“Jack shall have Jill/ Nought shall go ill.”: The Significance of Puck/Robin Goodfellow and Gender Performativity within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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Introduction: The “Agent of Change” of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Today, given society’s growing array of gender terms and discourse, it is easy to take for granted the idea of gender being a permeable part of identity. Though this examination has expanded within literary scholarship over the years, no other literary piece quite presents the complexity of gender identity as William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* does. Shakespeare particularly highlights this complex development through his female protagonists—Hermia and Helena—who exhibit the most changes due to the confusion and conflicts that occur in their pursuit of romance. We observe the women’s initial anti-patriarchal defiance in Athens and their later, overt resistance in the fairy forest. A fluidity of desire emerges from Shakespeare’s romantic pairs as their bonds become further disrupted. But Shakespeare centrally characterizes such potential in his dramatic catalyst: Puck/Robin Goodfellow. The fairy trickster is notorious for magical transformations and influence throughout the play. Even in modern discourse it remains difficult to define Puck/Robin’s gender beyond ambiguity. Yet, most scholars still tend to overlook Puck/Robin’s function as an agent of change within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, erasing the fairy’s significance in Shakespeare’s argument. My character analysis of Puck/Robin Goodfellow seeks to prove this literary function in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, pointing to how they provoke performative changes within Shakespeare’s four lovers. Using their magic, Puck/Robin incites inherent fluid changes within the lovers to alter their gender performances, revealing each one’s underlying gender range through conflict, transformation, and disruption. By breaking down Puck/Robin’s role as an agent of change in relation to his lovers, this analysis shall prove
how Shakespeare argues the natural fluidity and variation of gender identity beyond patriarchal society’s “stable” limits in his play.
Chapter One: Fluidity, Fairies, and the Pursuit of Desire

In order to explain how Shakespeare characterizes our modern understanding of gender fluidity in Puck/Robin’s performance, this analysis must first reiterate how our society currently views gender. According to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, “true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies,” “a regulatory fiction...created through sustained social performances,” or “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires [that] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, 136, 41). Basically, critics like Butler recognize individual identity as valid, while viewing gender as a tool to maintain social order through performance. Hence, “such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 136). Gender identity exists in society as an external, altered illusion of each individual’s inner self. At the same time, though, modern discourse also sides with Stuart Hall’s critical theory to regard “identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). We observe this recognition of gender identity and interiority primarily through the modern adaptation of diverse gender terminology. While this difference between Butler and Hall appears to clash, in actuality our society agrees with both. Indeed, gender is a performance of fabricated societal traits which constrain natural development, yet such acts also change to externally reflect the inner development of one’s identity over time.
As such, we note that while gender performance does not necessarily reflect one’s true gender, the external changes in behavior give viewers a glimpse into each individual’s inner self.

This progression of gender identity is particularly noticed in Shakespeare’s dramatic plays. During his work in the Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare witnessed the complex adaptations required for actors to portray their characters accurately to audiences. The act of embodying another identity is itself difficult by modern terms, but Shakespeare’s Elizabethan patriarchal society made it especially challenging when “physical differences between men and women generated a hierarchy that came to be ‘naturalized’” (McDonald, 255). Only men acted in the Elizabethan theatre, playing roles including but not limited to animals, mythical creatures, and women. Despite his social culture’s restriction of gender, Shakespeare’s observation of men pitching and mirroring feminine mannerisms enlightened him to see the theatre as an imaginative space. Like Butler and Hall, Shakespeare imparts a modern understanding of gender as being “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions [that] is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend” to “those who fail to do their gender right” within each generation’s norms of acceptable performance.

According to Russ McDonald’s “Men and Women: Gender, Family, Society,” sixteenth-century England’s Elizabethan patriarchy decreed that “[authority] in the early modern family rested finally with the father,” which allocated power to the male population within society whilst women, daughters, and “[wives], in other words, were to yield to their husbands” as well as all men unconditionally (McDonald, 259-60).
Based on this assessment of Shakespeare’s culture and understanding of gender, then, we recognize the performative adaptation of gender identity present within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Contrary to society’s historical presentation of gender as “naturally stable,” Shakespeare argues an otherwise modern view of gender and identity through his characters’ performances. We see this modern perspective most clearly in Shakespeare’s creation of the fairy trickster: Puck/Robin Goodfellow.

Before audiences are introduced to the fairy forest’s omnipotent rulers, Shakespeare opens Act Two with the entry of his renowned fairy trickster, Puck/Robin. Readers first identify the trickster’s function and attributes by how another fairy understands Puck/Robin’s character:

Fairy

Either I mistake your shape and making quite,

Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite

Called Robin Goodfellow. Are not you…

That frights the maidens of the villagery,

Skim milk, and sometimes labor in the quern,

And bootless make the breathless huswife churn,

And sometimes make the drink to bear no barm,

Mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm?

Those that “Hobgoblin” call you, and “Sweet Puck,”

You do their work, and they shall have good luck.

Are you not..?

Puck

Thou speakest aright;
Here, Shakespeare discloses Puck/Robin’s nature and purpose within the play. The other fairy’s first few lines imply an uncertainty about Puck/Robin’s appearance: “Either I mistake your shape and making quite/ Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite/ Called Robin Goodfellow” (2.1. 32-4). By hesitating to define the fairy trickster’s “shape and making” to any specific gender, Shakespeare presents Puck/Robin as undefined to audiences. This ambiguity further aligns Shakespeare’s thinking with modern gender discourse as he uses Puck/Robin Goodfellow to exemplify the complexity of gender beyond binary terms.² We affirm our findings with the modern gender anthology *Introduction to Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies*, linking Puck/Robin’s description to those who “experience shifts between gender identities,” “identify with neither of the assumed categories or with multiple categories” as gender-fluid (Kang, 11, 34). The unnamed fairy additionally confirms such gender fluidity by calling the trickster different names, like “Robin Goodfellow,” “Hobgoblin,” and “Sweet Puck” (1.1. 34, 39). In accord

