures: Queer Theories and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”, to which Alan Sinfield responded with his “Cultural Materialism and Intertextuality: The Limits of Queer Reading in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*”. As Tredell conveniently points out, criticism from the latest years ‘has made visible and audible elements of the *Dream* which were repressed less by its text than by some of its critics’ (Tredell, 2010). An ecocritical analysis of the play could also be expected, considering the alarming future configurations of life caused by climate change. Ecocriticism has in its aims the desire to analyse the global ecological crisis through the changes in literature and culture; on this matter, Tredell suggests, ‘Titania’s speech about the disorder in the elements’ (Tredell, 2010) could somehow foresee today’s seasonal disorders and more and more frequent natural disasters.

Now that a wide-ranging delineation of the critical history on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has been made, which is necessary to understand the play’s meanings and intents and how its perception by the public changed throughout the centuries, we feel the need to reconnect with the main topic of the present thesis. This thesis is a comparative study of several prose narrative adaptations of the said comedy purposely written for children – which can be said to represent the most modern way to introduce the Bard to young readership, but also maintains links with the scholars who, throughout the years, did not appreciate adaptations, and dismissed them thoroughly.

### CHAPTER 3. TEN PROSE-NARRATIVE ADAPTATIONS OF A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

A comparative study of ten prose-narrative adaptations will be carried out in the third and final chapter of this thesis. It will thoroughly examine how a specific set of characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (consisting of the fairies, the naughty Puck, and the comic Bottom) has been variously portrayed throughout the nineteenth century and up to the early 2000s. An introduction to the Lambs' first attempt to transpose Shakespeare's play for the enjoyment of the children will be provided as a starting point, which will be helpful in highlighting how subsequent adaptations have distanced themselves, or have taken as an example, the two siblings' "model" for adapting Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a prose-narrative. Even more so, the characters that will be analysed have been chosen due to the significant potential they have in seizing the child-readers' attention and interest, as magic endeavours and comic misadventures possibly represent two of the most recurrent and most appreciated topics in children's literature.

Considering Naomi Miller's well-informed take on the best ways though which children can be gently escorted to the reading of Shakespeare, it is of no surprise that *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, together with another very appreciated play, *The Tempest*, are considered the 'comedy and romance mostly directly associated with magical and fantastical worlds that appeal to young audiences' (Miller, 2017:377) – and, for this reason, the most adapted ones in children's literature. Each subchapter will thoroughly scrutinise the different portrayals of the fairies, Robin Goodfellow and Nick Bottom. Before that, however, Chapter 3 will investigate the prefaces and author's notes extracted from each book or collection of stories, which are one of the main instruments that can help us to reposition the adaptations within their respective contexts related to the moral values and needs

of their historical period. Then, with the help of Diane Purkiss and Katharine Briggs' captivating studies on fairy lore, the first issue we will address are the ways in which Titania, Oberon and their fairy trains have been depicted in children's adaptations, starting with Mary Seymour (1880) and up to Andrew Matthews (2002).

Robin Goodfellow's characterisation as the main trickster, and sort of "villain", of the comedy will then be taken as the main topic for 3.4, "Puck in Mischief", which will close with the sprite's triumphant comeback as the storyteller of Terry Deary's *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Nightmare in Elm Trees*.

Finally, Nick Bottom's clownish portrayal is our last topic of interest, considering the fact that the Lambs themselves called him the "Clown" in their 1807 adaptation, but never actually mentioned his and his companions' names. Bottom's portrayal as the fool of the play also recurred more than one century later, when Mary Macleod Banks and Marchette Chute published respectively *The Shakespeare Story-Book* (1902) and *Stories from Shakespeare* (1956).

## **3.1 The pioneers of Shakesperean adaptations for children**

### ***3.1.1 A collection of fairytale-like stories***

From the nineteenth century to the present, authors and artists have employed fantasy and fable to adapt, reimagine, translate, and transform the visions embodied in Shakespeare's plays for young audiences in particular, often offering not simply new takes on old plays but new habitations.

(Miller, 2017:377)

This short but very much eloquent passage, taken from Naomi J. Miller's 2017 essay "Conjuring Shakespeare for Young Audiences Through Fairy-Tales, Fables, and Fantasy", examines the reason why many adapters employed a fairytale-like tone and style to reimagine Shakespeare's plays for a much younger public. The considerable presence of supernatural and magic lore in Shakespeare's drama, to some extent, made the adapters' efforts easier, so that they could quite easily create new "habitations" for the plays, to be better appreciated by the young audiences of

the times in which such adaptations had been written. Nevertheless, the Bard's "fairy way of writing", a curious expression which derives from John Dryden but is actually associated with Joseph Addison's *Spectator*'s essays, somehow contributed to give raise to what nowadays is commonly known as the "fantasy" genre, which, as Pask argues, 'is bound up with the status of the creative imagination' (2013:1), which Shakespeare's plays are so imbued with. As Pask states:

Indeed, from the Victorian period onward, and with the development of the children's fairy tale, the fairy way of writing could be associated with the concept of fancy [...]. Fancy has to some extent informed the concept of fantasy and the fantastic.

(Pask, 2013:5–6)

If we are to search for a deeper reason behind this long-lasting fascination for fairy tales, fantasy and the supernatural, which in fact deeply influenced many rewritings of the Shakespearean drama, Rawnsley's analysis could be of great help. As he states,

[...] fairy tales provide a means for us to explore our most secret dreams and desires. [...] This fundamental element of hope is one of the most alluring features of such stories.

As well as wish fulfilment, fairy tales provide a safe space in which to acknowledge and confront our deepest fears and most profound anxieties.

(Rawnsley, 2013:145)

As is well-known, one of the most noteworthy events in the field of nineteenth century Shakespearean adaptations, which preceded the flourishing Victorian period, is certainly the publication of Charles and Mary Lamb's longtime famous *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). This collection set what can really be considered a model (and was thought by many to be the steppingstone) for future prose-narrative adaptations of the Bard's plays for children, thoroughly permeated by a fairy tale-like atmosphere. The Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* were groundbreaking in several respects. The tragedies were adapted by Charles, while Mary took charge of the comedies. In addition, they chose not to adapt the historical plays (such as *Anthony and Cleopatra*, or *Richard III*), which were possibly not so apt for a young



public. In order to avoid a too difficult kind of narration for the child-readers they wanted to market these tales for, the siblings' choice fell upon a prose-narrative type of retelling, which helped them give the stories a fairy tale-like tone and prevented the narration from sounding too 'tedious' to the readers' 'young ears' (Lamb & Lamb, 1973:1). For this reason, they narrativized the majority of the plays' dialogues in order to favour simpler but more effective descriptions, even though some of the original verses can be found here and there in the direct speeches. It was possibly more difficult to adapt the comedies' dialogues rather than the tragedies', as the former presented way more sexual puns that needed to be censored in some way.

Today, it can be said that the Lambs' adaptations are considered as true and proper fairytale renditions of the Shakespearean source-texts. In the first place, this thesis can be supported by the fact that the two siblings chose to explicitly title their work as a collection of "tales", a term which normally refers to a structurally simple narration of short length; even more so, this term also suggests that the reader could encounter a kind of narration which is explicitly reminiscent of the literary fairytale genre. In fact, among other things, tales frequently dealt with magical or exotic events; the Lambs' prose-narrative abridgement of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which *per se* evokes dreaminess and a fairytale-like atmosphere – both because of its mysterious wooded setting, a place suspended in time and space, and its fairy characters – is therefore of great interest for the sake of the present study. Both in its dramatic and narrativized form, its story possibly represents, I would argue, one fitting example of what Dryden and Addison called the "fairy way of writing". The original script of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* clearly depicted a series of characters and events that can be related to a basic pattern, or a set of paradigmatic elements, which Vladimir Propp identified as characteristic of the medieval oral wonder tale, or *conte merveilleux*. The medieval wonder tale was part of the oral storytelling tradition and was later massively appropriated by the literary fairytale genre (Zipes, 2000:xvi). It is important to highlight the fact that wonder tales presented many features which differed from one another according to their

geographical area of origin, that is why Propp's should only be taken as one of many possible existing patterns. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there are several similarities with what Propp acknowledged in his list of 'thirty-one basic functions that constitute the formation of a paradigmatic wonder tale' (Zipes, 2000:xvi), which were modelled on the study of Afanasyev's six hundred texts from *Russian Folktales* (1855–1863) and referred to 'the fundamental and constant components of a tale that are the acts of a character and necessary for driving the action' (Zipes, 2000:xvi). In fact, the plot of Shakespeare's enchanted play begins with the classic trope of the forbidden romance between two young lovers (Hermia and Lysander), which is then followed by the sudden decision to elope secretly and their subsequent encounter (although the humans in the play never actually *see* the fairies) with some helpful magical agent resulting in their misfortunes. But, in the end, in a typical wonder tale (and, to some extent, fairytale) fashion, 'the success of the protagonist', which in the play is represented by the young couples' reunion, 'usually leads to marriage and wealth' (Zipes, 2000:xvi–xvii), as wonder tales and fairytales rarely end unhappily and without leaving the listener and the reader with some sort of teaching. This final aspect was partly embraced by the Lambs who, as stated in Chapter 1, stood against strict didacticism, but nevertheless developed their ambitious project with a specific objective in mind, which is reflected in the narrative choices they adopted for their prose-narrative.

### ***3.1.2 Missing characters and moral teachings***

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Lambs fondly praised the powers of creative imagination and intended to rewrite Shakespeare's stories, as their Preface states, for 'very young children' (Lamb & Lamb, 1973:2). But, as we know, they were also concerned with the education of mid-Georgian Era's little girls. They wanted their stories to be easily understood by young girls through the useful and necessary mediation of their brothers, and were cautious enough to purge, or retell in a less blatant way, most of the inappropriate contents of the original texts, to protect

young readers – and ladies in particular – from any kind of improper message. The obvious question that now might arise is: *how* did they do that?

In Mary Lamb's adaptation, the majority of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* original and main "functions", such as the love intrigues and the portrayal of the fairies as supernatural benevolent agents, were overall maintained, although their storylines were shortened and reorganized in a less confuse way. To abridge the story even more and to make it more suitable for children, though, Mary Lamb sacrificed some of the most memorable – and chaotically funny – characters: any trace of the rude mechanicals' pantomime from Act 5 is in fact wiped away. The reason Mary had for doing so possibly lies in the fact that their silly dialogues were too allusive and problematic for a (female) child reader. Instead, Mary preferred to follow the fairies' adventures for the most part of her narration. The only allusion to the artisans concerns Nick Bottom, whose name actually never explicitly appears but is referred to simply as the "Clown", probably to maintain the comic effect of Titania's hilarious misadventure with the donkey-headed man, which is actually the turning point for the final restoration of peace between the fairy sovereigns. In fact, Titania's humiliation ensures that Oberon finally decides to give up on the changeling in order to make amends for what he has done to his spouse. The removal of this scene from the prose narrative would have irremediably destroyed the sequence of events of the main storyline. In this adaptation, we can affirm that the fairies become the main protagonists, as many parts of the narrative are devoted to describing their deeds.

In order to portray the scene in which the sleeping queen Titania is bewitched, Mary Lamb changed one (possibly fundamental) aspect of the original play. In her rewriting of the source text, Nick Bottom's funny transformation into a donkey is the work of the Fairy King, while the sprite-servant Puck only manoeuvres the young Athenians' misplaced love affairs. In the original, the complete opposite happens, as Bottom's metamorphosis is Puck's work. This is how Mary's tale retells this particular passage:

Titania was still sleeping, and Oberon seeing a clown near her, who had lost his way in the wood, and was likewise asleep: ‘This fellow,’ said he, ‘shall be my Titania’s true love’; and clapping an ass’s head over the clown’s, it seemed to fit him as well as if it had grown upon his own shoulders.

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:26–27)

This change was possibly intended to underline Oberon’s character development from whimsical prankster to a more mature and loving king – thus offering a sort of moral lesson to the young reader against the perils of self-centredness, which characterises the capricious, jealous fairy king from the beginning of the story. To this regard, as Skinner points out, Mary preferred to develop ‘characters with complex moral backgrounds and motivations that contrast with Charles’ one-sided representation of protagonists and antagonists’ (2011:99). In fact, towards the end of the tale, Mary concisely describes Oberon’s utter repentance for his recent misbehaviours, which he only performed for “his merry contrivance”, and portrays the rulers’ sweet reconciliation:

Oberon, having thus obtained the little boy he had so long wished for to be his page, took pity on the disgraceful situation into which, by his merry contrivance, he had brought his Titania and threw some of the juice of the other flower into her eyes [...].

(Lamb & Lamb, 1973:29)

After analysing a tale which is part of what is likely *the* most famous collection of children’s adaptations of all times (some editors are reprinting the *Tales from Shakespeare* even today), this dissertation will now move forward to more recent prose narrative retellings, presenting ten authors who, starting from the late nineteenth century, either took the Lambs as their inspiration and model or variously applied some changes and adjustments to their own adaptations of the enchanted world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

### **3.2 Different approaches: an overview of the paratexts**

#### ***3.2.1 Stories to be read by the fireplace***

Since the publication of the Lambs’ revolutionary *Tales from Shakespeare* at the start of the nineteenth century, the popularity of Shakespearean adaptations for

children continued to grow constantly throughout the course of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. As Tosi argues, there still was the need to guide children in the reading of these adaptations:

It appears that Shakespeare occupied too crucial a position in Victorian childhood pedagogy to give young readers the freedom to try and resolve (or simply make sense of) textual and moral ambiguities in an uncontrolled way.

(Tosi, 2020)

In less than a century, together with the greater spread of fairytales, many more children's authors (more or less) followed in the steps of Charles and Mary Lamb and decided to give their own versions of the dramatist's plays, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was especially seen as a good way to introduce Shakespeare to the young public. Mary Seymour, Adelaide Gordon Sim, and Edith Nesbit retold the *Dream* in the late nineteenth century; unlike the Lambs, who had in mind especially girl readers and wanted to introduce them to a future scholarly understanding of the Shakespearean drama, these adapters seemed to have the intention to address a mixed, ungended audience of children of a very young age. Child-readers themselves now participated more actively in the reading process – even though adults still played an important part in guiding their interpretations, ‘in an attempt to produce what Gubar has referred to as “the trope collaboration”’ (Tosi, 2020 quoting Gubar, 2009:7).