² “Binaries are social constructs composed of two parts that are framed as absolute and unchanging opposites. Binary systems reflect the integration of these oppositional ideas into our culture...result[ing] in an exaggeration of differences between social groups” that attempt to irrevocably “mask the complicated realities and variety in the realm of social identity” (Kang, 34). Gender binary systems are the most common of these systems, only acknowledging and dividing the two “[intelligible]’ genders” of men and women since they “institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” by the continuation of society through reproduction (Butler, 17).
with Butler’s theory of multiplicity in gender performance, we reason that Shakespeare uses multiple names to show that Puck/Robin’s gender is in a constant state of performative development. For this reason, this analysis shall refer to Puck/Robin with they/them pronouns. In the same vein, the text also associates Puck/Robin’s form as indefinite, as evidenced by the other fairy’s confusion about what to call them. Shakespeare ties this confusion to the trickster’s “shrewd and knavish” nature, using their fluidity to “fright[en] the maidens of the villagery” (1.1. 33, 35). By highlighting their tendency to manipulate and confuse, Shakespeare alludes to Puck/Robin’s function as an agent of change, capable of inspiring gender exploration in others. Readers may note as much by Puck/Robin’s clear yet indefinite response, “Thou speakest aright” (1.1. 43). At the core, Puck/Robin demonstrates natural fluidity not only in their gender performance, but throughout the romantic protagonists’ performances as well. That is to say, Shakespeare’s central catalyst is pivotal to articulating the complexity of gender throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Once readers see Puck/Robin as a central figure to the play, we start to notice how their disruptive nature permeates the drama through each of Shakespeare’s characters. Readers note this fairy-like resemblance first and foremost in the women, like the two queens Hippolyta and Titania, or his central female lovers, Hermia and Helena. Each challenges patriarchal rule by performing outside societal norms of femininity. For example, Hippolyta is a masculine warrior who lays siege upon Athens before the action of the play, and Titania rebukes her husband Oberon as an equal ruler of the fairy forest. Shakespeare appears to characterize these women as being prone to rebellious behavior like Puck/Robin. This pattern of masculine defiance is particularly observed in Hermia
and Helena, who disrupt patriarchal order in the pursuit of desire. In the instance when Hermia resists her father, she ignites a fluid disruption of Athens’s patriarchal gender norms with her masculine behavior. As a result, she triggers other fairy-like disruptions throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that affect her companions’ performances as well, their gender roles and dynamics, as they journey into nature. Readers also observe this fairy-like capacity for change in Helena as she pursues Demetrius. Her masculine pursuit of love presents an opposition to Athens's gender binary hierarchy. Acting in the same manner as a male suitor, Helena resists standards of femininity to initiate an intimate relationship. She disrupts gender dynamics by assuming a masculine role of power that in turn alters other power dynamics throughout the play.

While Shakespeare primarily associates Puck/Robin’s inherent gender fluidity and complexity with women, we also perceive this potential exhibited in men. Though these disruptions are mostly noticed in characters like Bottom--who desires to act in male and female roles--Shakespeare’s male lovers, Lysander and Demetrius, exhibit similar signs of performative change. By Elizabethan patriarchal standards, men are to be direct, loyal and assured during courtship; yet, Demetrius performs contrary to this model from the start, having switched his object of desire from Helena to Hermia. As a result, he causes Lysander to perform contrary to societal norms of propriety in order to secure Hermia’s love, behaving quite unlike a suitor. Though both are regarded as male suitors, each appears to perform outside such patriarchal norms of masculinity. Due to their fickle and unstable natures, both men consequently alter their preferences throughout the text, disrupting each woman’s desire as they alternate their pursuits between Helena and Hermia. Through these alterations, Shakespeare’s text presents gender and identity as
unstable in the contemporary sense of a modern thinker. In short, he uses his lovers’ complex character performances to force readers to reevaluate their understanding of identity under society’s imposed limits. He uses his fairy trickster to not only complicate the plot, but also as a central symbol of gender fluidity within the play.

As the lovers and Puck/Robin’s performances primarily occur in the fairy forest, we also associate nature as the essential space for transformation. Since both fairies and humans display the most changes within the fairy forest, it is crucial that readers attribute nature with the same fundamental fluidity which Puck/Robin represents in humanity. By pursuing desire—a metaphysical tie to one’s inner reality—within nature, each of Shakespeare’s lovers undergoes a metamorphosis, altering their perceptions of reality as they begin a fairy-like exploration of identity. Shakespeare utilizes his fairy trickster to cause disruptions in his romantic couples, which occur by magically altering the male lovers’ objects of desire. For example, once Puck/Robin magically shifts Lysander’s interest from Hermia to Helena, the act clearly affects both women: firstly, Hermia’s romance with Lysander is disrupted with his change towards Helena; and secondly, his sudden pursuit of Helena threatens to disrupt her pursuit of Demetrius. Through these magical disruptions, Puck/Robin creates conflicts that complicate the lovers’ relationships. Even as each lover becomes more free-spirited throughout the performance, the fairy’s disruptions trigger further issues between the couples. Following our previous model, Shakespeare uses Puck/Robin to switch his intended pairs, with Lysander pursuing Helena as Demetrius courts Hermia. By altering the play’s intended pairs, his fairy trickster creates strain not only between Hermia and Lysander or Helena and Demetrius, but also complicates the bond between his female lovers. The further each
one pursues a binary romance with men, the more Hermia and Helena’s friendship becomes frayed throughout the course of Shakespeare’s drama.

Following these performative correlations to Puck/Robin, we closely examine Shakespeare’s lovers as they express the same radical gender fluidity. Furthermore, this reading emphasizes an examination of Hermia and Helena’s gender performances, since they are the characters who most literally and metaphorically relate to Puck/Robin’s attributes. We shall conclude as much within the next section as particular attention is paid to the women’s prior development to friends in the fairy forest before *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. By examining their bond within Athens, readers shall perceive how their continued intimate socialization similarly subverts patriarchal order and primacy as the trickster is apt to do. Thus, we begin our close-reading with Hermia and Helena as they pursue their desires in Athens’s court.
Chapter 2: Hermia and Helena’s Disruption of Patriarchal Order

Viewers first perceive the effects of natural desire on gender identity in the lovers’ behavior in Athens. Drawing on the ideology that “all forms of public and domestic authority [are] vested in men,” Shakespeare uses Athens to mimic Elizabethan culture, with the exception that Athens is a complete patriarchy under its Duke and mythic hero, Theseus (Montrose, 64). Despite this implied deference to patriarchal order within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, modern scholars recognize that “[like] most writers of comedy, Shakespeare usually sympathizes with the daughter” in his works (McDonald, 268). In her essay “Moral Conceptions of Sexual Love in Elizabethan Comedy,” Mary Beth Rose notes how “[the] dramatic conflict of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is, of course, set in motion by the issue of individual choice of a mate versus forced marriage” (Rose, 38). Iterating his patterned emphasis of women’s experiences and behaviors, Shakespeare focuses on his female lovers’ gender performances to show how each one’s desire disrupts Athens’s patriarchal order.

Hermia first exhibits these performative changes during her conflict with her father Egeus over their preferred suitors, Lysander and Demetrius. Voicing his woes to Theseus, Egeus states that Hermia has “Turned her obedience, which is due to me/ To

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3 “Elizabethan romantic comedy is traditionally regarded as a dramatic form that can be distinguished as a generic celebration of marriage,” wherein “sexual love that leads to marriage symbolizes the ongoing life of society,” all in all reiterating patriarchal dominance over subordinate social groups--such as women, the lower-class, or outcasts--through reinforcement of gender binary categories within the traditional hierarchical social structure (Rose, 12).
stubborn harshness” (1.1. 37-8). She responds to her father’s attempts to “estate [her] unto Demetrius” in an arranged marriage through active defiance (1.1. 98). Hermia’s rejection of Demetrius displays a performative shift counter to her prescribed feminine role as a passive maiden to her father’s will. Yet, we also note how her behavior creates a deeper opposition to her gender role within society. Egeus’s view of her as an “estate” indicates to readers an ingrained patriarchal “conception of his daughter as a possession” (McDonald, 268).4 His claim of “all [his] right of her” further implies a binary conception of women as property (1.1. 97). In addition, Egeus attempts to reassert patriarchal authority over Hermia by using the doctrine that “[parents] had authority over their children in matters of marriage, certainly until the young person reached adulthood and, in some cases, as long as the parents lived” to support his claim before the court (McDonald, 267). In reaffirming his “natural” authority as Hermia’s father, though, Egeus discloses how dehumanized women are within the gender binary hierarchy, which artificially conditions the public to value women’s gender roles as no more than “commodities” within men’s estates. Attributing this patriarchal consciousness to her father’s favorite suitor, then, Hermia asserts her autonomy to oppose not only her role as

4 During the Elizabethan era, “[marriage] was part of a system of inheritance and economics so ingrained and pervasive that the emotional affections or physical desires of a man and woman diminished in importance,” thus establishing marriages amongst the English upper-class as business negotiations rather than matters of romantic reciprocation (McDonald, 266). As a result, most marriages became exchanges of contractual profit between suitors and parents, reducing women’s societal status to the equivalent of male property to be bid and sold to the most wealthy suitor.
a commodity, but, more importantly, male authority within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Her assertion of autonomy performs a masculine dominance that disrupts her father’s, Demetrius’s, and Athens’s patriarchal stability. Deeming his daughter’s defiance as a threat to patriarchal dominance, Egeus claims “the ancient privilege of Athens/ As she is mine, I may dispose of her/ Which shall be either to this gentleman/ Or to her death, according to our law,” imploring Theseus’s aid to reinstate the gender binary order over Hermia’s will (1.1. 41-4). Heeding this request, Theseus attempts to implicitly and explicitly force Hermia back into submission by compounding binary rhetoric:

*Theseus*

What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid.

To you your father should be as a god—

One that composed your beauties, yea, and one

To whom you are but as a form in wax

By him imprinted, and within his power

To leave the figure or disfigure it.

(1.1. 46-51).

Patriarchal doctrine is woven throughout Theseus’s speech to discredit women’s wills and desires. The Duke especially applies this binary rhetoric to Hermia as he appraises Egeus “as a god.” By crediting the maiden’s father with her existence, Theseus essentially discredits Hermia’s autonomous right over herself. Louis Montrose points out that “Theseus’s lecture on the shaping of a daughter” promotes the “fantasy of male parthenogenesis,” an ideology that supports a patriarchal hierarchy of “gender and power: men make women, and make themselves through the medium of women” to reinforce
male supremacy within the gender binary hierarchy as the natural order while
disregarding reality with its improbable ideals (Montrose, 70, 72). When this binary
invalidation fails to tame Hermia, Theseus then directs an explicit threat of masculine
violence towards her, as implied by his comment that Egeus is “within his power/ To
leave the figure or disfigure” Hermia (1.1. 50-1). In short, Theseus disavows women’s
desires in an effort to reinstate masculine dominance. Despite these attempts to “counsel”
er, however, Hermia retains her will against the patriarchs’ tyranny, breaking from
feminine gender norms to assert her autonomy within Athens.

We note Hermia’s rebellion as she expresses her desire for Lysander in defiance of
her father’s choice of Demetrius. Upon becoming the first binary romance of *A
Midsummer Night’s Dream*, though, the pair are deemed a threat to Athens’s patriarchal
dominance. Ergo, Theseus imposes the following ultimatum on Hermia: marry
Demetrius, or “[either] to die the death or to abjure/ Forever the society of men” (1.1.
65-6). As Melissa Sanchez explains, “Because the patriarchal structure of society makes
it virtually impossible ‘to separate the act of intercourse from the social reality of male
power’,” Theseus’s ultimatum can be seen as a way of controlling her sexuality⁵
(Sanchez, 495). Viewers witness as “[the] maiden is surrounded by men, each of
whom—as father, lover, or lord—claims a kind of property in her. Yet Hermia dares to
suggest that she has a claim to property in her [body]” (Montrose, 67). And so, by

⁵ By Louis Montrose’s literary analysis of the dispute in Act One, Hermia’s expression of
autonomy proposes a “self-possession of single blessedness,” or assertion of sexual
agency, “a form of power against which are opposed the marriage doctrines of
Shakespeare’s culture and the very form of his comedy” (Montrose, 68).
“wish[ing] the limited privilege of giving herself,” Hermia disrupts patriarchal
dominance, asserting her desire for sexual agency against patriarchal feminine norms
(Montrose, 67). The first two options restrict her gender role to being either Demetrius’s
wife or Egeus’s disposed “commodity” in death. Even so, Theseus’s final option-- “to
abjure/ Forever the society of men”--holds the most potential to end Hermia’s rebellion
by assuming control over her sexuality (1.1. 66). By offering the option of virgin chastity,
Theseus “usurps the power of virginity by imposing upon Hermia his own power to deny
her the use of her body” (Montrose, 68). In doing so, the Duke attempts to violently
subvert Hermia’s autonomy by restricting her sexual relations not only to just Demetrius,
but also further ties to Lysander or other suitors beyond her current options. In either
case, he tries to confine Hermia’s gender performance to the role of a passive maiden and
deny further exploration beyond traditional gender categories. Considering this afront to
her relationship, we infer from Hermia’s assertion of autonomy how natural desire
disrupts patriarchal dominance by inciting women’s inherent willpower to oppose and
explore beyond gender binary norms. Following her performative shift from a passive
“commodity” to an autonomous woman, this reading examines the effects Hermia’s
assertion creates within A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In particular, how her disruption of
gender norms also upsets gender dynamics, as seen in Helena’s gender performance
following the disruption of Demetrius’s masculine dominance.

Audiences observe a similar suppression of Helena’s sexuality. Before she can
complain about her own patriarchal oppression to viewers, Helena is first cited during the
male lovers’ dispute over Hermia, where Lysander mentions her prior ties to Demetrius:

Lysander
Demetrius, I’ll avouch it to his head,
Made love to Nedar’s daughter, Helena,
And won her soul; and she, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
Upon this spotted and inconstant man.

(1.1. 106-10).

Here, Shakespeare establishes Helena and Demetrius as the play’s second binary romance. Despite Lysander’s claim that Demetrius “[made] love to Nedar’s daughter, Helena/ And won her soul,” though, Demetrius gives no indication of a prior relationship with Helena as he pursues Hermia in Athens (1.1. 107-8). Seeing a chance to discredit his rival anyway, Lysander discloses Demetrius’s erstwhile courtship of Helena and exposes his “spotted and inconstant” insincerity (1.1. 110). However, Lysander’s point proves innocuous to Demetrius while inadvertently condemning Helena within the patriarchal gender hierarchy, as Elizabethan audiences would consider having “won her soul” as a metaphorical loss of innocence (1.1. 108). Since the passage claims Demetrius’s ownership of her affection, so, too, does this reading recognize Helena’s performative shift from maiden to lover. According to Elizabethan patriarchal standards of propriety, this intimate exchange of love would obligate Helena to marry Demetrius in order to retain her social standing as a woman.6 This issue is especially a concern for Helena due