In 1880, Mary Seymour published her collection of short tales called *Shakespeare's Stories Simply Told*, which was split into two different volumes containing the comedies and the tragedies respectively. Its title seems to explicitly hint at the author's intention to create very straightforward retellings of the great dramatist's plays, while also following the Lambs' example of a prose-narrative

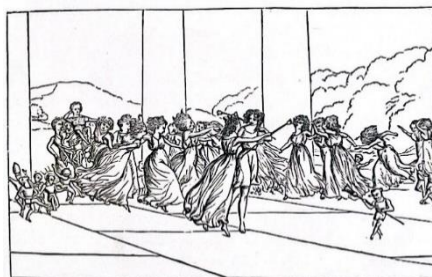


Figure 1

kind of reinterpretation. Each of Seymour's stories are interspersed with beautiful illustrations. This is an aspect which certainly helps the child readers-listeners to visualise more clearly what is being described; at the top of each page, a short title summarises the scene it is being narrated. An example is provided by Figure 1, which portrays the fairies' merriments, entitled "Oberon and Titania bless Theseus' wedding", while the head of the page reads "The Faeries' Revelry", referring to the sprites' rejoicings following the crazy misadventures of that night.

In a very short preface, Seymour presents her declaration of intents; here, she claims that it is still necessary to keep on producing Shakespeare's adaptations for children:

Although the stories of many of Shakespeare's plays were ably told by a writer of a long-past day, the favourable reception accorded to a simpler rendering of them has proved that it was not unnecessary to produce a volume suitable to the youngest readers of these later times.

(Seymour, 1893, Preface)

With the phrase "a writer of a long-past day" Seymour is most probably referring to Charles Lamb (Mary's name was nowhere to be found on the first editions of the *Tales*), whose work had mostly received a positive response from the public and demonstrated that a "simpler rendering" of the plays, carefully modelled upon the needs of the youngest readers would not be useless or harmful at all (as some detractors may have bitterly argued) in the Victorian period. Moreover, the final superlative adjective Seymour employs, "youngest", might suggest the age of the readers whom she had in her mind when she was writing her adaptations. She probably wished to submit them to even younger readers than the Lambs' *Tales*.

Seymour then continues as follows:

It will be noticed that no more than an outline of the story has been given in each case. The appreciation of the Plays themselves [...] belongs to more mature years; but that will not be the less keen because the appetite has been whetted and the curiosity aroused in early youth.

(Seymour, 1893, Preface)

Seymour is well aware of the fact that it makes no sense to give little readers unnecessarily intricated stories, and that a simple sketched outline is more than sufficient – and preferable – for them. She also somehow echoes the Lambs by

arguing that the reading of the Bard's originals will be of even greater delight once these kids have grown up, as their curiosity towards them would have been already aroused when they were younger.

In England, women were finally granted the right to access higher studies in 1869, when the newly founded Girton College opened its doors to five female students. During the Victorian period the education of little girls, together with the preoccupation to preserve their morals, moreover, were on the agenda of many children's literature writers. And yet we can still notice that Mary Seymour does not address female readers but ostensibly wishes for an ungendered audience, which is simply referred to as "the youngest readers of these later times". This places her work in a completely different and unique position, as it is an eloquent indicator of the seventy-three years that elapse between *Shakespeare's Stories Simply Told* and *Tales from Shakespeare*. Significant sociocultural changes were in motion, leading to the long-awaited women's freedom to read whatever they wished, which actually only occurred in the period in-between the two World Wars.

Mary Seymour's collection of stories was followed, in 1894, by Adelaide C. Gordon Sim's *Phoebe's Shakespeare, Arranged for Children*, which, in the same way as Edith Nesbit's *The Children's Shakespeare* (1897), later published as *Beautiful Stories From Shakespeare* (1900), embraced 'the movement towards the fantastic in children's literature' (Miller, 2007:142). For this reason, they both can be easily regarded as fantastical adaptations of Shakespeare. Even more so, in her narrativization of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Sim curiously chooses to provide Shakespeare himself with the role of the narrator, as she wants to offer her readers 'the opportunity to form an imaginative relationship with the author, as character, that connects them to the plays' (Miller, 2007:143), a strategy which will also influence some adapters from the subsequent centuries. Moreover, Sim's preface takes a warmer and less stiff tone than Seymour's as, in this case, the author-narrator stages a completely different setting. Sim is writing a Christmas letter to her dear niece, Phoebe, whose name actually titles the book. This sort of domestic approach gives the impression that the author is amiably talking directly to whatever child is

reading her book, acting like an aunt who is telling a story to her nieces and nephews before bedtime. In this way, the child presumably is straightforwardly brought into a Christmassy, familial atmosphere and, later, into “such beautiful stories”. In this preface-letter, Sim recollects past memories of the Bard’s grandeur while also adopting a typical fairytale evocative language. In this regard, the opening sentence she uses leaves no doubts as to the influence exerted by fairytales, as she employs the classic “once upon a time”:

My dear little Phoebe, Once upon a time, [...] there lived a most wonderful man called Mr. William Shakespeare. No one before he lived ever made up such beautiful stories [...]. All these stories you will read when you are grown up; but Mr. Shakespeare wrote some stories that even children can read and understand; [...] I want you to learn to know them, and love them, while you are still a little girl.

And this is a Christmas Present from your loving Auntie Addie.

(Sim, 1894, Preface)

This preface-letter sets up a sort of storytelling situation, in which one can find “Auntie Addie”, the adult narrator, wishing to gift some wonderful stories to Phoebe, who then becomes an *exemplum* of the child reader, that will hopefully be transported to other fancy worlds by the aunt’s narration. In the preface, Sim is also acknowledging the fact that there exist certain Shakespeare’s stories (such as, for instance, *Macbeth* or the Historical Plays) which are not so suitable to the young child-reader’s ears. For this reason, Sim only narrativized a strict selection of plays (mainly the comedies), namely *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It* and the love tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. A similar “gift” strategy can be found in Edith Nesbit’s *The Children’s Shakespeare*, published in 1897, in which the author adapted a total of twelve plays: *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. The adaptations of *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter’s Tale* were included as well. If Sim’s and Nesbit’s selections are juxtaposed, it can be noted that ‘as well as singling out plays with supernatural elements’, the plays that the two authors narrativized



equally dealt with ‘young people encountering the demands of adulthood, in the form of love and patriotic or family duty’ (Greenhalgh, 2007:126), of which the four Athenians’ midsummer misadventure certainly represents one eloquent example. Naomi Miller adds that Sim and Nesbit both conceived a situation in which Shakespeare is rhetorically offered to child-members of the author’s own family (Phoebe, Rosamund, and Iris) a gesture which is indicative ‘of the growing significance of the middle-class “family”’, where the reading of Shakespeare became more and more ‘a familial rather than solely individual experience’ (Miller, 2007:141). Moreover, both Sim’s and Nesbit’s (as well as Seymour’s) collections of adaptations follow ‘a less gendered and hierarchical’ orientation than the Lambs’ *Tales* (Miller, 2007:141).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, for her storytelling setting Nesbit chooses a cold evening; two little girls, Rosamund and Iris (the author’s daughters), are sitting by the table reading Shakespeare’s plays, but they are struggling to make sense of the stories. Nesbit, who absolutely wants them to enjoy the reading, admits:

In truth it was not easy to arrange the story simply. Even with the recollection of Lamb’s tales to help me I found it hard to tell the “Midsummer Night’s Dream” in words that these little ones could understand. But presently I began the tale, and then the words came fast enough.

(Nesbit, 2000:10)

It can also be inferred that the kids are given more agency, as *they* are the ones who ask the adult to retell the stories in a simpler way:

[...] “You see he did not write for children.”

“No, but you might,” cried Iris, flushed with a sudden idea. “Why don’t you write the stories for us so that we can understand them, just as you told us that, and then, when we are grown up, we shall understand the plays so much better. Do! do!”

[...] So they settled it for me, and for them these tales were written.

(Nesbit, 2000:10)

In this case, the author-narrator is already conveying a narrative description of the scene, as if she is already telling a story. Nesbit is addressing no one in particular (but she is certainly not talking to children, like Sim seemed to do), but she is giving

some details which explain why she chose to adapt these stories, conferring little Iris the credits for the idea.

### 3.2.2 *Dwelling in the realms of fancy*

*The Shakespeare Story-Book* by Mary Macleod Banks (whose surname sometimes also appeared as Macleod), illustrated by Gordon Browne, was published in 1902 with an introduction written by the eminent British biographer Sir Sidney Lee. This introduction takes a different turn and elevates Macleod Banks' work with a great deal of dignity and seriousness, even though her *Story-Book* may not be as well-known as other collections of adaptations. Lee starts his introduction by offering an academic introspective investigation of the dialogue between plot and the inner machinations of the characters' mind, which is what, he argues, granted the Shakespearean drama the immense fortune it had (and it still has). He then turns to a lukewarm critic of the Lambs' *Tales*, underlining both their merits and defects, with a particular insistence on the many omissions and oversimplifications of the plots that can be found in their adaptations (the mechanicals' eloquent absence in Mary Lamb's version of the *Dream* is strongly highlighted). Similarly to what Nesbit famously stated in her preface, namely that 'the stories are the *least* part of Shakespeare' (2000:10), Lee offers a quick summary of the history of romantic fiction, from which, he states, Shakespeare took much inspiration for his own plots (Lee in Macleod Banks, 1902, Introduction). Finally, considering that the receptors of Macleod Banks' book were children, Lee finds it useful for them to be aware of such details as originally "presented" by Shakespeare. As he argues,

It is essential that young readers should find delight and recreation in the tales as he finally presented them in his plays. Such delight and recreation I believe the contents of this volume is fitted to afford them.  
(Lee in Macleod Banks, 1902:xii)

Even though Lee seemed to place himself among the detractors of the Lambs' *Tales*, he nevertheless ends his introduction with an explicit echo of the siblings' words, praising Shakespeare as the repository of great values and moral teachings, thus acknowledging the influence that the Lambs were still exerting among adapters

even one century after the publication of their volume. There is no further explanation or detail about Macleod Banks' adaptations; one of the few things we can infer from the introduction possibly is the fact that the author tried not to omit too many elements or characters from the original plots (as, for instance, Mary Lamb did with the artisans' subplot). Macleod Banks adapted a total of sixteen plays, namely *The Tempest*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. Like her predecessors, she did not narrativize the historical plays. Regarding the structure of Macleod Banks' adaptations, it can be noted that she took care of organizing the texts in different chapters (four to five). For *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, she devoted the first chapter, "Helena and Hermia", to the first scenes at Theseus' court and the lovers' plan to flee the city; the second, "Playing the Lion", follows the petty artisans' comic rehearsals for their imminent debut as actors; and "The Magic Flower" is about Oberon and Titania's fight and the lovers' mismatching caused by the love-in-idleness, to be followed by a fourth chapter entitled "Puck in Mischief" on Bottom's transformation into a donkey and the final restoration of peace.

Other collections of adaptations followed Macleod Banks' *Story-Book* a few years after its publication; in 1905, Jeanie Lang came out with the nursery book *Stories from Shakespeare*, which was part of a series entitled *Told to the Children*. Lang's short preface is very reminiscent of Seymour's in the fact that it similarly states that only "a faint little pencil outline" of the original stories had been traced, primarily aiming at entertaining the little children with the great dramatist's stories, while also wishing to prevent them from finding these plays dull and boring. In her words,

In this little book I have tried to tell you some of the Shakespeare stories,  
and to leave out the long words and the things difficult to understand.

Some day, when you are older [...], you will say: 'The little book that I read long ago was only like a faint little pencil outline, and this is the greatest picture in all the world.'

But if you can say: '[...], yet it taught me the stories,' then I shall be glad, for that is all that I wish to do.

(Lang, 1905:viii)

Like her predecessors, Lang chose to incorporate one illustration for each of the stories she adapted, again as a way to make children feel more engaged in the stories, as she understands and is aware of the fact that, at a first glance, the books of 'grown-up people', among which Shakespeare is always present, 'look very dull' (Lang 1905:viii), so they need to be tailored to the children's taste. Her selection of narrativized plays, at first, was very small. Lang initially only adapted *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. Then, five years later, Lang wrote *More Stories from Shakespeare* (1910), in which she expanded her selection of adaptations by also adding tragedies such as, for example, *Hamlet* and *Pericles*. Moreover, Lang's collections align with the Edwardian tradition and desire to initiate very young readers to the great classics of literature (Richmond, 2008:155). To obtain that, her stories are strongly reminiscent of the fairytale style and structure, as they evoke a distant past (by employing the classic openings "once upon a time" or "long, long ago") and are put in very simple words and sentences. In her adaptation of the *Dream*, for instance, fairies become the main protagonists, while the lovers' affairs are put in the background. This might be a signal of the widespread interest for magic and the realms of fancy which was typical of those years.

Fay Adams Britton's *Fairy Tales from Shakespeare* (1907), also known as *Shakespearian Fairy Tales*, illustrated by Clara Powers Wilson, was even more explicit in its relationship with the fairytale genre, as the very title of the collection openly suggests. As is known, fairytales were very often spread orally in a simple narrative style and were mostly populated by magical creatures, to which children were very accustomed – and very fond of. In fact, in Adams Britton's adaptations,

fairies are everywhere to be found, and they embody the protagonists' helpers in a typical fairytale fashion (e.g., as fairy godmothers). Moreover, many of Clara Powers Wilson's twenty-four refined illustrations are specifically devoted to the representation of these beloved sprites; three full-page pictures, one in colour and two in black-and-white, are interspersed in-between each of the eight tales she adapted (Richmond, 2008:188). This choice links with the fact that, as Adams Britton explains in the author's note, the children's visual – and imaginative – memory is stronger than everything else, and it will help them remember these tales in a better way once they become adults. The author also particularly insists on one specific peculiarity of the children's mind, which is said to be dwelling in what she calls the "realms of fancy":

The minds of children dwell in realms of fancy. With magical eyes they see the things which are read or told to them, and retain the pictures in memory ever after.

The retentive age begins when children can understand, and long before they begin to read for themselves.

(Adams Britton, 2014, Author's Note)

Moreover, the author states that her tales are also suitable for children who cannot actually read yet, therefore can only be told the stories by someone else (this is somewhat reminiscent of the storytelling situation of antecedent works, like Nesbit's or Sim's). Adams Britton retold, as said before, a total of eight plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Cymbeline*. Her work has been of great interest for the study of the fairy lore in modern adaptations of the Shakespearean plays, which will be further discussed in 3.3.

### ***3.2.3 To ease or not to ease: adaptations in-between two millenniums***

As the title of this subchapter ironically suggests, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, Shakespeare adapters took separate ways. Thus far we have analysed how the general trend among children's adaptations concerned a thorough linguistic and structural simplification of the original plots, paired with an overall sanitisation of controversial scenes and dialogues. We will depart from this tendency with an

outstanding example from twentieth-century adaptations, that is, Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories* (1985). Before that, though, it is worth mentioning American author Marchette Gaylord Chute's ambitious project called *Stories from Shakespeare*, which was published by The New American Library in 1956 as part of a scholarly series called *The Mentor Books*. In 1950, Chute had also authored a biography of the great dramatist, titled *Shakespeare of London*. In *Stories from Shakespeare*, all of the thirty-six plays, as they appeared in the First Folio, have been adapted by the author. Like in the Folio, Chute's prose-narratives are divided into three sections: the comedies, the tragedies, and the histories. This is possibly one of the first (and rare) cases in which the historical tragedies have been adapted into a narrative prose also for the benefit of a younger readership. Speaking of which, even though *Stories from Shakespeare* addresses a generic variety of ages, and not strictly children, from this perspective we can affirm that Chute carried out an eminent and ambitious work with regard both to children's literature and adaptations.

As stated in the book's introduction, Chute preferred to employ a prose narrative style, as 'nowadays most storytelling is done in prose, whether in books or in the theatre' (Chute, 1959:7); her stories intentionally appear like short, simplified summaries of the original plays, almost completely devoid of dialogues. In her detailed introduction she offers a well-structured, simple-worded explanation of the ways in which the Shakespearean drama worked at his time, and what his theatre meant for the people back in the days, but then shifts to the present day by affirming that it is understandable that many may not find the study of Shakespeare as enjoyable as the academy wishes it to be. Moreover, as the plays were originally only meant to be performed and were not printed on paper, the actual reading of such poetic texts surely demanded a great deal of study and commitment. In fact, as Chute ironically states, 'Shakespeare never stopped to explain anything' (1959:9). One has to imagine the setting, the characters' appearance, as well as the entirety of the play's details, as the verses do not describe everything as a novel would do. From this issue derives Chute's choice of employing the prose-narrative

form. Additionally, to prevent the growth of a feeling of aversion towards the Bard's intricated words, Chute affirms that *Stories from Shakespeare* was written with a precise aim:

Its purpose is to give the reader a preliminary idea of each of the thirty-six plays by telling the stories and explaining in a general way the intentions and points of view of the characters.

(Chute, 1959:10)

From this introduction, the overall feeling that this collection of adaptations provokes – if compared to its predecessors – is that of a completely different kind of approach to the matter of ushering children (and people in general) to the beauties of Shakespeare's plays. Chute's versions, I would argue, provide clear summaries that any student could use, and are very distant from the dreamy tones that can be found in other adaptations, which insist on the fairytale aspect and treat Shakespeare as a fantastic storyteller. This is possibly linked to Chute's choice of submitting such adaptations not only to children, but to every possible interested reader. In fact, even though the author underlines the importance of one's enjoyment when reading Shakespeare, the descriptive narration she employs somehow struggles to evoke the magical atmospheres of Fay Adams Britton's or Edith Nesbit's works.

In 1985, the renowned and prolific author Leon Garfield published *Shakespeare Stories*, in which twelve narrative adaptations of the plays can be found, supported by various colour and black-and-white illustrations by Michael Foreman. His retellings, or "refashionings", expand way more than Chute's brief summaries. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the texts of *Shakespeare Stories* present a well-balanced mixture of descriptive details, which give the narration the flow – and the feeling – of proper storytelling, together with the original verses and dialogues taken from the source texts. In 1989, in an interview with Roni Natov, Garfield stated that:

If you're using quotations from plays as dialogue, then the language around them must be of the same texture, so that the young reader [...] can read it as a story, and not just as a series of quotations. It's almost like translating.

(Natov, 1991:92)

This “translating” operation is what arguably took the most effort from the author, as he always carefully tried not to debase the source texts and their celebrated *ars poetica*. For this reason, given the significant presence of verse and poetry, *Shakespeare Stories* inverts the approach which previous adapters employed. Instead of bringing Shakespeare closer to the readers of his time by simplifying, modernizing, or censoring the plays, Garfield attempts the exact opposite: he wants to bring his *readers* closer to *Shakespeare* (Garfield, 1990:46).

Another notable difference with past collections of adaptations concerns the length of Garfield’s stories, which are not so short and summarized as many of his fellow adapters’ retellings were. Moreover, Garfield did not include any introduction or preface to his book; the book flap of the 1991 edition, though, clarifies that:

*Shakespeare Stories* is not a series of retellings, but rather a refashioning of the dramas and stories that remain true to the essential spirit of the original versions [...] without resorting to simplification.  
(Garfield, 1991)

Later, Garfield was also in charge of the scripts of a series called *Animated Tales*, first screened in 1992. These *Tales* are animated transpositions of Garfield’s retellings; they had a great success and were often used in schools to introduce children to the compulsory study of Shakespeare, without risking it to be a complete failure but transforming it into an amusing experience instead.

Terry Deary came out with the (almost) homonymous *Top Ten Shakespeare Stories* in 1998, which include the ten most performed Shakespearean plays, namely *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Compared to Garfield’s, though, this work has a completely different approach, stylistically, structurally, and linguistically speaking. Deary’s book is interspersed with many comics and pictures – it is like the original scripts have been both narrativized and in part transposed into a different genre (from screenplay to comics). The characters’ pictures have a very funny, childish appearance and were possibly employed to facilitate children’s reading and



understanding. Moreover, while the language has been wholly modernised and narrativized, the comics balloons contain some of the most captivating and memorable original verses. Additionally, each adaptation is followed by a shorter subchapter which contains “facts” that provide more information on the history behind every play, or some curiosities about Shakespeare’s life and time.

Somehow, this collection is reminiscent of Chute’s “edifying” approach, but it nevertheless stresses a funnier, more entertaining, and fantastic kind of narration, which is clearly reflected by the stylistic choices taken by the author. As stated in the short introduction, ‘Shakespeare wrote plays so people would be entertained. He wanted people to have FUN’ (Deary, 1998:7). As can be easily inferred by this quotation, Deary’s main focus is on the funny side of the Bard’s plays, which he thinks is what really can connect him to young people. Sometimes, to achieve an even better connection, Deary uses the narrator of the story to speak directly to the audience. This is the case, for example, of *Nightmare in Elm Trees* – the adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – where Puck becomes the irreverent first-person narrating voice. This escamotage recalls nineteenth-century examples of adaptations, where the adult narrator poses himself very close to the young reader, speaking with a maternalistic, tender, and sometimes unserious tone. This seems to have been one of the most favourite escamotages employed by the adapters to bring Shakespeare to children.

Finally, we introduce Andrew Matthews’ 2012 e-book re-issue of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* illustrated by Tony Ross, which is devoid of a preface or introduction. All of his prose narratives were originally published in 2002 in hardback by Orchard Books as stand-alone titles of a collection called *The Shakespeare Stories*, but they appeared in 2001 in the form of a gift collection for children titled *The Orchard Book of Shakespeare Stories*, illustrated by Angela Barrett. Each story first presents the cast list, which encloses the sketched portraits of the numerous characters, so that the child-reader does not get lost in the intricate labyrinth of Shakespeare’s plots and machinations but can remember the names and the roles thanks to visual memory – which, as we know, Fay Adams Britton

signalled as the best instrument through which one (and children in particular) visualizes and memorises pieces of information. Then, after the many pages devoted to the story, the reader can find some more informative chapters about Shakespeare's world – one is about the most debated topics of a chosen play, while the second chapter always stays the same, and is entitled "Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre". In the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Matthews dedicates one chapter to the prominent topic of love and magic in the play; other examples are *Romeo and Juliet's* adaptation, which has a chapter on love and hate, while *Hamlet's* one is about the revenge theme.

Here and there, the reader finds some bits of dialogues taken from the original scripts, even though they are not as present as in Garfield's adaptation. In fact, the overall text has been thoroughly "translated" to modern English, from the characters' dialogues to the narrative, descriptive interludes. The black-and-white pictures are interspersed within each page; as the narration flows, the reader is accompanied by these explicative sketched portraits that describe the characters' facial expressions and emotions, or the setting around them. Matthews' and Deary's works share many similarities that make them two of the most children-friendly adaptations written in-between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. At the same time, they take a distinct path compared to Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories*, which tries to remain as true to the original as possible and mixed prose and poetry in a masterly manner.

At this point, we can safely argue that the trend for modern adapters of the Shakespearean drama for children has not been unidirectional, as they followed their own paths and independently chose whether or not a simpler narration was to their liking, together with other aspects that will be discussed shortly. All of the adaptations we have discussed not only differed stylistically or linguistically, but also characterised the protagonists of their stories in a different manner. What this chapter will provide in the next pages is a thorough analysis of the portrayals of the fairies, Puck, and Nick Bottom within the specific historical contexts and moral aspects of their adaptations.

### 3.3 The evolution of fairy beings

In folklore, there are various ways to represent fairies. Sometimes, they are as small and winged as beetles, living inside acorn cups and bluebells; other times, they are full-grown women sprinkling fairy dust from their wands. At times, fairies are benevolent and aid everyone they encounter; in other cases, they disrupt other people's lives just because they feel bored. They also sometimes acquire sexual characteristics which distance them from the cute flying creatures that populate children's stories. Fairies were – and still are – categorized in various ways, they can even belong to many different magical species. Everybody must have heard about pixies, elves, dwarfs, trolls, hags, leprechauns, or goblins at least once in their lifetime. To some extent, even witches could be regarded as (evil?) fairies, given their supernatural breed and their knowledge of powerful enchantments. We are now about to further analyse how fairies acquired different characteristics based on the cultural contexts of the historical periods to which the ten children's adaptations we have selected belong.

#### 3.3.1 *“But we are spirits of another sort!”: Victorian fairies*

Oberon's celebrated line, which titles this first subchapter, suggests that the sprites represented by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were themselves “out of the ordinary” for their time. The way in which the dramatist depicted them went against the negative connotation of such creatures as evil, demonic beings that was common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Three hundred years later, when more and more children's adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* started to appear, these creatures were given a similarly positive characterisation. Oftentimes, the fairies became the main protagonists of these retellings. Arguably, the reason was that the authors felt a more central role in the narrative and could capture the young readers' interest for the Shakespearean drama more easily, and the fact that *MND* was so imbued with such a highly magical and fantastical atmosphere certainly played in their favour.

First of all, an historical overview of the intricate origins of fairies appears to be fundamental. As argued by Diane Purkiss in the introduction to her book *Fairies and Fairy Stories: A History* (2000), the tiny dainty (and sometimes mischievous) creatures whom everyone has encountered at least once in their life – through books, films and TV series, or toys – have very ancient roots. An old theory which lacks evidence but was fully supported by the Egyptologist Margaret Murray saw fairies as the embodiment of pygmy ancient Britons; later, because of their close link with nature, fairies were also believed to impersonate pagan deities, reduced in stature (2000:16). This was an interpretation which also helped them acquire their classic Victorian connotation as benevolent tiny beings with gossamer wings (Purkiss, 2000:16). But were they really so good and innocent? Folklorist Katharine Briggs carefully analysed the many faces and characteristics that fairies acquired throughout the centuries, and resolved to claim that, within hundreds of different names and stories, only four categories of fairies really had some relevance in popular culture. Briggs arranged them as follows: 1. brownies, hobs, and familiars; 2. fairy guides; 3. fairy societies; 4. poltergeist fairies (Purkiss, 2000:17). If we take a closer look, the three major fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be easily enclosed within three of these groups. Robin Goodfellow is famously modelled on the figure of the hobgoblin-servant, who sometimes acquires the nature of a naughty poltergeist, while Titania and Oberon stand in the prestigious position of Queen and King of the fairy society they established in the woodland (of which Mustardseed, Cobweb and the other minor fairies are also part as the sovereigns' regal attendants). Shakespeare possibly did not have much knowledge of popular fairy culture but, among others, he relied on Reginald Scot's accounts of fairy demonic creatures (Purkiss, 2000:18) – and, as we know, turned them into benign creatures.

Bearing this simple categorization in mind, we can now skip to the time period of our interest – the nineteenth century – when the figure of the fairy became really popular – so much so that a literary genre actually enclosed these creatures in its name, even when the stories did not actually revolve around fairy characters.

The English word “fairytale” derives from the French term *conte de fées*, which translates to *fiaba* in Italian, or *Märchen* (meaning “little story”) in German. It is curious that the fairy, which is one of major characters to be featured in these kinds of stories, prevails over other terms; this probably hints at the formidable position that fairies retained in the folkloristic tradition. Some much-needed clarifications will now be given for what it concerns the phenomenon of the Victorian craze for fairies, which manifested itself in the ways in which Seymour, Sim, and Nesbit treated these creatures in their retellings of *MND*. For what it concerns theatre and drama, the nineteenth century also saw Madame Vestris’ revival of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s fortune in a production which took place in Covent Garden and depicted fairy extravaganzas with spectacular dances and special effects (Purkiss, 2000:263). Purkiss synthesised the nineteenth-century social and literary contexts as follows:

It is in Victorian England that fairyland, like everywhere else, undergoes a population explosion. Fairies, elves, gnomes and small winged things of every kind multiply into swarms and infest writing and art and the minds of men and women.

(Purkiss, 2000:246)

Moreover, in the past many people actually *believed* in the existence of fairies – as Purkiss states, they infested the minds of people, who feared to anger them, as fairies could become very mischievous creatures (think about the fairy changelings) or, on the contrary, people hoped to acquire their benevolence in order to ensure future happiness and rewards. We can argue, therefore, that fairies were not always only a “children’s matter” as we may perceive them today; but they certainly represented, amongst other things, one of the favourite characters that populated children’s bedtime stories, nursery rhymes and fairytales – and adapters writing in that period were very well aware of that.

But how did these creatures look like? According to Professor Reidar Th. Christiansen, ‘the small size of fairies was part of the universal fairy belief, though in earlier times there is good evidence for life-sized fairies, as for instance, those who were fairy brides to mortals, and these full-size fairies still persist’ (Briggs, 1978:28). Edwin Landseer’s painting (Figure 2), which is a good starting point for a discussion on the representation of fairies from *MND*, is an eloquent example of it.



Figure 2

Oftentimes, as Landseer’s painting displays, King Oberon and Queen Titania were taller than their fairy entourages, who were instead depicted as very small creatures (in the picture above, some tiny, winged fairies riding rabbits can be seen all around the enamoured queen; in front of Titania, a small naked Puck observes the scene); this was possibly aimed at highlighting the sovereigns’ position of power with respect to their subjects. Shakespeare imagined his fairies as minute creatures (e.g., in 2.1.31, Puck describes how fairies are able to hide into acorn cups), but he pictured Titania and Oberon as tall as humans – in the original play, Titania can fully embrace Nick Bottom.