6 From her review of traditional romantic-comedies, Rose notes that “sexual desire is never idealized for its own sake, never seen as by itself leading to personal happiness, never conceived as a positive value—as love—apart from marriage or procreation”
to her father’s absence. While no context is given regarding Nedar’s whereabouts within Athens, Helena’s lack of patriarchal support nevertheless places her in a vulnerable position during courtship. In the case of Demetrius, his taking ownership of her heart without patriarchal approval puts her reputation at risk unless the pair marry. Hence, she “[devoutly] dotes, dotes in idolatry” to express her desire for Demetrius (1.1.109); even so, “inconstant” Demetrius pushes Helena’s feelings aside in favor of Hermia. By rejecting her feelings while owning her heart, Demetrius displaces Helena’s status within Athens, thereby forcing her into a submissive unrequited lover role. Adding to Nedar’s absence, we’re therefore led to feel that Demetrius’s abandonment doubly damages Helena’s reputation as a daughter, lover, or wife without either one’s support or concern for her. These discrepancies in Helena and Demetrius’s gender performances present a “double standard of sexual morality” within the text, which Shakespeare highlights to critique the unequal gender expectations imposed on women’s social propriety and performance. Helena expresses frustration towards this doubleness as she recalls “ere Demetrius looked on Hermia’s eyne/ He hailed down oaths that he was only mine/ And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt/ So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt” (1.1.242-5). From Helena’s statement, we discern what Rose calls a beneficial to society (Rose, 37). Corresponding with the patriarchy’s “economic need to legitimize property for the purposes of inheritance” (Rose, 17), Elizabethan society fabricated an “association of sexuality with sin” to enforce chastity and keep women ‘pure’ for marriage (Rose, 37).
"double-mindedness"⁷ ingrained in the patriarchal consciousness towards gender, dictating that women must be completely devoted to male interests to gain "oaths" of affection while men are exempt from such societal liability. Simply, men are free to pursue or "melt" their ties to women without repercussions.

In response to this double-standard, Helena makes a performative shift similar to Hermia to contest patriarchal oppression. Unlike her companion, though, Helena directs her opposition more towards gender dynamics, wherein she rejects male dominance by pursuing Demetrius against patriarchal norms of female passivity. Shakespeare highlights this contrast between Hermia and Helena by comparing their relations to Demetrius. Though Hermia's statement "The more I hate, the more he follows me" contests Demetrius's desire, her assertion of autonomy nevertheless adheres to patriarchal gender dynamics by rejecting a dominant male suitor as a passive maiden (1.1. 198).

Conversely, Helena's confession, "The more I love, the more he hateth me," clearly disrupts Demetrius's masculine dominance in an overt expression of romantic desire (1.1. 199). As her assertion presents a masculine-like quality, we perceive how "Helena's attachment to Demetrius...equally resists injunctions of proper maidenly behavior" to reject not only her unrequited lover role, but also unequal gender dynamics which

⁷ Elizabethan patriarchal gender norms often enforced an unrealistic "double-mindedness: women must be totally subordinate while also being fully capable and equal; freedom of choice in marriage must be pursued while absolute obedience to parents is maintained; individual personality and desire must be asserted and fulfilled, but spiritual authority and social stability must never be violated," building an endless list of impossible expectations for women to perform daily (Rose, 32).
interfere with achieving Demetrius as a lover (Sanchez, 504). Furthermore, Helena’s assertion seeks to fulfill the void of patriarchal authority in her life as well. Despite being dismissed by Nedar and Demetrius, their abandonment actually pushes Helena to fill the absence of masculine support in her life herself by pursuing Demetrius, whose attention she tries to gain by any means. Audiences note as much after Helena goes to tell Demetrius of Hermia’s elopement into the fairy forest, hoping that doing so will allow her to “have his sight thither and back again” in a strategy not unlike Lysander’s earlier attempt (1.2. 251). Helena’s natural desire disrupts patriarchal dominance by promoting her latent interests in intimacy. Hence, we see in Helena’s pursuit of a reluctant Demetrius a masculine defiance that threatens to alter the gender dynamics of their pairing. Following the pair into the fairy forest, we examine how women’s pursuit of desire upsets gender norms--and, consequently, gender dynamics.

Alas, because their wills threaten Athens’s patriarchal order, further attempts are made by authorities to suppress Hermia and Helena. Through Theseus’s ultimatum, Shakespeare highlights a “binary regulation of sexuality” enacted by patriarchal society to impede upon the pair’s desired intimate relationships. Faced with the possible infringement of her romance with Lysander, Hermia displays another performative shift

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8 In Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she theorizes that “[the] binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and mediojuridical hegemonies” which typically serve as the foundation of patriarchal social order (Butler, 19). Consequently, this binary regulation is applied more often than not towards women to maintain ‘productive’ relations with men.
from a passive maiden to actively assert her will as a lover against Athens. She relays as much to Helena while reminiscing over their childhood, revealing her intent to preserve sexual autonomy by escaping into the fairy forest with Lysander:

    Hermia

    And in the wood, where often you and I
    Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,
    Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,
    There my Lysander and myself shall meet;
    And thence from Athens turn away our eyes,
    To seek new friends and stranger companies.

    (1.1. 214-9).