How did Seymour, Sim and Nesbit portray such fascinating beings? Did they relate to Shakespeare’s description, or did they part from it in order to offer their own Victorian perspective?

Sim’s adaptation subverts the original sequence of events, placing Oberon and Titania’s quarrel at the start (as Fay Adams Britton and Terry Deary will do in later years), while Seymour and Nesbit open their adaptations with the canonical

scene of Egeus and Theseus discussing Hermia's fate. Curiously, this is also the only moment in which the two last authors actually mention the Duke, whose wedding celebrations are omitted. On the contrary, Sim introduces the fairies straight away, underlining their fundamental role for the purpose of the story. As Miller argues, in her adaptation Sim adds many details, and she 'exaggerates settings in order to heighten the plays' fantastical elements' (2007:143), which are the main focus of her retelling. The first few sentences of her adaptation read as follows:

All the children [...] have, I am sure, heard of fairies, and have seen the green rings on the grass where they dance on moonlight nights [...]. But Mr. William Shakespeare was a poet, and a poet is a person who *can* see fairies [...]. On that beautiful warm, moonlight night, Oberon, king of the fairies, and Titania, the queen, had a great quarrel.

(Sim, 1894:14–15)

Sim immediately sets the overall dreamy tone of her narration, also directly evoking Queen Titania's 'moonlight revels' from 2.1.141. At the same time, she pays a homage to Shakespeare by saying that, as a poet and great dramatist, he was gifted with a sort of superpower which let him actually *see* supernatural beings. Then, she goes on narrating the rulers' quarrel and subsequently alludes to the 'good, beautiful [...]' 'tempers' of the fairies (Sim, 1894:15), who recall human beings, stating that their passions can sometimes drive them to wickedness. Sim also keeps emphasising the fact that these particular fairies possess delicate wings and a miniaturised stature, thus placing her portrayal along the common view of fairies as very small flying beings. Sim also offers one of the most picturesque descriptions of Titania's and her fairies' stunning dresses, which she says to be made of 'the petals of flowers and the wings of butterflies, with great shining dewdrops instead of diamonds for jewels' (1894:17), thus reinstating their traditional relation with nature, and their categorisation as forest fairies. The dancing and singing nature of fairies is also maintained, and, like other adapters, Sim includes Shakespeare's original fairy songs within the prose narrative (e.g., she incorporates the song the elves sing in Act 2, Scene 2 to make Titania sleep). Even though the fairies are

depicted as the benevolent stars of the show, Sim occasionally retains a scolding tone towards Oberon's wicked deeds, similarly to what Mary Lamb did in her adaptation of the same play. Unlike Lamb, though, Sim includes the mechanicals, and the love scene between Titania and Bottom reveals the Queen's seemingly human stature, as she is described as being able to 'put her soft arms round his neck', kiss his ears and put roses in his hair (1894:25).

The fairies from Seymour's *Dream*, which was published few years earlier than Sim's, pretty much resemble the latter's (and the Lambs') fairies in some respects, as they are equally tiny and capricious, but good-natured no matter what – therefore, a good role model to be followed by young readers. Adhering to the prevailing Victorian depiction of fairies, however, Seymour describes the royal pair as tiny as their attendants: for example, queen Titania is referred to as "the little queen" several times. Moreover, like the Lambs, Seymour makes Oberon turn Bottom's head into a donkey, and not Puck, but she cuts the whole queen-donkey scene short, probably because of the sexual allusions the original had (Sim thoroughly featured this passage in her adaptation). Seymour places this episode almost at the end of the story, in the section called "Oberon Interferes", when the lovers' misadventures have already been resolved thanks to the king's magic. In a way, it seems that Seymour is trying to combine the various happenings of each subplot into one unified, more linear scene, instead of going back and forth between the storylines (in this way the unfolding of the events becomes less confusing for a child reader).

Edith Nesbit's shorter version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* follows her predecessors' conception of fairies as similar in nature to human folk (they are 'very wise people, but now and then they can be quite as foolish' – Nesbit, 2000:42), but she does not dwell much on the stature of the sprites, possibly taking for granted that the Victorian reader, who was familiar with the typical fairy art of the period, would have imagined them as small creatures. Nesbit also shares the popular belief which saw the woods as the favourite places infested by these creatures, 'if only



one had the eyes to see them' (2000:42). This final aspect, alluding to the fairies' invisibility, seemingly links with Sim's hint at Shakespeare's special ability of seeing them. According to the folkloristic tradition and fairy lore, fairies normally 'are invisible to human mortals, except to those whose eyes have been touched with the fairy ointment or who are carrying a four-leafed clover somewhere upon the head' (Briggs, 1978:82).

All the three adaptations portray a happy ending, like most of the best fairytales tend to do, but with a special focus on the fairy king and queen's destiny. Like Adelaide Gordon Sim, Edith Nesbit enhances the fairytale aspects of the play (Miller, 2007:143), which are exemplified by the final part of her narrative, where everything has fallen back to place, and everyone, specifically the fairies, can now enjoy their happy ending:

So the four mortal lovers went back to Athens and were married; and the Fairy King and Queen live happily ever after in that very wood at this very day.

(Nesbit, 2000:49)

The adjective Nesbit uses to describe the four lovers is possibly aimed at juxtaposing humankind's finite life with the fairies' immortal one, as fairies and fairy creatures are usually portrayed with such a characteristic.

Mary Seymour's epilogue recalls the play the most, as she states that 'all sorrow seemed to have been but a "Midsummer Night's Dream"' (1893:93), thus explicitly evoking the oneiric dimension to which Shakespeare alluded in the original scene. On the other hand, in *Phoebe's Shakespeare* Adelaide Sim ends her tale by focussing on Bottom's confused awakening from a wild dream, having almost no memory of his encounter with the little sprites, which maintain their prominent role by being the protagonists of the very final sentence:

But he could only think that he had had a most wonderful dream [...];  
little thinking that he had been all night among the fairies.

(Sim, 1894:33)

Nineteenth-century adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* show that no particularly relevant changes were applied to that period's canonical depiction of

fairies, as the three authors we analysed more or less followed the same path. Even more so, the royal pair from *MND* was at this time described as both benevolent *and* good-looking, which possibly alluded to the Victorian belief that one's beauty remarks one's goodness. See for instance Sim's jocose description of how her charming fairies grew uglier and uglier the more they got angry. The narrator says that when they 'give way to bad feelings, they [...] lose their looks and get hump-backed, and wrinkled and ugly' (Sim, 1894:15); notably, this description is reminiscent of the way the witch has been depicted as an ugly and deformed woman in the fairy-tale tradition. In conclusion, it is safe to say that, while keeping in mind their illustrious predecessors, Seymour, Sim, and Nesbit outlined a simpler rendition of the Shakespearean fairyland's inhabitants and used these good creatures to introduce Shakespeare to younger generations in a dreamier way, thus adhering to the popular representation of fairies that was common during the Victorian era, together with an additional interest for the preservation of the children's morals.

### ***3.3.2 The stars of the show: fairies as main characters***

As we have seen in 3.2, in the nineteenth century the process of reading books often involved a familial setting, where adults carefully selected appropriate readings for their children in order to preserve their morals. The Lambs' *Tales* had successfully accomplished such a reading model and were sometimes emulated by their successors throughout the final years of the century. Now a new era was approaching, and many changes were in the making. As Frey argues in the essay "A Brief History of Shakespeare as Children's Literature", 'the introduction of Shakespeare to children was a massive project in the twentieth century and one not at all limited to schools' (2001:152). The trend of retelling the Bard's plays never experienced a downfall, except obviously for 'some slackening in the War years and shortly thereafter' (Frey, 2001:152). In "Short Shakespeare: Cut-Down Versions for Children and Young People", Rokison also states that what was identified by Wells as the 'major shift in moral values' of the twentieth century

contributed to eliminate the deeply morally rooted ‘sententious character judgements’ which shadowed nineteenth century adaptations (2013:67). Moreover, in “‘A Classic for the Elders’: Marketing Charles and Mary Lamb in the Nineteenth Century”, Harvey maintains that between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries some authors supplemented the Lambs’ *Tales* by adapting the plays which the two siblings excluded from their collection (2016:5), in order to offer child-readers a more wide-ranging look on the Bard’s works, of which Marchette Chute’s meticulous work is an excellent example. Within this context, Mary Macleod Banks’, Jeanie Lang’s, and Fay Adams Britton’s takes on the fairy characters of *MND*, at least for what it concerns their appearance, seemingly followed up the tradition of romantic winged fairies which was so widespread during the Victorian era. What I now propose is that the magic element and the fantasy setting were slowly acquiring an even stronger and pervasive role within the fields of children’s literature and adaptations – and it showed in the way in which these authors treated these characters in their retellings.

It is in fact magic what mainly characterises Macleod Banks’ fairy king and queen, whose charms (and fights) are so fierce. Like the Bard, Macleod Banks spends some lines describing the overwhelming consequences of the fairy sovereigns’ fight. She states that ‘because of their quarrels nothing went well in the surrounding country’ and Titania often reproached her husband with ‘all the ill-luck that was happening because of their dissension’ (Macleod Banks, 1902:89). Again, we find fairies who are dressed in floral garments, and the author simply refers to some of them as little elves. One of the pictures which complement the narration



Figure 3

(Figure 3) depicts a human-sized, butterfly-winged Titania sitting next to an ass-headed Bottom. Around them, a flock of other child-sized fairies, possibly Titania's attendants, and many tiny sprites are playing on the grass around the weird couple.

We can also point out that Macleod Banks, who employs a third person omniscient narrator, follows Oberon for the most part of the chapter devoted to the fairies, titled "The Magic Flower". The reader gets to fully know his thoughts, what he is planning to do next, the sorrow he feels for poor Helena, and so on. Additionally, he is portrayed as a seemingly pitiful husband who at the end is not actually able to give up on his desires and takes possession of the Indian boy nevertheless; we can infer that the author is suggesting that no matter how powerful his magic charms are, Oberon is still subject to humanlike passions, and is not totally innocent for his behaviour. He is not to be considered a villain, but his weaker and most human sides are emphasized.

Jeanie Lang's 1905 adaptation proposes a very romantic and peaceful pastoral setting, which contrasts with the rational, "urban" city of Athens. To introduce the inhabitants of fairyland, Lang describes a 'warm summer night' which is still breathing 'the scent of honeysuckle and wild thyme' (Lang, 1905:80); by doing so, the author is also suggesting that this is an idyllic space for the lovers who are planning to flee the city on that very night. It is as if humankind, though unaware of their presence, is somehow enchanted by the nearby fairy inhabitants and their influence on nature. The narrator then moves on by hinting at the curious fact that only good kids can hear the fairies' tiny voices among the trees, as well as their bodies' 'soft rustling in the long green grass' (Lang, 1905:81). She also mentions bluebells, which, according to fairy lore, often were the chosen residences of these creatures (Purkiss, 2007:306). Like Seymour did before her, Lang depicts all of her fairies as tiny-sized, kind creatures, no matter the position they held within the fairy society they live in. She also idealises the fairies' innate kindness and portrays them as amiable beings who are able to acknowledge and recover from their wrongdoings (e.g., her Oberon repents the silly prank he has played on his wife). As the narration

progresses, Lang insists once again on the four lovers' inability to grasp the sight and sound of the fairies, as if this was an innate peculiarity of children, and children only – just like Nesbit alluded to in her adaptation few years before. In this tale, the little sprites are again strongly associated with moonlight and fairy dances, which also describes the way in which they move around places and, by doing so, charm nature itself. For example, when Titania's fairy train begins to sing her to sleep, Lang describes their voices as 'so sweet, that in their dreams the sleeping birds felt envious, and the flowers woke up to listen' (1905:87). Before her bewitchment, Titania's crowned head is said to be resting on a bed of thyme and violets, which once again reconnects with the typical, natural fairy art fashion. Overall, it can be argued that Lang's depiction of fairies is, for the present moment, the most fantastical one, as she often reiterates what makes them so fascinating and extraordinary if compared to one's ordinary life (as that of the four Athenians). The fairy couple's parting scene is filled with a sense of nostalgia and a thorough romantic atmosphere:

And, hand in hand, the fairies flew away into the west, while the moonbeams had scarcely ceased to turn the dew into silver, and while the rosy-fingered dawn had only touched with her finger-tips the eastern sky.

(Lang, 1905:97)

It is safe to say, though, that Fay Adams Britton's retelling went a step further into the fantasy and fairytale worlds. Fairies become the true and undisputed stars of her adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In Adams Britton's *Fairy Tales from Shakespeare*, it is very usual that fairy characters are added and become thoroughly involved in the action, while they caringly assist or enthusiastically serve the main characters – or become the protagonists themselves. This version of *MND* in particular is wholly narrated in the third person through the fairies' point of view: the two couples merely appear in the background as "the lovers", and there is no mention of the artisans' rehearsals in the woods either (again, only Bottom makes his comeback as the "clown"). Every subplot which does not directly concern the fairies' interactions has been reduced to its utmost essential. In this sense, Adams

Britton's project acquires a whole different meaning, explicitly (and only) pointing at the most fantastical elements of the play, which then become the main and most significant focus. We can argue that hers is one of the most evocative and children-friendly adaptations of all, even though, because of the many cuts, not the most faithful.

The physical appearance of Adams Britton's fairies is described in a typical fairytale fashion. They are 'tiny', 'mite', 'graceful' and 'beautiful', but they 'sometimes quarrel and do naughty things' (Adams Britton, 2014). Their supposedly small stature, though, contrasts with the illustrations which we find along the pages. The picture titled "Titania and the Clown" (Figure 4), for example, shows a human-sized fairy queen caressing the donkey-headed weaver while, on the contrary, "Fairies sometimes quarrel" (Figure 5) depicts fairies who are as small as flower blossoms.



*Figures 4 (left) and 5 (right)*

Moreover, Adams Britton's fairies also carry another characteristic: they are good beings, but they do not like when someone makes fun of them and can act somehow selfishly, a particular which humanises them and take them closer to human behaviour. For instance, as in Mary Lamb's adaptation, the fairy king, with a magic wand, puts a spell on Bottom's head and transforms it into a donkey. Then, even though the king and queen are given a happy ending, Oberon never regrets humiliating his wife and tricking her into obtaining the page for himself. In this

way, he is represented in a much more “humanlike” manner, a pray of his own selfish desires, which is distant from the Victorian conception of fairies as perfect beings (from which Lang possibly took inspiration for her rendition of the same characters).

### **3.3.3 *Modern fairies***

Throughout the twentieth century, Walt Disney provided children with many beautiful, animated renderings of some of the most popular fairies of past tales, such as Tinkerbell from the *Peter Pan* animated movie (1954), or the Fairy Godmother from *Cinderella* (1950). The advent of television certainly helped a swifter spread of such characters among young spectators. Fairies were everywhere, and they appeared under many forms – the two examples we cited actually display a miniaturized winged fairy, and the other a human-sized old woman with a magic wand. Within this variegated context, in which every kind of media was exploited to reach the widest possible audience, Marchette Chute birthed her own narrativized version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1956. As we have already stated in the previous subchapter, hers is a peculiar kind of prose narrative, as it gives the sense of a sort of summary of the whole plot. Her characters never speak to each other; it is only through the narrator’s voice that the story unfolds. Despite this, though, Chute’s description of the fairies is imbued with many folkloristic elements, which actually accentuate their mysterious, captivating aura. The author particularly stresses the deep influence that moonlight has on the characters of the story; she says that everybody is ‘a little moonstruck’, ‘a little touched by magic’ (Chute, 1959:40). Surprisingly, she states that the fairies’ magic is not the cause for this sense of confusion:

It is Shakespeare’s magic and the power he had over words, a power stronger than that of Theseus the conqueror or Oberon the fairy king.  
(Chute, 1959:40)

Further on, Chute nevertheless acknowledges the fairies’ power over nature. They are used to hold midnight revels in a wood of ‘cowslips and primroses’ (Chute, 1959:42), but they are fighting with each other so furiously that they cause a heavy

rain which drenches the land, and their scared elves hide into acorn cups to protect themselves from their rage. These last details suggest that Chute's fairies are miniaturized in stature, like Peter Pan's leaf-dressed friend Tinkerbell. The insistence on their size sometimes achieves a comic effect when Cobweb and the other minor fairies from Titania's train are asked to attend to Nick Bottom's desires, but they encounter 'a certain amount of difficulty in trying to serve anyone as large and hairy as Bottom' (Chute, 1959:44). Needless to say, from what the reader can infer from the narrative, these fairies fit the typical canon to which we have been accustomed: their dancing and singing have calming and magical effects, they are small, nice creatures living together in a dreamy though hierarchical society and do no harm the nearby humankind but try to help them when possible.

Of a "darker" characterisation are the forest fairies we find in three more recent adaptations, which differ for what it concerns stylistic and structural choices. Garfield's, Deary's and Matthews' prose narratives all share a similar "midsummer mad" kind of environment. Oberon is the king of night and shadows; husband and wife fight each other with potent spells; and nature itself feels fastidiously disturbed by the strange forces hiding in the Otherworld, which is the name Terry Deary chooses for his enchanted fairyland. These portrayals overall echo Shakespeare's own fairy world, in which good and evil forces coexist. This ambivalence is sometimes reflected by the juxtaposition of the two sovereigns' personalities who, according to Matthews, represent 'darkness and shadows', endorsed by Oberon, while Titania embodies 'moonlight and silver' (Matthews, 2012). This recalls Shakespeare's own description of the fairies as shadowy creatures who creep through the woods, hidden to the mortal's sight.

Garfield's fairies literally "haunt" the woods like pixies and monsters do in the best horror stories; they flicker among the shadows and carry out their mysterious deeds cautiously while hiding themselves in the darkness. King Oberon is 'shadowy', 'formidable', even 'dangerous' (Garfield, 1991:254–255). The alluring gloom he embodies is also reflected by the physical representation which



Leon Garfield himself gave Oberon in the ink-portrait that the reader finds alongside the story (Figure 6). His robes recall those of a wizard, with many stars decorating his long-cloaked dress, while his sharp collar looks like a dragon's scales. He is not followed by dainty flowery creatures but has got a train composed of all sorts of sprites, goblins, and elves. From what we get to see, king Oberon may look like the perfect villain.



Figure 6

Titania is described as a delicate-footed fairy, her long hair is covered in a million flowers, but she is nevertheless 'so wild' a wife as to make 'a sickness in Nature herself' (Garfield, 1991:255). The king, as many other adaptations show, at the end is finally able to take pity of his wife: it is as if the author is trying to serve him some justice by highlighting his humblest side, thus adhering to the representation of the caring fairy (at least in part). I would argue that Oberon's finale, which reconnects with the usual fairytale need for a happy ending, contrasts with the author's initial effort to represent him as such a dangerous creature of the night. It is as if the author *needed* him to be good and is somewhat driven to an inevitable positive portrayal of the character. After such dark comments on Oberon's state of being, Garfield suddenly shows a compassionate husband, who lovingly takes his wife by the hand and leads her to their fairyland, graciously dancing with her. However, we surely need to keep in mind that this is a children's story, which may be the reason for such an ambivalence of behaviours within the male fairy protagonist.

As far as his characterization of the fairies is concerned, Andrew Matthews' portrayal places itself in-between Garfield's and Deary's (the latter of which will be analysed later). The midsummer madness is again disturbing the peaceful lives of our fairies, as it is causing violent fights in fairyland: Titania does not need any magic wand but can send balls 'of blue fire roaring across the glade' (Matthews, 2012) straight at her husband's face by simply rising her left hand. On the other side, we find Oberon as a master of rhyming words of magic, which sound like nursery rhymes:

"Be the way you used to be, /See the way you used to see, /Wake, my  
Queen, and come to me!"  
(Matthews, 2012)

Matthews equally portrays a human-sized fairy queen who is able to cradle Bottom's head in her lap; in general, in this adaptation fairies are not given further details with regards to their appearance and behaviour.

After the story, the reader finds a short but useful insight into the two main topics of *MND*, namely love and its deep correlation to the fairies' magic. It is in fact important to remember that, notwithstanding their own troubles with each other, the fairies from the original play, as well as all the fairies we have encountered in the adaptations we have analysed, are responsible for the mismatching of the Athenian couples, but also for their final reconciliation. Oberon in particular always displays an affection and preoccupation for Helena's unlucky love life and offers his earnest aid in any case (thus nobody will ever know it was he who cast the charms). In Matthews' words, when the human world is close to fall into tragedy and Demetrius and Lysander are ready to kill each other, 'magic sets things right' (Matthews, 2012), and the happy ending happens to be waiting just around the corner.

Finally, we analyse Deary's comic portrait of the fairies infesting *MND*. The very title of his adaptation, *Nightmare in Elm Trees* (which recalls Wes Craven's 1984 slasher movie *A Nightmare on Elm Street*) does not hint at the idyllic settings which we have encountered so far. As will be discussed in 3.4, here we find a

different (and unusual) narrator, as this adaptation is told in the first person by none other than the prankster sprite Robin Goodfellow. Deary chose to put the fairies' entrance scene at the beginning and seizes this opportunity to give the narration a bitterly ironic tone. Puck warns the reader about the extremely powerful nature of fairies, who are certainly not 'little girls with half a frock, a wand, and a pair of wings' (Deary, 1998:11). This opening prepares the reader to what comes next: we will find no tiny, elegant creatures dressed in leaves and blossoms, flying around the trees while singing lullabies and dancing gracefully. Instead, Deary's fairies are shapeshifters. This means they can change their appearance as they please, thus acquiring a certain degree of ambiguity and mystery which adds up to the unusual characterization they are given in this adaptation. This also significantly places Deary's fairies, or "faeries", as Puck underlines, in a more dangerous position towards humankind, as the narrator explicitly warns the reader that, as shapeshifters, fairies could also turn into one's worst nightmare: 'if I want to appear as the bully boy in big brown boots (size twelve) that haunts your dreams, I will' (Deary, 1998:11). These fairies belong to the Otherworld, which places itself in the realm of dreams, where people are devoid of any control upon their lives. As the narrating voice states, the thin curtain which usually separates the Otherworld from the human world has been compromised. And there will be consequences.

Oberon is said to have shapeshifted into the typical human king; he likes to dress in fine garments, and has a crown made of precious stones on his head. Fairies are also very capricious, and they do not like when other creatures disobey them; they are not unused to planning 'rotten' revenges, as they can become very 'spiteful' (Deary, 1998:13). It can be argued that Deary's fairies have been deprived of any allure of grandeur or elegance which was typical of previous narrativizations. On the contrary, their most whimsical vein has been exploited in order to achieve a more comic effect, which represents the greatest strength of this adaptation for children.

### 3.4 Puck in mischief

So far, as the reader might have noticed, the analysis of the characterisation which children's adapters reserved to Robin Goodfellow, alias Puck, has been intentionally left out. When we think about him, we may almost instantly consider him as the funniest (and the most mischievous) character of the story. His funny, magical adventures possibly seek little readers' interest more than what love stories tend to do, as the latter might be perceived as more boring by a young reader; it is not surprising, indeed, that most adapters often left the lovers' subplot at the margins of their retellings, to favour the magic of the fairies instead. With regards to children's literature, Puck embodies numerous characteristics which make him suitable for children's liking – first of all, he is a *fairy*. And a very special one. Then, most importantly, all of the most chaotic and fast-paced action in *MND* starts because of him. It is Puck's fault that the lovers' pairings are mismatched, that Lysander and Demetrius lose track of their passions, that the girls almost destroy their friendship over a man. He is also invested with the important task of reconstituting order and peace – a task which he carries out more or less diligently. Despite that, though, Puck cannot be regarded as the villain of the story, even if this aspect has been more or less hinted at according to how the adapter wanted to portray him. The sociocultural context certainly had an important role in this.

Through the centuries, this character has been treated – and interpreted – very differently, both by critics and authors who adapted *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In some cases, he was branded as the epitome of the naughty poltergeist; other times he was pictured as an ambiguous and wicked character. His reverence and loyalty towards his fairy king have often been praised, but he himself also makes fun of Oberon's jealousy and silly fights with Titania. Sometimes, Puck expressed a sentiment of disgust – or utmost curiosity – towards the human characters of the story, of which Nick Bottom usually represents his number one target. Let us now move to a detailed analysis of this comic character, who

sometimes was feared by child-readers, but in many other cases (and, I would argue, most frequently) was deeply adored by them.

### ***3.4.1 An obedient sprite***

As a fairy, Robin Goodfellow can be listed among the twofold-natured hobgoblins, also known as brownies or familiars. According to fairy lore, the hobgoblin is a domestic type of fairy who performs his duties in the households in which he lives, but also really loves to play merry innocuous pranks to the people whom he does not fancy. As a servant to King Oberon, Puck is asked to go looking for love-in-idleness and take care of the lovers' fate, but he disrupts the normal "course of true love" due to a case of mistaken identity. When he does not have to accomplish missions for his master's benefit, though, he is a free spirit who wanders around playing pranks on unfortunate passers-by.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, with *MND* Shakespeare revived the interest towards Robin Goodfellow, upon which many stories have been written from the 1590s on. As far as the Victorian adaptations we took into consideration are concerned, Puck's naughty behaviour is what was highlighted the most. As Seymour states, 'never was there a sprite as mischievous as this one!' (1893:87); according to Nesbit, Puck is 'the spirit of mischief' (2000:43); for Sim, he is a trickster, whose appearance is not as good looking as Titania's and her graceful fairy train's. As we have already mentioned, since the very first pages of her story Sim explicitly states that mischievousness and ugliness are as connected as good behaviour and beauty.

When Puck wrongly mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, in none of the three adaptations is there any hint at a possible malicious intentionality behind this act; he simply takes for granted Oberon's instructions and pursues them accordingly. Bad luck wants that he commits a mistake in doing so. Puck's wrongdoings are of an innocent nature, and this kind of interpretation probably links with the fact that during the Victorian period children's authors liked to take the opportunity to

include some sort of moral teachings within their works, and not to present the young readership with negative characters or immoral behaviours – so that to preserve their innate goodness and virtue.

One of Puck's other characteristics in nineteenth-century adaptations which is worth a mention is his complete obedience to his master, Oberon, who calls him his favourite gentle servant in Seymour's text (1893:87). Obedience was a quality which was praised by Victorians, as it was part of the virtues of the good Christian; children were encouraged to become one, and naughty people were not to be taken as role models. Despite the cultural implications which we can find behind the description of this character, Seymour, Sim, and Nesbit do not explicitly or insistently interfere with personal – or moralistic – comments on the little sprite's behaviour, but rather exploit his funniest side for the sake of a more entertaining narration. Their stories do not take on the (sometimes) pedantic tones of typical cautionary tales – which were very popular during the Victorian era – but plainly give here and there some good advice to the child reader. These authors are stating that Puck *is* mischievous but never in an evil way. To sustain this statement, two out of three adaptations portray the pranks which Puck plays in the original play, of which the trick on the dairymaid is one of the most recurrent (to be found in Act 2, Scene 1 of *MND*). Both Nesbit and Seymour, like Shakespeare, incorporate Puck's tricks within his first apparition, when Oberon summons him to go look for love-in-idleness (Nesbit, 2000:43; Seymour, 1893:87). Moreover, we can notice that in these adaptations Puck does not take on a prominent role, as the focus stays on the regal fairies' and the lovers' misadventures, but he adheres to his function of resolving each misfortune and, by doing so, he gently escorts the main characters to their coveted happy ending.

Concerning his appearance, we know that, like Oberon and Titania, he is a little creature who is able to fly, and his physical aspect possibly coincided with the fashion of fairy paintings which, as we have already apprehended, were very appreciated at that time. In that period, Puck was often conceived with pointed ears,

wearing simple leaf-made garments which possibly reflected his status as Oberon's servant, whose clothes were more regal and full of magnificent dewy flowers. As we can guess, these retellings primarily focussed on Puck's temper rather than on his appearance, in order to model him according to the needs of Victorian young readers, who needed to be presented with overall good characters.