Along with a brief glimpse at Hermia and Helena’s childhood, the subtext of Hermia’s speech also indicates the space in which the pair developed their bond and desires subversive to Athens. Within her anecdote, Hermia allocates her shared space with Helena “in the wood” outside of Athens, referring to none other than *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s fairy forest (1.1. 214). By noting the women’s bond to have formed in nature, Shakespeare establishes a correlation between women’s subversive gender performances and the fairy forest. Keeping in mind the forest’s inherently subversive and unlimited potential, Shakespeare attributes his female lovers with similar qualities to the fairy realm. Likewise, we may infer that each woman is capable of exploring and expanding their gender identities beyond society’s arbitrary limits like Puck/Robin given their prior experience in said forest. Thus, Hermia’s intent to escape into the fairy forest holds deeper implications for both women’s gender performances, as their pursuits of
desire within nature may subvert more than just their current romances. This subversion is confirmed by the pair’s past relationship. Hermia’s remark to Helena, “often you and I/Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie/Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,” not only reaffirms their ties to the fairy forest but also shares their exploration of intimacy to readers through exchanges of “counsel sweet” on “primrose beds” (1.1. 214-6). Since this exchange appears as a form of lover’s pillow talk, we thus view Hermia and Helena’s bond as equal to, if not more, intimate than their binary romances with Athens’s male lovers. Because their intimacy extends women’s desires beyond the male primacy of binary romance, though, Hermia and Helena’s bond poses a threat to patriarchal stability. As a result, Athens extends its binary regulation of sexuality to women’s same-sex relationships as well under the inference that female intimacy may undermine men’s sexual accessibility. According to Rose, “Sexuality therefore presents itself as a paradox: the human need for sexual relationships could lead to the mindless disruption of society, but without fulfillment of this need, there would be no ordered society at all” (37). Although this comments on Elizabethan views of sexual propriety within binary romances, the presentation of this second doubleness towards female same-sex intimacy proves just as disruptive to patriarchal norms of femininity. To counter this regulation that deems women “to be less capable than [men] of keeping the humours and elements in balance” in relationships, Shakespeare maintains Hermia and Helena’s bond from the fairy forest to Athens (McDonald, 254). By continuing their intimate relationship within society, Shakespeare shows how women’s desires fluidly extend beyond masculine primacy and the patriarchal fantasy of central importance. While acknowledging the liberty of her same-sex intimacy with Helena, though, Hermia also cements her desire for
Lysander by severing ties with her companion. She even goes as far as to claim their intimate space as where “my Lysander and myself shall meet/ And thence from Athens turn away our eyes/ To seek new friends and stranger companies” (1.1. 217-9). From her claim to “seek new friends and stranger companies,” we glean another performative shift from Hermia as she separates from a passive maiden role to assert her masculine pursuit of desire as a lover (1.1. 219). Yet, her opposition from Athens into the fairy forest also highlights inherent similarities in her relationships with Lysander and Helena. Even as she places her romance with Lysander above her bond with Helena, Hermia also attempts to overwrite her binary romance in the same place where her relationship with Helena took root. She views the two relationships as equivalent, and therefore seeks to adhere to her societal role by substituting the love of a man for her initial love of a woman. Since patriarchal society only recognizes binary relationships, Hermia must alter her interest to retain authority over her desire. Thus, Hermia’s overt assertion to Helena creates a strain in their intimate bond as they assume their roles as lovers. Though this break-up proves as a necessary catalyst to progress the narrative, both of Shakespeare’s women are disrupted from their bond to each other: Hermia asserts her choice of Lysander according to societal norms, yet is barred from female socialization with Helena; likewise, Helena is denied further intimacy with Hermia due to the male suitors which pervade their union. Evidently, the women’s subversive bond also transforms as they move from society to nature. Taking such information into our analysis, this reading perceives Hermia and Helena’s journey into the fairy forest as not just a pursuit of romance, but also their attempt to reconnect with their previous selves once more. For this reason, this reading characterizes the pursuit of desire as a magical, transformative experience. Such
development is most clearly seen from Shakespeare’s lovers, who display fairy-like behaviors upon entering Puck/Robin’s realm.
Chapter 3: Magical “Mistakes” and Puck/Robin’s Mischievous Effect

Inside *A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s* fairy forest, Shakespeare presents viewers within a magical, transformative realm where women and fairies perform free from societal gender norms. Melissa Sanchez notes this liberty from Hermia and Helena in her article “‘Use Me But as Your Spaniel’: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities,” particularly “how diverse a range of past sexualities comes into view” the further they explore their natural desires (495). Human and fairy spectators alike witness the effects of women’s fluid exploration during Helena and Demetrius’s dispute:

Demetrius

Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?
Or rather do I not in plainest truth
Tell you I do not nor I cannot love you?

Helena

And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

(2.1. 199-207).

We concur with Sanchez to see that “Helena upsets clear distinctions between domination and submission” as she pursues Demetrius (Sanchez, 505). This act causes a clash between the lovers that disrupts their gender dynamics, becoming apparent during
Demetrius’s gender performance when he states, “I do not nor I cannot love you” to
Helena (2.1. 201). Despite clearly rejecting her, Demetrius’s language also expresses
exasperation, which through “do I not in plainest truth” implies a recoil from Helena’s
advances contrary to his performance in Athens (2.1. 200). Similarly, Helena also
displays a change in her gender performance as she vows “[unworthy] as I am, to follow
you” regardless of his explicit threats. Based on these performative changes, Sanchez
believes that “Helena’s obsessive pursuit of an unresponsive object co-opts the male role
of lover and the male prerogative of refusing to take no for an answer” (505). As such,
we discern from Helena’s gender performance how women’s natural desires disrupt
patriarchal dominance by inciting fluid shifts between the lovers’ gender roles. Such is
exemplified by Helena’s performative shift to a masculine suitor, whose similar pursuit of
love shifts Demetrius to a feminine lover role like that of Hermia in Athens. Helena’s
gender performance as a male suitor disrupts not only patriarchal gender norms, but also
gender dynamics when she asks Demetrius to “[use] me but as your spaniel, spurn me,
strike me/ Neglect me, lose me” (2.1. 205-6). Among modern critics, some infer Helena’s
“spaniel” to express a “loving surrender of individual identity” to Demetrius’s authority
in hopes of assuming her desired gender role as his “wife” (Rose, 40). However, I believe
her request to be a “spaniel” asserts a fantasy not for feminine submission, but rather an
atypical sexual interest in sadomasochistic intimacy through violence. Essentially,
“Helena’s relentless devotion demonstrates how, taken to a masochistic extreme, fantasies
of female submission and obedience can pervert and threaten men’s privileged access to
sexual initiative and agency” (Sanchez, 505). Her initiation of atypical intimacy opposes
patriarchal gender norms by asserting her intentions outright, causing Demetrius to lose
the traditional advantage of sexual authority. For this reason, Demetrius attempts to “run from thee and hide me in the brakes/ And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts” as Helena pursues in a “fight for love, as men may do” (2.1. 227-8, 241). Helena strains the binary pairing by fluidly performing outside their socially prescribed gender roles. Through the pair’s clash, Shakespeare displays how women’s natural desires disrupt patriarchal dominance when women pursue their inherently diverse sexual interests within relationships. Conflict is Shakespeare’s primary means of provoking fluidity. Upon having his catalyst encounter the lovers, Shakespeare uses Puck/Robin to provoke conflict, advancing the lovers’ disruptions with their mischievous magical influence.

Once each of his binary romances is disrupted, Shakespeare brings his fairy trickster to incite further complications upon the lovers’ gender roles within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Arguably, Puck/Robin’s magical influence seeks to oppose patriarchal dominance over nature as well as society within the text. Based on Mary Ellen Lamb’s claim that “the forest episodes stage the absurd-yet-compelling fantasy of a return to a female-dominated space of magic and beauty,” we note how Puck/Robin only enacts their magical influence after women assert their will against men (Lamb, 305). Viewers mark this causality after Oberon and Titania’s dispute ends in the fairy queen’s favor against their reconciliation. Upset by the loss, Oberon orders Puck/Robin to fetch “love-in-idleness”—a magical herb “purple with love’s wound” and able to alter a person’s desire (2.1. 168, 167). The goal is to reinforce Oberon’s patriarchal authority by magically directing Titania’s affection towards a mortal beast. Basically, Oberon’s love potion serves as his means for usurping power over women’s natural desires. Additionally, Oberon tasks Puck/Robin with uniting Helena and Demetrius after
watching their fight. He expresses sympathy for the “sweet Athenian lady...in love/ With a disdainful youth” because she is in a similar plight to himself (2.1. 260-1). By magically forcing Demetrius to reciprocate Helena’s feelings, Oberon thus ensures that Shakespeare’s romantic comedy resolves in the traditional “Jack shall have Jill/ Naught shall go ill” ending (3.2. 461-2). Oberon’s desire to aid Helena also mirrors that of Theseus: to secure their “patriarchal power” using “heterosexual marriage [to] protect...the “normal world” from women and the irrational desires they inspire and embody” (Sanchez, 501). Though Theseus’s conviction to enforce his own pairings opposes Oberon, both use their patriarchal authority to usurp others’ desires and set the “right” pairs together. Contrary to this expected ending, however, Oberon’s employment of Puck/Robin—one whose undefinable nature is invalidated by society’s binary norms of ‘real’ gender identity—9—to enforce his arbitrary control evidently derails the narrative as they seize the chance to disrupt the patriarch’s plan instead. In other words, Puck/Robin magically influences Athens’s couples in order to undermine Oberon’s patriarchal oppression. Ironically, they oppose the patriarchal gender order by obeying the king’s order exactly. From Oberon’s description, all that Puck/Robin has to identify Demetrius is “the Athenian garments he hath on” (2.1. 264). Shakespeare emphasizes Oberon’s command in order to implicitly critique patriarchal society’s focus on appearance. McDonald tells us that during Shakespeare’s lifetime, the Elizabethan gender

9 “Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain,” and as such negate the validity and existence of undefinable performers like Puck/Robin under such terms (Butler, 17).
hierarchy was organized through specific attire, wherein “a person’s clothing revealed at a glance the social class to which he or she belonged” (275). That is, appearance established not only one’s position, but also emphasized their gender role within the social culture. Yet, this identification by Athens’s gender norms is problematic, as residents of the fairy forest like Puck/Robin are not limited by such arbitrary restrictions. By revealing Oberon’s seemingly clear command as rather unclear, Shakespeare exposes the ambiguity and confusion gendered language generates upon individual identity. Instead, we see how the fairy king’s use of binary terms to express his will complicates his intentions by generalizing Demetrius as just an Athenian male. Due to this confusion, Oberon enables Puck/Robin to exploit such gender stereotypes for their disruptive influence. And so, they “obey” the king’s request by intentionally targeting the first Athenian man they find.

Soon enough, Puck/Robin spots a potential target in the form of Lysander. Upon entering the forest clearing, he and Hermia present another conflict to audiences. In this case, it is Lysander who disrupts gender norms while arguing his desire:

Lysander

One turf shall serve as pillow for us both;

One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.

Hermia

Nay, good Lysander, for my sake, my dear,

Lie further off yet; do not lie so near.

Lysander

O, take the sense, sweet, of my innocence!
Love takes the meaning in love’s conference.
I mean that my heart unto yours is knit
So that but one heart we can make of it;
Two bosoms interchanged with an oath—
So then two bosoms and a single troth.
Then by your side no bed-room me deny,
For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie.

Hermia

Lysander riddles very prettily.

(2.2. 47-59).

From Hermia and Lysander’s exchange, another clear disruption of gender dynamics appears between Shakespeare’s lovers. Unlike their counterparts, Lysander instigates this debate when he implores her to share “[one] heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” as they rest in the fairy forest (2.2. 48). At first glance, his expression of desire seems intent on securing their bond from Athens’s tyranny; yet, his claim “One turf shall serve as pillow for us both” proves his otherwise disregard of Hermia’s prior sexual oppression in society as he pursues intimacy with her (2.2. 47). In short, Lysander discloses his underlying intent to usurp control over Hermia through intercourse. Given Hermia’s desire for autonomy, this reading considers their clash to pit women’s wills against the patriarchal ‘naturalized’ idea that men hold primacy within relationships. Modern readers foremost note this conflict once Hermia rejects Lysander, asking “for my sake, my dear/
Lie further off yet; do not lie so near” (2.2. 49-50). By refusing intercourse with Lysander, Hermia disrupts his masculine authority while reasserting her sexual autonomy.
As a result, Lysander performatively shifts from a dominant ‘lover’ and potential ‘husband’ to a defensive ‘suitor’ as he attempts to defend his “innocence,” demanding “by your side no bed-room me deny/ For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie” (2.2. 51, 57-8).

From his defensive response, we infer how women’s natural desires disrupt patriarchal dominance by inciting women’s willpower to assert control over their bodies during intimacy. Hence, Hermia retains her sexual autonomy despite Lysander’s patriarchal “riddles” arguing otherwise (2.2. 59). Interestingly, Hermia’s masculine defiance is not the only disruption of patriarchal gender norms. Rather, Lysander’s initial performative shift to aggression to achieve his desire contradicts patriarchal norms of masculine chivalry in courtship. As such, Lysander’s gender performance causes Hermia to rebuke him, resulting in a disruption of patriarchal gender norms. Consequently, the pair’s argument creates a fluid shift in their romance’s gender dynamics as well. Unlike Helena’s reversal of gender roles, though, Hermia’s assertion disrupts the patriarchal gender hierarchy entirely to transpose both lovers to equal roles. We mark how natural desire disrupts patriarchal dominance by highlighting women’s wills. When Hermia asserts her inherent equality, this act exposes men’s inherent instability over women and even themselves when denied control. As these disturbances take hold upon Shakespeare’s lovers, he returns Puck/Robin to expedite their fluid exploration of identity. Ironically, we observe the fairy’s magical influence attributed through a case of ‘mistaken’ identity.

Capitalizing on Oberon’s orders, the fairy enacts their ‘shrewd and knavish’ disruptive influence as they mistakenly use “love-in-idleness” on Lysander instead of Demetrius. Since the potion is applied during sleep, though, audiences do not witness
Puck/Robin’s magical effect until Helena discovers and wakes Lysander, triggering his shift in desire from Hermia to herself. He expresses this change as he vows to “repent/
The tedious minutes I with her have spent./ Not Hermia but Helena I love./ Who will not change a raven for a dove?” (2.2. 117-20). Mary Ellen Lamb ascertains from this expression of desire that “[the] fairy ointment Puck[/Robin] rubs on Lysander’s eyelids alludes to what need not be directly stated: that his love for Hermia cooled as she denied him the illicit sexual pleasure he desired” (Lamb, 303). As such, Puck/Robin merely expedites Lysander’s foregone choice of Helena in light of Hermia’s opposition. Thus, the fairy uses the opportunity to catalyze his performative fluid shift from a defensive lover to a dominant suitor. Whilst their magical effect is confirmed by Lysander’s comparison of Hermia and Helena as “a raven for a dove” respectively, this reading also recognizes from Puck/Robin’s “mistake” how similar his gender performance is to Demetrius (2.2. 120). Given their parallel goals for sexual primacy and inconstancy toward women, it is clear that Shakespeare’s male lovers embody the same patriarchal “consciousness which exalts and idealizes the image of Woman while simultaneously regarding actual women with neglect or contempt” (Rose, 21). That is, Shakespeare uses Puck/Robin’s “mistake” to fluidly correlate Lysander and Demetrius’s identities as nearly identical suitors. By establishing the suitors’ similarities in society and nature, Shakespeare appears to further characterize gender as fluid in spite of the patriarchy’s hand in conforming their masculine roles. Hence we see Lysander and Demetrius display similar shifts even as each one’s behavior differs during their own exploration of gender identity. For this reason, we discern Puck/Robin’s performative function as able to disrupt as well as liberate the lovers’ true selves by creating multiple mistakes to complicate their
bonds. These complications most often occur through the fairy’s magical instigation of conflict and confusion regarding desire, as this disruption likewise upsets the lovers’ internal expression of themselves.