### ***3.4.1 A naughty elf, a loyal servant***

In the early twentieth century, the tradition of representing Puck as the designated prankster-maker of the story went on, but Fay Adams Britton's contribution brought to the fore his most trustworthy side and differentiated itself from the trend to which other adapters adhered. Macleod Banks and Lang's fairy servants, for instance, act very similarly. Macleod Banks' 'little imp' is 'always alert to some mischief' (1902:95); hers is a curious word choice as, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term "imp" nowadays can refer to a child who has a bad but funny temper (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.); in the past, it meant "young tree", therefore meaning "child", then later mainly referred to little devilish creatures (Scott, 1895:110). The author also associates Puck with two other well-known names taken from fairy lore, that is, "Will-o'-the Wisp" and "Hobgoblin", which again reinforce his essentially good but tricky nature – and, from a physical point of view, may recall a creature which people were familiar with at that time. In Macleod Banks' narrativization, the Will-o'-the-Wisp's attention is seized by the crew of 'petty artisans' (1911:86), whose animosity in the woods promptly results in the perfect opportunity for him to play one of his famous funny pranks and thus to give way to a series of irresistible misunderstandings and absurd situations. Similarly, Jeanie Lang's Puck from *Stories from Shakespeare, Told to the Children* is a 'merry, mischievous little elf' (1905:83), a creature who is always in a good mood to make fun of dairymaids and poor gossiping old women. As we have mentioned in the previous subchapters, we can easily notice how the many terms – "elf", "sprite", "imp", and so on – very often used interchangeably when speaking about Puck could generate a great deal of misunderstanding, and possibly highlight one quality of the creature or another.

In the public's collective imagery, the word "elf" might recall a more elegant and innocuous creature than what the devilish "imp" could do instead. In fact, Lang states that this elf is 'a good little fellow indeed to those who treated him kindly' (1905:84–85). But, in this adaptation, something more is said about the sprite's behaviour that challenges Lang's definition of Puck as 'a good little fellow'. Once Oberon has found out about his mistake, Puck explicitly expresses a feeling of delight and self-satisfaction towards the ridiculous situation he has placed the four poor lovers in – which may rise some doubts about his kindness of heart.

Marchette Chute's portrayal of Robin Goodfellow gives him a more marginal role with respect to the fairy royal pair. Additionally, the narrator leaves the reader with some doubts on the fact that Puck did what he did by acting out of his own mischievousness. In fact, when this 'teasing mischief-maker who spends most of his time playing jokes' (Chute, 1959:42) is interrogated by Oberon about his wrongdoings, he candidly asserts that he innocently mistook one man (Lysander) for the other (Demetrius). The allusive way in which the author briefly describes him, however, opens the way to a much more cautious interpretation of his nature. Should we trust Puck's words or not? The readers are left to draw their own conclusions, similar to what happened in the original play. The reason for this kind of attitude towards the behaviour of the mischief-maker of the story possibly resides in the fact that Chute destined her collection of adaptations to a wider public of readers and therefore did not exclusively think about children while adapting the plays into prose narratives, as her colleagues did. Moreover, she also wanted to preserve the originals' essence for the most part. To conclude, we can assert that we are far from Victorian's gentle scolding tones towards Puck's malicious deeds, as Chute engages in a more neutral narration which does not affect the way in which each reader could form an opinion on Oberon's servant. In terms of an informative kind of retelling, this author possibly aims at offering the reader a simpler, summarised outline of the plays' plots which can help them to engage more easily in an eventual future reading of the original texts.



Now to the outcast of this selection of early to mid-twentieth century adaptations. Fay Adams Britton describes Puck by employing her typical wistful narrative tone, in the same way in which she depicted the other fairies, who, as we know, become the undisputable main characters of this abridgement. In this retelling of *MND*, the fairy elf serves as the protagonist's assistant, as was very common for fairytales and very typical in this author's adaptations of other plays. Robin Goodfellow is the one magical character through which Oberon tries to help the Athenian damsel in distress, but instead accidentally creates chaos when trying to follow his master's instructions in the best possible way. Despite that, though, he rapidly makes up his mistakes and is happy to help his king no matter what.



Figure 7

In Adams Britton's adaptation Puck is again regarded as an "elf", he always has his head in the clouds, but he also is the 'merriest, maddest elf imaginable'; he is so cheerful to be loved and adored by everyone, as he is 'such a dear little fellow and never meant no wrong' (Adams Britton, 2014). He is portrayed in Figure 7 while climbing what seems to be a moth, or a little bat; his resemblance with the other fairies of Power Wilson's illustrations is set by the glittering butterfly-wings on his back; he is also given a pair of antennae and, obviously, a grinning little smile. In addition, he is not wearing any clothes, and he has the features of a child – puffy round cheeks, short wavy hair, a diffused chubbiness in his upper and lower limbs.

This aura of innocent childhood which he evokes maybe adds up to the innate benevolent nature with which he is described in the story.

About his relationship with the king, Adams Britton says that Puck embodies Oberon's favourite instrument through which the fairy king cheers himself up when he is feeling bored or not amused, thus evoking Shakespeare's own lines from Act 2, Scene 1. Overall, Puck's most positive features are highlighted in this adaptation: his loyalty and devotion towards his sovereign make him an admirable character, an elf who is worth our respect and admiration. When he mistakes a sleeping Lysander for Demetrius, the narrator says, it only happens because of his distraction and absent-mindedness – and no more reasons are given so that the reader could ever doubt that.

### ***3.4.2 A wild elf, a lurking henchman, and a storyteller***

There is not one single, unified path which adapters followed to adapt Puck between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. In the collective imaginary, though, he kept on acquiring some symbolical features which authors more or less took on in their stories: a pair of pointed ears, a smaller stature with regard to his king, and a quirky malicious smile. What changes the most is his decisive role within the story, which in some of the previous adaptations had been marginalised or shadowed by other characters. Now he is granted his own moment of true and proper debut. Authors dwell on his physical appearance to the point of investing him with the important role of first-person narrator. There is less preoccupation with the correct term with which his species should be named after, while sometimes more is said about his feelings and states of being.

Almost one hundred years separate Fay Adams Britton's and Andrew Matthews' adaptations, but Puck makes his comeback as an "elf" also in this 2001 rewriting. Unlike the predecessors we analysed before, however, Matthews decides to provide his readers with a short physical description of his elf, by saying that he wears 'leaves that had been sewn together', he has got tangled hair and brown skin,

and when he smiles his white teeth flash mischievously (Matthews, 2012). These details surely place Puck among his fellow forest fairies, as he uses floral garments to dress up, but somehow seems to hint at something more: his jaunty, relaxed features make him acquire a sort of “wilderness”. He looks like a spirit who really praises his freedom – and really likes to do what he pleases, as his grinning smile suggests. Even though Puck, as always, is perfectly aware of how to exploit ‘a chance to make mischief’ (Matthews, 2012), the author is also careful to highlight his best “humanlike” qualities. First, when he and Oberon watch as the lovers get lost in the woods and he is asked to find the love-in-idleness, his innocent curiosity makes him wonder if human love is always so complicated (Matthews, 2012), a question which Oberon completely ignores. Secondly, he gives proof of his profound empathy towards his master: when they approach Titania after she has fallen prey to their love spell, Puck is initially ready to grin about the situation, as he is very proud of what master and servant have accomplished together, but stops as soon as he sees ‘the sorrow in his master’s eyes’ (Matthews, 2012), and then proceeds to follow the king’s instructions to remove the spell from the humans, thus giving proof of being as empathetic as us humans are.

In Leon Garfield’s adaptation, Puck features as Oberon’s number one member of his “monstruous” fairy train. In this case, his characterisation leans more on his most mischievous side: he is described as Oberon’s ‘grinning, mocking henchman’ (Garfield, 1991:254) and, just like his king, feels at ease in the darkness. Then, the author employs one verb from the original play (to be found in Act 2, Scene 1) to describe Puck’s movements in the dark, as he is always ‘lurking’ (Garfield, 1991:256) around his master patiently waiting for his orders. Garfield’s description of Robin Goodfellow overall aligns with the darker depiction he employed for his other fairies, while also adding some details about his appearance and personality:

[...] Puck, a prick-eared child with a crooked grin, whose chief delight was fright and confusion.  
(Garfield, 1991:256)

Confusion is surely what “gentle” Puck masters, as he takes much enjoyment in making Lysander and Demetrius go out of their minds by imitating each other’s voices (all he had to do was simply to make them asleep and recast the love spell appropriately). This never-ending obsession with ‘crossed and crossing lovers’ (Garfield, 1991:265) is what makes him rejoice the most. It is safe to affirm that Garfield’s adaptation of this character is a very faithful one, as he does not add or subtract any element, but overall maintains the original oblivious nature and ambiguous deeds of Oberon’s servant, thus reinstating the author’s ambition to remain true to the Shakespearean description of characters. In doing so, as is usual in Garfield’s stories, the characters’ state-of-mind is often explicated, as it also simplifies the reading. An example is provided by the scene in which Puck has put the ass’s head on Bottom and is planning to make Titania fall in love with him: ‘Puck watched with rare delight and guided the weaver’s steps nearer and nearer to the bed of the Fairy Queen’ (Garfield, 1991:265). In this way, the reader is fully informed of the fact that Puck is very delighted by what is happening, possibly meaning that he is acting out of his own mischievous intents – and that he perfectly knows what he is doing.

In the 1990s, the children’s literature industry was unconsciously preparing to welcome the greatest blockbuster of modern times. The publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in 1997 set an astronomical book sales record for what it concerns the fantasy genre. What better way to try to catch the attention of young readers, if not by employing the most magical narrator to tell the most fantastical Shakespearean story? This is what probably was in Terry Deary’s mind when he adapted *MND* for the young readership one year after the public met the 11-years-old green-eyed wizard.

In Deary’s abridgement, Puck speaks directly to his readers, sometimes defiantly (‘Am I to blame, I ask you?’ – 1998:19). As we know by now, Puck has the same superpowers as his king: he is a shapeshifter, he can become invisible, he can also put spells on other people – and, most of all, he can deceive us into

understanding what is real and what belongs to the Otherworld. As the first-person narrator, we get to know each and every thought that passes through Puck's mind, even his personal opinion on his master Oberon. For instance, he blames him for not telling him about the *other* couple of lovers wandering in the forest (Lysander and Hermia), therefore it is not his fault if he mistook Lysander for the man Oberon was talking about. Deary's Puck is a resourceful, confident fellow – nothing really seems to scare him (at most, *he* is the one to scare others), and he also does not hold himself responsible for what happens between Titania and Bottom. After all, as he candidly asserts, 'I did not *see* the queen Titania lying there' (Deary, 1998:19). This rendition of the play gives a different perspective on the story, as everything is filtered through Puck's eyes and opinions; moreover, the accuracy of details or scenes is often altered or sacrificed in order to favour a more comic atmosphere.

Adaptations from the latest decades offered varied scenarios which diversely stressed one or another side of Puck's fascinating personality. While Matthews reestablished his link with nature and wilderness, Garfield and Deary preferred to move towards a more modern, fantasised rendering of this character, inserting him among a darker setting and atmosphere which wink at the best fantasy (and, to some extent, horror) stories.

### **3.5 Bottom and the mechanicals**

Every Robin Goodfellow needs his Nick Bottom. Their accidental but in fact pivotal encounter brings the comic element of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to its utmost expression, making it such an entertaining and funny comedy for readers and spectators of every age. The weaver's metamorphosis into an ass represents a scene very much liked by children; it is the one plot-twist which amuses audiences of all times, while what follow next, instead, sometimes outrages.

What Nick Bottom also carries with him, though, are some peculiar characteristics which do not apply very well to a younger readership. His ambiguous encounter with the enamoured, and sometimes relentless, fairy queen

was originally framed by many sexual allusions which, surprisingly, some children's adapters partly maintained. Bottom's own speeches, to be found in prose in the original play – as was typical for Shakespearean characters of humble origins – are interspersed with puns and imprecations. As we can expect, the mindset of Victorian adaptors demanded that such problematic scenes had to be excluded from children's adaptations. In this historical period, Bottom often lost his own identity and name; in other cases, his scenes were dismissed in very few, short sentences. His fellow mechanicals underwent the same destiny, as the rehearsal and the staging of their tragedy were often given no space in many retellings.

As decades went by, and societies' preoccupations slowly drifted to other shores, Nick and the workmen's comedic attitude was too irresistible to do without, and they figured more and more prominently in children's adaptations. The investigation we are carrying out will now take into consideration and distinctly compare two groups: the adapters who omitted Bottom in the Victorian and Edwardian eras (3.5.1), and those who included his dreamy adventures in fairyland (3.5.2).

### ***3.5.1 A neglected identity***

Having reached this point of the thesis, it almost seems superfluous to state once again that Victorian prudishness could not leave young readers at the complete mercy of the Shakespearean text. Even though he was praised as a moral writer, his plays were filled with controversy. As is usual for adaptations made for the children, some reworkings were therefore strictly required. Mary Seymour and Edith Nesbit, to be echoed by Fay Adams Britton in 1907, chose not to include – or preferred to fully rework – Nick Bottom and the mechanicals in their prose narrative adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The other Victorian retelling we analysed, written by Adelaide Gordon Sim, actually incorporates the whole Titania-Bottom scene, but inverted the course of events, as the queen gives the page to Oberon *before* she goes to rest. Sim even explicitly reports the couple sleeping next to each other, 'so there on the soft moss

Bottom fell asleep with Titania's arms around him, and her pretty little head on his hairy neck' (1894:27). As we can notice from this short extract, however, her narration is obviously devoid of any kind of explicitly sexual terms. Bottom's description is itself very tender (he is referred to as "poor donkey" several times); the narrator does not overly make fun of him and portrays him as a very unique kind of gentleman. The way in which he speaks to Mustardseed and the other fairies, for instance, only partly show his vainest side – 'Bottom was very pleased at being treated so like a prince' (Sim, 1894:24) – and he overall maintains a tone of kind reverence towards the little fairy attendants. We can also add that Bottom's metamorphosis is here reserved a special space and is described as a great magic number performed by Puck. As we know, the Victorians curiously blended 'scientific naturalism and the belief in magic' (Butler, 2003:82), that is also exemplified by their obsession with fairies, which intrinsically are magical beings. Puck is very reminiscent of a classic extravagant magician-illusionist:

The mischievous fairy suddenly waved his wand over Bottom the weaver, and lo, instead of his own red fat face [...] he had a donkey's head on his shoulders [...]!  
(Sim, 1894:22).

On the other hand, Mary Seymour (1893) omits *every* interaction between Nick Bottom and Titania's fairy elves and refers to Bottom as 'a poor foolish clown' (Seymour, 1893:91). For the second time since Mary Lamb's adaptation, Bottom is denied his own name and, to some extent, even his voice. His dialogues are wholly absent, his scenes (as well as the mise-en-scène of *Pyramus and Thisbe*) are quickly and superficially dismissed in the matter of very few lines – in fact, there is absolutely no mention of the fairy queen and the weaver sleeping together. Seymour only takes advantage of Bottom's transformation (operated by Oberon) to maintain the effect of Titania's sudden infatuation, which is simply described as follows: [she] 'talked to him as if she loved him dearly' (Seymour, 1893:91). Then, she makes Oberon obtain the changeling boy and undo the charm, leaving Bottom by himself, peacefully asleep in the meadow. As is noticeable, Seymour's adaptation censors the weaver the most; what can be argued is that her tale mainly favoured a

fairies-centred type of retelling. As the illustrations which are interspersed in-between the pages testify, Seymour's perspective is on nothing but the fairies, even when the actions which are being described do not actively concern them. Actually, she devotes one illustration to donkey-Bottom, in which he is portrayed at the centre of the picture sleeping in the prairie, but the title "Oberon releasing Titania from the spell" (Seymour, 1893:92) again removes the focus from him to highlight the fairies instead.