Indeed, we observe Puck/Robin’s magical fluid effect as their “mistaken” liberation of Lysander’s true nature incites disruptive mistakes upon the other lovers. Helena is affected second when Lysander’s pursuit as a dominant suitor threatens to disrupt her pursuit of Demetrius. Rather than viewing his confession as sincere, though, Helena instead mistakes his shift in desire to mock her hopes of love in a “disdainful manner” (2.2. 136). Coupling this interpretation with his disavowal of Hermia—to whom she remains loyal—Helena infers Lysander’s behavior as contrary to the “gentleness” typically expected of a male lover (2.2. 138). In the same vein that Hermia replaces her with Lysander, Helena perceives the male lover as her replacement. Yet, his performative shift presents an otherwise fickle, abrasive nature typically attributed to women within society, suggesting an instability in Lysander’s genuineness as a person and a lover. Essentially, this change of preference to Helena displays a similar disruption of gender norms as Demetrius, thus betraying both women’s expectations of intimate companionship. Disgusted by his behavior, Helena thus vehemently rejects Lysander and escapes into the forest to preserve her authority. Moreover, her overt rejection presents a fluid shift from a dominant suitor to a feminine lover, as Helena’s forced bond with Lysander also allows the role of Hermia’s lover to be filled. Through the performative changes displayed by his new pair, Shakespeare shows how natural desire inevitably incites multiplicities throughout each lover’s expression of gender identity in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.
Viewers particularly observe such fluid multiplicity during Hermia and Demetrius’s performances after the fairy trickster’s “mistake” magically disrupts their pairings. Hermia shows a significant shift in her gender performance once Puck/Robin disrupts her bond with Lysander, as the fairy’s influence allows her to freely explore her gender identity outside of Athens’s patriarchal gender norms and restrictions. Consequently, this liberation enables her to further her rebellion against patriarchal feminine standards to secure her autonomy as an independent woman. Yet, acquiring her sexual autonomy comes at a price: her relationship with Lysander. By deciding to leave, Lysander goes against Hermia’s pursuit of desire, thereby disrupting her will. Hence, as Hermia pursues her lost lover through the fairy forest, we see her shift from a defiant woman to an aggressive, dominant suitor in an effort to reinstate their relationship as well as her will. She particularly asserts herself against a persistent Demetrius, whose accosting she curses with, “Out, dog! Out, cur! Thou driv’st me past the bounds/ Of maiden’s patience” (3.2. 65-6). Similarly, Hermia’s rejection of his feelings incites Demetrius’s performative fluid shift as well, nearly displacing his gender performance outside patriarchal norms of masculinity entirely. As he expresses how his “sorrow’s heaviness doth heavier grow/ For debt that bankrupt sleep doth sorrow owe,” Demetrius relays his fluid shift from a female-esque pursued lover to that of a powerless, unrequited lover (3.2. 84-5). Notwithstanding the irony of Demetrius assuming the previous gender role of Helena, the pair’s interaction also indicates a disruption of gender dynamics. Because both he and Hermia perform contrary to their expected gender norms, the pair’s initial gender dynamic within Athens is disrupted, resulting in a transposition of power to place Demetrius at the mercy of Hermia’s will. Coupled with the altercations between
Lysander and Helena, then, we see an implicit parallel between Shakespeare’s couples that connects their performative changes to Puck/Robin’s natural fluidity. By using his fairy to cause magical mistakes among the lovers, Shakespeare has Puck/Robin complicate their desires and provoke a disruption of the lovers’ prescribed gender roles by creating conflict. While these disruptions enable an exploration of oneself within nature, Shakespeare utilizes his lovers to present how natural desire enables a continuous, fluid development of gender complexity and multiplicity as they socially interact with each other. We note as much based on the interactions each lover undergoes outside of their intended binary pairing, which become increasingly less stable the more they argue with one another. Ergo, we observe disruptive diversions that almost parody their initial pairings, such as Hermia and Demetrius reflecting Helena’s pursuit of Demetrius; or Helena and Lysander presenting an inversion of Demetrius’s pursuit of Hermia. Even though these pairings reflect current disruptions of Shakespeare’s pairings, none present the patriarchal model of gender norms or dynamics. Instead, each couple is a reflection in a broken mirror, displaying relationships that only hold more complexities than resolutions with their union. As Puck/Robin watches these fluid parallels and disruptions of gender take hold within Athens’s lovers, we further mark their magical effects as Oberon calls upon them once more to correct these “mistakes.” In doing so, though, the fairy lord allows Puck/Robin to set up a final confrontation between Hermia and Helena, wherein their natural wills as equals are pitted against each other in a desperate struggle for romance.
Chapter 4: Puck/Robin’s Liberation of Natural Identity by Disrupting Romance

After seeing the effects of Puck/Robin’s ‘mistake’ firsthand, Oberon clashes with the fairy over their intentions towards Athens’s lovers:

Oberon

...Thou hast mistaken quite
And laid the love juice on some true love’s sight.
Of thy misprision must perforce ensue
Some true love turned, and not a false turned true.

(3.2. 88-91).

In his comment, Oberon expresses his distrust in Puck/Robin, whom he accuses of a purposeful “misprision” after mistaking Lysander for Demetrius. While Oberon’s suspicions of the trickster are well founded, he fails to acknowledge his own part in the lovers’ disruption as well. During his critique, Oberon focuses on the fact that Puck/Robin has upset his plans with “Some true love turned, and not a false turned true” (3.2. 91). That is, Oberon expresses more concern with how his patriarchal dominance has been disrupted rather than the relationships themselves. Puck/Robin appears intent on this disruption given their flippant response, “Then fate o’errules, that, one man holding troth/ A million fail, confounding oath on oath” (3.2. 92-3). While noting the fairy’s lack of remorse, we also infer from the text how Puck/Robin perceives the failure of their lord’s plan as inevitable. Even if “one man [holds] troth/ A million fail” to live up to patriarchal expectations of masculinity. In light of learning their lord’s plan, then, we discern the pair’s dispute as an implicit clash between the patriarchal gender order and natural desire, wherein Shakespeare uses his fairies to critique the patriarchy’s arbitrary imposition of “true” or “false” gender categories over individual identities. Hence,
Puck/Robin magically influences the male lovers to prove humanity’s innate default from patriarchal gender norms. Since “there were many parallels between fairies and women throughout folklore” incorporated in Shakespeare’s work, this reading must especially note how this patriarchal imposition threatens those most like Puck/Robin: Hermia and Helena (Walters, 123). By using their magic to disrupt Shakespeare’s couples, Puck/Robin attempts to preserve the inherent gender complexities of the fairy forest along with the lovers from Oberon’s enforcement of patriarchal gender norms, which would “[obscure] gender diversity” and “erase the existence of individuals” (Kang, 34, 38). Puck/Robin justifies their magically disruptive influence by claiming the natural fluidity of desire—and, consequently, gender identity—as the inevitable “fate” of each lover. Just as Hermia and Helena are linked to the fairy forest, so too are Lysander and Demetrius bound to fulfill their desires by any means, even by “confounding oath on oath” to each woman as per their natures (3.2. 93). Within this same vein, the Athenian lovers’ identities can be attributed with the same fate for gender fluidity and multiplicity as Shakespeare’s fairies¹⁰ without magic. Puck/Robin reiterates through their actions how performative changes present key aspects which hint towards the internal growth of one’s gender identity. As such, Shakespeare’s fairy trickster merely expedites each lovers’ development within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* through their disruptive mistakes within the couples’ relations.