Edith Nesbit (1897) devotes few passages to the description of Bottom's adventure in the woods, and none of them to his companions. He is a "foolish clown" as well as a "dreadful monster", and hunger is what characterises this character the most. The dialogue between the clown and Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed is integrated, only to highlight his ravenous appetite which associates him with the comic element. Like Seymour, Nesbit rearranges the sleeping scene: 'when Oberon came along he found his beautiful Queen lavishing kisses and endearments on a clown with a donkey's head' (Nesbit, 2000:49). Even though she makes Titania say that she desires to sleep with Bottom, the factual reality of the scene makes us think that, between them, nothing really happens at all. Then, once Titania has been released from the spell, the narrator no longer mentions Bottom's fate: the reader is left with the single piece of information that he is still resting between thymes and violets, and the narration goes back to the fairies' and the lovers' happy ending.

Fay Adams Britton (1907) takes Puck's magic number from Sim's adaptation but makes Oberon the designated magician of her retelling ('the King quickly waved his hand, and behold! the clown's head was that of a donkey' – Adams Britton, 2014). With this, Britton mixes Bottom's canonical characterisation as the clown, but does not give further explanations about his foolishness, nor the reader gets to know something about his life. The only thing we get to know is that, 'my dears, [a clown] is a very foolish man who does silly things' (Adams Britton, 2014). As is common in many other adaptations, there is no psychological insight into this character's inner nature; he is only exploited for the possible comicality



that may rise from his actions. He only serves as the canonical “fool”, the ridiculous character who is made fun of by everybody just for the sake of a good laugh – which is what adapters mostly aimed at in children’s Shakespeare adaptations. Titania and the fairies’ ridiculous attempts at scratching and caressing the gigantic hairy donkey in this rendering of Shakespeare’s story are a blatant example of that. Again, in Adams Britton’s work Titania does not sleep with Bottom, but only attends upon him by putting garlands of flowers upon his body. Any possible sexual misunderstanding is therefore nipped in the bud – and a perfectly “safe” children’s reading is possible.

All of these considerations now lead to one single unanswered question: why did these adapters chose not to mention Bottom’s name? What harm would possibly have it caused? Being stories destined to be read by children, it is unquestionable that some changes *were* necessary, as everybody knows that Shakespeare’s language could sometimes go, so to speak, off the limits of “decency”. But what can a *name* do to harm children? Sadly, there is not much to support any convincing answer. We could infer that the word “bottom”, which is now also used to refer to the part of the body upon which we sit on, makes a pun with the animal into which Nick is transformed, namely, the “ass”. Most likely, authors who used “fool” and “clown” to define the character of Nick Bottom instead of his own name, perhaps did it to justify the presence of such a silly character, to be exploited for the comic purposes of the main plot – and is also reminiscent of popular beliefs according to which the ass is the most fool, bad-tempered animal in the farm.

### ***3.5.2 The natural target of children’s laughter***

So far, we have dealt with adaptations which keep Nick Bottom and his henchmen “at a safe distance” – oftentimes by heavily censoring, reworking or directly silencing them. Children’s adaptations from years to come, however, demonstrate a willingness to enclose these characters, whose comic potential is employed in different manners. It is certainly curious to notice how there is an imbalance among the interpretations of these characters even between adaptations belonging to the

same period, as for instance Fay Adams Britton's (1907), Jeanie Lang's (1905) and Mary Macleod Banks's (1902).

Unlike Adams Britton, Macleod Banks devotes an entire chapter to the Athenian actors, entitled "Playing the Lion", in which the 'petty artisans' are introduced (before the fairies!) while they are animatedly discussing their upcoming dramatic performance at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding feast. This scene in particular was usually skipped by many adapters: in this case, the inclusion of such a passage offers an interesting insight into Bottom's bossy, pompous attitude with regard to his humbler companions, which most surely secures a comic reaction in the reader, who is naturally driven to make fun of such a foolish character. Bottom's foolish essence is thoroughly maintained, and very efficiently narrativized: the reader can easily picture him while he walks pacing up and down, shrieking out-of-tunes songs, a stolid and blunt man who is 'not in the least impressed with the dainty loveliness of the Queen of the Fairies', but is ready to give orders to fairy servants 'with loutish stupidity' (Macleod Banks, 1902:99). Bottom and his curious troupe of wannabe actors are even reserved the grand finale of the story, which ends with an evocation of the performance of their mirthful tragedy, enclosed by a small black-and-white illustration of a donkey-headed Bottom portrayed from behind, standing on a hill.

Jeanie Lang, for her part, portrays Nick Bottom in a very similar manner to her colleague, often insisting on his stupidity and referring to him as a "fat countryman". The narrator openly jokes on his metamorphosis by commenting that it really suits Bottom as a person: 'Bottom, who was part man, part ass, and more of an ass than a man' (Lang, 1905:90). This probably links with the erroneous popular belief which saw donkeys as dumb animals (e.g., Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio turns into an ass as a punishment), of which Bottom, within this kind of description, represents one fitting example.

Marchette Chute's adaptation (1956), places Bottom under the same humorous light, even though, maybe helped by the use of the present tense, she employs a less "childish" language to describe him. Chute over-stresses the weaver's excessive self-confidence (that makes him believe to be fit to play every character in the tragedy) in order to recreate the artisans' funny dialogue which escalates to Quince's exasperation. It is also interesting to notice how the author casually glosses over Titania and Bottom's love encounter to quickly reach the final restoration of peace between the fairy couple, and the dissolving of the donkey-head enchantment: the performance of Quince's company is now finally ready to begin without further ado.

Leon Garfield (1956) prominently features Bottom and his friends from their very first canonical appearance. Generally speaking, the weaver is described by the narrator in a funny ironic manner:

Among every company of men there is always one to be reckoned with,  
one that it is good to have on your side, one whose abilities mark him out  
as a mine of intellect and a tower of strength.

(Garfield, 1991:260)

Sarcastic, overly grandiloquent commentaries on the troupe's attitude pile up one after the other, providing the narration with a formidable comic effect that intensely makes fun of them and leaves much space for their ridiculous banters.

There is one last striking element in Garfield's work, something which has raised many questions among critics. The following black-and-white ink illustration, exemplified by Figure 8, somehow clashes with the general context –



*Figure 8*

that is, a children's story. A human-sized Titania is portrayed with an ecstatic facial expression, while Bottom, covered in little flowers, looks at her with a satisfied look on his hairy face. The whole passage itself makes use of Shakespeare's evocative, highly allusive language: Bottom is said to have 'submitted himself to Titania's embrace', he 'laid himself down upon Titania's couch', and has the minor fairies scratching him until 'the weariness of endlessly fulfilled desires overcame him' (Garfield, 1991:267–268). Taken by themselves, these sentences cannot be misinterpreted, as we can picture Bottom while he takes advantage of the fairies' services and is happy to be treated like a prince. If we look at that illustration, however, the scene can generate a more controversial interpretation.

Andrew Matthews gifts us a more tender depiction of a chubby Nick Bottom mistreated by a very naughty Puck. He describes Bottom's transfiguration from man to donkey in a very evocative, graphic manner, which is very reminiscent of fairy tales, also incorporating his companions' hilarious reactions to his sight:

Magic sparks showered down from his fingertips on to the weaver.  
Immediately Bottom's face began to sprout hair, and his nose and ears  
grew longer and longer. [...] Bottom had meant his entrance to be  
dramatic, and it certainly was. The other actors took one look at the  
donkey-headed monster coming towards them, and raced away  
screaming and shouting.

(Matthews, 2012)

The reader cannot help but grow fond of such a character who lives with his head in the clouds and is not the least amused by the incredible sight of a fairy queen, nor is able to become aware of his present situation. What really – and only – matters, to him, is eating: “I wouldn't say no to some supper” (Matthews, 2012). With Matthews' adaptation we assist to a marginalization of Quince and the other mechanicals, whose names are never mentioned in the story, and whose performance is only slightly hinted at the beginning. Bottom takes on the role of the main protagonist among the troupe, and acts for his own interest; as the narrator tells us, his aim is to demonstrate Theseus how good of an actor he is and is very determined to do so. The last sentences of this abridgement follow our hero as he

prepares to submit the Duke a poem about his midsummer adventure, hoping to receive the gold he thinks he deserves.

Finally, we analyse Terry Deary's (1998) highly comical rendition of Nick Bottom and the mechanicals. Quince, Bottom, Starveling, Snout and Snug are, according to Puck's narrating voice, all fools, none excluded. Nick Bottom, however, exceeds every possible level of foolishness. The narrator openly jokes with the pun existing between the term "bottom" and "buttocks", with which 1990s children were probably very familiar, and uses it to make fun of Bottom's backstory: 'How would you like to be called Bottom? Imagine the jokes! [...] No wonder he grew up a bit strange' (Deary, 1998:17). Is the narrator trying to make us feel sorry for him, or is he merely mistreating him out of personal delight? Puck-the-narrator seizes every possible moment to bitterly criticise this character, and to underline his many flaws: he is bossy, idiotic, and a clown. He is such an annoying man that Puck even states that he deserves to be properly punished; what happens after his transformation into a donkey is commonly known, but the narrator does not spend many lines describing Bottom and Titania's love encounter. The workmen are given their very short moment of glory towards the end of the story, when the narrator says that they can finally, proudly perform their play at the Duke's wedding.

## CONCLUSION

This final thesis tried to validate the opinion according to which the Shakespearean text, when transcoded from drama to a prose narrative for the benefit of children, is able to work at its best so as to ensure a better, easier understanding of his stories, regardless of the child's obviously limited cultural background. Throughout the centuries, prose fiction has proven to be a very malleable genre which let adaptors incorporate their personal style to taste, thus giving birth to very unique retellings, filled with magic and child-friendly characteristics. This has certainly been a challenging task to complete, as authors often needed to narrativize the play's original verses into fluent prose dialogues which could give the idea of a more engaging, catching (and simpler) narration – even though, as Marchette Chute's highly descriptive adaptations testify, this has not been always the case, but varied according to the authors' desires and the historical period they belonged to. In fact, this final thesis also investigated how adaptation studies developed concurrently to the everchanging beliefs which characterised the three historical periods we took into consideration – that is, the Victorian era, the twentieth century, and the early twenty-first century. We demonstrated that adaptations are still playing a crucial part in popularising high literature among children, thus escorting them to the reading, listening, or vision of otherwise inaccessible, challenging works of art. To achieve that, adaptors from different time-periods, belonging to different sociocultural backgrounds, employed several techniques which helped them to simplify, compress, or, on the contrary, expand the chosen source-texts as they pleased. With regard to the Shakespearean drama, this intricate adaptive operation involved plentiful aspects, from language, to poetry, to content, to the actual characterisation of the characters from the plays which, as we have seen with narrativized adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were represented very differently. This comedy in particular has been taken as the focal point of this thesis because of its many appealing themes which, it could be argued, perfectly suit children's tastes from all times. It in fact depicts a dreamy world that evokes the

canonical fairytale atmosphere which, together with its fairy characters and funny “clowns”, provides children’s literature with a very useful tool through which Shakespeare can be perceived as the children’s funny friend, instead of as an impenetrable, incomprehensible author. On the other hand, as one might infer, *MND* also comes with some peculiarities which need to be revised by children’s literature authors: some of its topics are in fact strictly correlated to mature contents and employ a scurrile language and possibly problematic sexual allusions, which adapters treated differently according to their moral codes.

This thesis attentively followed the challenging, and sometimes controversial, journey of adaptation theory, which finally acquired its own well-established position among literary critics and scholars of children’s literature. Its theoretical roots originated in the 1960s with the study of the concept of *intertextualité*, which opened the way to a series of interesting considerations upon the close link existing between the modes of engagement (showing, telling, and participatory), and the way in which, if adapted, a source text modifies its inner essence to always favour the best possible reception by the actual users of such adaptation – whether they be readers, listeners, even “players”, or spectators. The adaptation and appropriation theory now possesses its own well-informed critical apparatus and a wide range of specific terminology which also helps to determine the adaptor’s motives and stylistic choices – which are as worth of scholarly interest as other more “canonical” literary works such as tales and original fiction. This peculiar literary theory profoundly mutated through the passing of centuries, and nowadays permeates many fields of our daily lives – from cinematographic transpositions of well-known books to other trans-mediations. Bearing in mind the eloquent Latin etymology of the word *adaptare*, as suggested by Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation (The New Critical Idiom)*, the ten Shakespearean prose narratives we analysed literally *made* themselves *fit* to the needs of their remediated genre (which switched from poetry to prose), audience (from mixed adult addressees to a strictly child public), and historical period (from the Victorian

Era to the modern age). These adaptations changed their focus – in addition to their actual style, language, or reworkings on the *fabula* – accordingly, and adjusted themselves to appeal their readers according to their preferences, variously employing and reworking what, in this thesis, has been referred to as Shakespeare’s best fairytale story, in order to make their adaptations of *MND* memorable for the years (and readers) to come. The time span which we chose to examine is in fact quite a wide one, and it certainly helped to capture a broader range of narrativizations which differed one from the other for many reasons. Throughout the course of this extended time-period, adaptations (and appropriations) of Shakespeare’s plays literally flourished everywhere, concurrently with a constant, vertiginous growth of the children’s literature industry – and a never-ending interest for fantasy, which prominently figures among the top-selling genres of the publishing market still today. Speaking of fantasy, *MND*’s numerous subplots certainly conveyed a great number of child-friendly topics, where magic dominates everything, and irretrievably fascinates everyone. I firmly believe that, without *MND*, we would not know and appreciate “fantasy” as much as we do today.

This journey back in time started with a brief but nevertheless necessary insight into the acclaimed *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) by siblings Charles and Mary Lamb, who established a true and proper “model” for future children’s adaptations. As we have discussed, their retelling of *MND*, as well as all the other adaptations from the collection, was primarily aimed at a girls’ public (to be helped in the reading by a sort of omnipresent “guiding” male figure). It censored multiple scenes and cut subplots down, to favour a more sanitized narration devoid of any possible immoral content. The mechanicals were utterly excluded from the narration, with the sole exception of the figure of Bottom as the “clown”, an aspect which was later taken as an inspiration by some Victorian retellings of the play. However, in the time span of seventy-three years, Shakespearean adaptations took a different turn, and moved towards a slightly different interpretation, concurrently with the evolution of society and the moral values in general. In fact, in the last two



decades of nineteenth-century England, the world of adaptations was gifted, among others, with three peculiar collections of Shakespearean stories, which we chose as the paradigmatic examples for the general trend of this historical period. We are speaking of Mary Seymour's *Shakespeare Stories Simply Told* (1880), Adelaide Gordon Sim's *Phoebe's Shakespeare, Arranged for Children* (1894), and Edith Nesbit's *The Children's Shakespeare* (1897). Unlike their predecessors, they were aimed at a mixed, ungended audience, to be hopefully delighted by their dreamy, simply outlined prose narratives of Shakespeare's plays. One of the worthiest aspects of these Victorian adaptations is the fact that, for their part, as is exemplified by the author's notes and prefaces we analysed, they gave their contribution and support to a more ungended public of readers, thus distancing themselves from the Lambs' sole preoccupation with little Georgian girls, and helping to spread Shakespeare among children of even younger age and of whatever gender, if not of every social class. At the same time, the reading context was itself undergoing a significant change, together with an extension of the agency on the part of child-readers/listeners. We witnessed the insistence on a sort of "storytelling situation" in which Shakespeare's stories became fantastical fairytales to be read before bedtime by a loving member of the family – a familial setting which mirrored the Victorian concern for the middle-class family. In their adaptations, Seymour, Sim, and Nesbit paraded the most valuable intentions (and, why not, the best "teachings"), hidden within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, offering young readers respectable role models to imitate while, at the same time, gently warning them against less admirable characters, by taking the role of affable aunts telling amusing stories to their nieces and nephews.

The early twentieth century certainly presented an even wider and more heterogeneous variety of narrativizations, which more often criticized the Lambs' model (as Sidney Lee did in Macleod Banks' introduction) and posed themselves against excessive omissions and oversimplifications of the Shakespearean plots, but nevertheless praised the Bard as the repository of great values and moral teachings.

We conveniently split this time period in two parts: the first one concerns adaptations written in the first half of the century; the second part moves through the second five decades up to the first years of the new millennium. *The Shakespeare Story-Book* (1902) by Mary Macleod Banks, *Stories from Shakespeare, Told to the Children* (1905) by Jeanie Lang, and *Fairy Tales from Shakespeare* by Fay Adams Britton (1907) are our targeted prose-narratives from the first part of the 1900s. Marchette Chute's *Stories from Shakespeare* (1956) then figured as our example of adaptations written for any age. Her sketched narrativizations of each of the thirty-six plays functioned as useful preliminary introductions to the Bard's opus, as they carefully followed the original *fabulae* and adopted a more descriptive style – unlike the other collections we analysed, Chute's adaptations almost completely lack dialogues. She also offered some clarifying notions about the characters' intents and motives, which were usually difficult to grasp from the playwright's verses only. Chute's interpretation of the Bard's plays contrasts with later adaptations. Concerning children's adaptations from in-between the late 1980s and the new millennium, we took into consideration Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories* (1985), Terry Deary's highly comical *Top Ten Shakespeare Stories* (1998) and Andrew Matthews' *The Shakespeare Stories* (2002). Garfield's "refashionings" in particular, which expanded in the form of delightful, highly engaging tales, and contrasted with the general trend of simplifying and modernising the language of the source texts, as he skilfully mixed prose and poetry to maintain the essential theatricality of Shakespeare's plays. For his part, Terry Deary employed comic strips to accompany his funny retelling of *MND*. His text thus acquires a more irreverent – and sometimes even mocking – tone, but nevertheless encloses some of the play's original verses inside the balloons, creating a funny contrast between the Bard's words and the comical unfolding of the events. Andrew Matthews similarly includes some bits of the original dialogues but, unlike Garfield, engages in a more thorough modernisation of the language which speaks more easily to twenty-first century readers.

As regards the close reading of the texts that we carried out, at this point it can be affirmed that the three Victorian retellings that we examined were overall more inclined to favour a deeper reworking of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The narrator that Victorian adaptors employed oftentimes accurately filtered the original *fabula* from any possible immoral content, sometimes by engaging in direct speeches addressed to the reader – which pretty much resembled the Lambs' intents. Even though one of them – Sim's adaptation – for the most part showed a greater determination in trying to adhere to the original plot, also including the artisans' subplot, and therefore to give proof of thinking ahead of its times, these three authors generally followed the characters of the fairies for the most part of their narration. They over-highlighted the fairies' raffinate appearances and goodness of nature, as was custom in the Victorian age, therefore often ending up marginalizing other characters and sacrificing minor subplots. Victorian fairies, as were portrayed by the three adaptations of *MND* we analysed, usually had pearlescent gossamer wings, and liked to wear flower blossoms as their raffinate clothes. The popular explosion of these magical creatures influenced children's literature in particular, which saw an impressive growth in terms of the publication of tales depicting fairies as main characters. Seymour, Sim, and Nesbit physically portrayed their fairies as was customary at the time. Regarding Victorian interpretation of fairies, we know for sure that they were not always perceived as small-sized winged humans, but sometimes could be described as tall as men, especially when speaking about the rulers of fairy societies such as Oberon and Titania, possibly to highlight their higher social position with respect to their fairy trains. In this sense, fairy art followed this general trend, but the fairies' ever-changing dimensions were possibly modelled upon the author's personal taste. Adelaide Gordon Sim is the one Victorian author to bring her fairies to a more prominent place: they occupy the very first scene of her retelling and are dedicated a great deal of attention and detailed descriptions. They are stunningly good-looking, they wear picturesque clothes which link them to nature, and they spend their time singing and dancing. Her interpretation of the forest fairies can be more or less assimilated to Seymour's

and Nesbit's: they are invisible to us, and they are reminiscent of human folk, therefore they might be prone to sin – but, as stated before, their innate benevolence stays above any possible flaw.

The three authors from the early twentieth century that we have selected (Macleod Banks, Lang, and Adams Britton) similarly adapted *MND* in a poignant fairytale fashion – a genre which was by that time immensely popular – also by enclosing the canonical openings “once upon a time” or “long, long ago”. As Adams Britton claimed, children are always well-inclined to dwell in the realms of fancy, so what better way to adapt Shakespeare, if not by exploiting the fairytale genre? This choice resulted in highly fantastical renderings of the fairy characters in particular. Nevertheless, unlike the Victorian conception of fairies as innately good creatures, adaptors from the early twentieth century started to address their more mischievous and capricious attitude, to bring them truly closer to the flawed humankind. The major shift from the Victorian moral values to twentieth century morality certainly contributed to eliminate that sort of “lecturing” attitude of which Victorian authors could not do without. Even though Macleod Banks, Lang and Adams Britton adhered to the previous well-established model which saw fairies as romantic winged beings, we have demonstrated how the fantasy element was rapidly becoming more and more preponderant within children's literature, without excluding Shakespeare's adaptations for the little ones. From what we have grasped, the reader could by then experience a truly immersive journey to fairyland and get to know more of its curious inhabitants: those fairies did commit mistakes and were not always able to fully repent and backtrack (even though their good nature is still idealised, like in Jeanie Lang's adaptation). In some cases, fairies were said to be heard only by (good) children's ears, and their presence invoked a very romantic, pastoral kind of setting, so dreamy and out-of-the-ordinary world. In Fay Adams Britton's fairytale adaptation, the whole story is told through the fairies' eyes; all of the action follows them, and them only. Her fairies, like Macleod Banks', sometimes quarrel with each other and act selfishly: even though they are

described as small, graceful creatures, they are not always faultless (e.g., Oberon diabolically puts the donkey head on Bottom's shoulders).

As for more recent adaptations, we saw how they were possibly influenced by other media, such as television and cartoons (where Walt Disney ruled over other companies). Folklore appealed once again to Marchette Chute's rendition of the fairies from her adaptation, and, in their appearances, they sometimes recall the very popular miniaturized Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*. From this idyllic, peaceful fairyland we then moved to the world of darkness and shadows of Leon Garfield's narrativization. His fairies creep in the dark forest and literally haunt the place; king Oberon looks like the perfect villain, while Titania embodies nature's wilderness. This pervasive feeling of "midsummer madness" makes its comeback in Andrew Matthews' prose narrative, in which fairies behave like true and proper magicians, flashing flames from their very own hands. The author also cares to remind his readers of the fact that fairies, although capricious, are also caring beings, who cherish peace among humans and work to achieve that, as they prove throughout the course of the story. In the case of Terry Deary, we have a way more comical depiction of such dignified creatures: this is amplified by the narrating voice, embodied by Puck. The reader is straightforwardly warned about the fairies' immense powers; they can shapeshift as they please while also becoming invisible to our eyes. Few (if no) things are left of pastime sophisticated fairies. The two crowned king and queen rule over the Otherworld, the world of dreams, and can subvert our own life.

The present thesis then proceeded to investigate Robin Goodfellow's depiction in children's adaptations of *MND*. As we have noted, similarly to the fairies, both his appearance and characterisation carefully responded to the demands of the historical context during which such adaptations appeared. Puck – his other well-known epithet – obviously figured among the fairy characters of the play, but indeed possessed his own peculiarities: he is regarded as the epitome of the trickster fairy, while oftentimes he was named with specific fairy breeds (such as the

poltergeist, the hobgoblin, the brownie or the familiar). During the Victorian Era, Puck's naughtiness was juxtaposed to other favourable behaviours which explicitly promoted obedience and reverence. Generally speaking, meekness was fondly praised by Victorian educators, as well as by typical moral and Christian codes of conduct of that period. This ethics, though, did not prevent Victorian authors from underlining Puck's mischievous nature but, at the same time, the text suggest that he never acted out of wickedness. The hobgoblin from Victorian adaptations of *MND* diligently carried out his task by creating *and* resolving each of the misfortunate occurrences that he caused to the main characters. Finally, we have demonstrated that the adaptations written in this historical period primarily focused on Puck's temperament; as regards his physical aspect, he was depicted as was typical for the Victorian fairy art.

The first half of the subsequent century carried on this popular depiction of the little imp, which in fact recalled past portrayals; it was very usual to find cheerful portrayals of Robin Goodfellow, whose nature was again generally good. What probably continued to generate confusion, though, was that there was no unanimity among the authors about *how* to call him: he was at the same time an imp, a sprite, a little elf, a Will-o'-the-Wisp. Fay Adams Britton brought to light Puck's most loyal side. Here, as we have discussed, Puck embodies the typical fairytale "helper" of the protagonist, who does anything to aid him and give his support. He can only be adored by everybody, as he is a very good, loyal, and gentle fellow whom others admire. Marchette Chute's 1956 interpretation, on the other hand, left the reader free to decide whether Puck acted out of innocence or not, as her cryptic narration does not clarify. Finally, similarly to what happened to the fairies, adaptations from the latest decades saw a Puck as curious as us humans and, overall, closely linked to nature (both regarding his bodily appearance and wild attitudes). Andrew Matthews gifted his public with a remarkable depiction of a very empathetic elf servant, who fondly takes care of his master. Puck was depicted as Oberon's favourite wingman also in Leon Garfield's adaptation, and, like his king,

he acquired some darker characteristics. Finally, Puck became the main protagonist – and the narrator – of the story in Terry Deary’s retelling. This choice let him deliberately orchestrate the reader’s opinion on what was happening around him, as he proved to be very persuasive.

The third and final targets of our investigation were Nick Bottom and his fellow mechanicals who, as we know, were often excluded from children’s adaptations because of their problematic language – and, in the case of Bottom the weaver, because of one particular scene with queen Titania which caused great distress among the very first viewers of the play, as she embodies some qualities which recalled queen Elizabeth and therefore gave rise to some scandalous allegations, as it was impossible (and unthinkable) for a humble artisan to have an affair with such a regal woman. Nevertheless, there were cases in which Nick Bottom’s metamorphosis into a donkey was on the contrary exploited by adaptors for its highly magical and, in some respects, comical effect, which certainly amused little readers. It seemed obvious to state that adaptations from the Victorian and Edwardian eras left Bottom and the mechanicals out, as these characters contrasted with their rigorous mindset. In fact, we saw that Seymour, Nesbit, and Adams Britton all simply referred to him as the hungry “clown” and cut Bottom’s scenes very short. Adelaide Sim posed her Victorian retelling upstream, as she did incorporate Bottom and Titania’s sleeping scene, but accurately filtered it from any improper content; the focus was on the magical aspect of his transformation instead, operated by Puck. Similarly, Adams Britton employed another pyrotechnic magician to perform the metamorphosis on Bottom’s head, that is, king Oberon, focusing on Bottom’s foolish behaviours giving rise to comical scenes. From Adams Britton’s time period we analysed Macleod Banks’s and Lang’s portrayals of the character, who employed a slightly different approach: they both included the “fat countryman” within their stories, devoting an entire chapter to him (e.g., Macleod Banks’ chapter “Playing the Lion”). His excessive self-confidence was emphasised by Marchette Chute, who granted his scenes a thoroughly comical

element level and humorous entertainment – even though she quite interestingly overlooked the whole Bottom-Titania scene.

With more recent adaptations we assisted to a more and more prominent presence of the funny Athenian workmen, as Leon Garfield's story testimonies; he features them in the very first scene, faithfully adhering to the original play. His adaptation also encloses the love-scene and does not actually worry about possible misunderstandings, as the illustration which follows the passage is itself very provocative and seemingly out of context for a children's book. As we argued, Matthews later gave us a more innocent depiction of the poor mistreated weaver, to be juxtaposed to Deary's mocking portrayal. Where Matthews described a pompous but overall kind man, Deary insisted on his and his friends' foolishness, thus underlining that Bottom is the king of all simpletons.

There would be much more to say about Shakespeare for children. There could be a thousand more studies solely based on the importance of illustrations enclosed within such adaptations, or about those modern retellings which have been adapted for television and their special effects, to which the fantastical world of *MND* suit perfectly. What I have tried to accomplish through this thesis is a thorough comparison of many different renditions of the same dear old story, to show that the idea which Shakespeare's stories expressed throughout the centuries has been an everchanging one, and it is destined to keep bringing on this never-ending process of mutation which, at the end, will truly grant Shakespeare his well-deserved immortality.



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