¹⁰ Based on literary and oral tradition of Shakespeare’s works, women like “fairies also challenge early modern axioms concerning silence, obedience, and chastity which were, in theory, meant to define ideal femininity,” as noted by his leading and controversial women in *As You Like It* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Walters, 137).
Viewers distinctly notice performative changes amongst Shakespeare’s lovers after Puck/Robin is forced to fix their first ‘mistake’ by using ‘love-in-idleness’ on Demetrius. By fulfilling their lord’s intended plan, however, the trickster ultimately incites another disruption of the romantic plot as Demetrius fluidly shifts his desire upon spotting Helena:

Demetrius

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!

To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?

Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show

Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!

That pure congealed white, high Taurus snow,

Fanned with the eastern wind, turns to a crow

(3.2. 137-42).

Along with shifting his interest from Hermia to Helena, we also discern from Demetrius’s passage how Shakespeare uses Puck/Robin’s second mistake to challenge traditional views of romance. Much like Lysander, Demetrius’s fluid shift comes in response to Hermia’s masculine-like rejection of his affections. Finding no chance to assert his role as Hermia’s unrequited lover, Demetrius thus shifts his pursuit of love towards Helena, with whom he perceives a more positive response due to their prior relationship. As a result, Demetrius undergoes a performative fluid shift from an unrequited lover to a masculine suitor performance once more, displaying a more patriarchal model of masculinity as he praises Helena as a “goddess, nymph, perfect, divine” (3.2. 137). Concurrently, Demetrius’s sudden change also reignites his rivalry with Lysander, as evidenced by the
two suitors debating the sincerity and validity of their feelings for Helena against one another. This resumed conflict between the men evidently relates back to Puck/Robin’s function within the play. Recalling the fairy’s passage in Act Two, Shakespeare’s text states that part of Puck/Robin’s role as a catalyst includes using their natural fluidity to “Mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm” (2.1. 39). Puck/Robin disrupts the narrative by “[m]islead[ing]” both Lysander and Demetrius’s desires towards Helena. These mistakes instigate a disruption of the patriarchal gender order within Shakespeare’s binary pairs—more specifically, for his female lovers’ gender performances by transposing their gender roles to place Helena as the coveted love interest while Hermia becomes the unrequited lover. Although this inversion of the lovers’ societal roles initially seems to upset the womens’ pursuit of desire, it represents the fairy’s function to “do their [other’s] work, and they shall have good luck” (2.1. 41). Indeed, we know that Puck/Robin’s “mistakes” serve to not only disrupt the lovers’ preset societal gender roles, but to also liberate each lover to freely explore their complex identities outside patriarchal restrictions. Therefore, to awaken the fluid multiplicities within each woman’s gender performance, Puck/Robin must “do their work” and incite disruptions within the lovers’ binary relationships. Hence, Shakespeare uses his fairy to “[m]islead” his lovers from their relationships established within patriarchal society, thereby disrupting their desires to inspire further performative exploration within nature. By using their second mistake to invert the lovers’ gender roles and dynamics from Athens within the fairy forest, Shakespeare firmly establishes Puck/Robin’s function as an agent of change within A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Lisa Walters concurs with this assessment in her article “Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore in Shakespeare’s A
“Midsummer Night’s Dream” by stating “fairies are feminine forces that are also disorderly agents of metamorphosis and transformation” (Walters, 124). Yet, her statement also attributes to women the same capacity for adaptation as Puck/Robin. Our close-reading likewise affirms Walters’s point, given how Hermia and Helena’s exhibit fairy-like performative shifts from feminine to masculine behaviors as they pursue their desires into the female-dominant space of the fairy forest: where powerful women like Titania hold equal—if not more—authority than men. Helena’s gender performance displays such fluid multiplicity following Puck/Robin’s magical influence on Demetrius. In spite of acquiring her beloved’s attention, Helena perceives Demetrius’s aggrandizing of her to “Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show/ Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!/ That pure congealed white, high Taurus snow” as eerily similar to Lysander’s insincerity (3.2. 139-41). Coupled with the fact that Puck/Robin has altered his relationship to her, Demetrius’s sudden pursuit as a masculine lover threatens to disrupt Helena’s pursuit of romance as a suitor as well. Thus, in their attempt to disrupt Oberon’s patriarchal imposition upon the lovers’ desires, Puck/Robin disrupts Helena’s relationship by altering her and Demetrius’s gender dynamics. Through Puck/Robin’s influence, we notice how natural desire again disrupts patriarchal order by activating women’s inherent permeability to further counter arbitrary restrictions upon their gender performances. Ergo, Helena rejects both Demetrius and Lysander in a masculine-like assertion as she mistakes their compliments to mock her pursuit as suitor. Of course, her defiance results in the dissolution of her binary pairing or possible romance with Demetrius. However, that does not deter Helena from further asserting the validity of her feelings against her suitors, which we mark as her performative fluid shift from a
feminine lover to an aggressive equal. She articulates her rebellion against patriarchal dominance as she criticises Lysander and Demetrius’s masculinity, claiming “If you were men, as men you are in show/ You would not use a gentle lady so” (3.2. 51-2). Helena’s critique discloses additional disruptions within the text, the first being the underlying effects incurred upon women under the patriarchal gender ideology. Rose notes that Elizabethan culture purported the idea that “[loved] women were better left exalted, remote, and untouched,” thereby conditioning an artificial dissociation from oneself as well as others (Rose, 21). In other words, patriarchal gender norms oppress natural identities into a narrow category of acceptable performance, which—while ideal—are impossible to uphold. Because of such socially constructed gender norms, “[it] is therefore not surprising to discover that where idealization of women occurred, misogyny was rarely far behind,” as only repercussions fall upon women even when men also fail to perform to societal gender norms (Rose, 21). Through Helena’s opposition, then, Shakespeare exposes the gender binary hierarchy’s double-standard regarding femininity, which imparts unrealistic performative expectations of a “perfect woman” within the male consciousness. In application, this idealized image of femininity puts not only women’s gender identities under scrutiny, but also the binary pairing when men attempt to achieve such an artificial model. Perceiving such a masculine pressure to conform from her suitors, Helena rebukes both Lysander and Demetrius to secure her own pursuit of love within the play.

The second disruption applies to the Elizabethan patriarchal view of romance, which does not appear clear nor ideal according to Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Traditionally, audiences follow a dramatic performance with the expectation that
a specific pair shall end up together towards the end; yet, Shakespeare’s lovers counter such a tradition, as neither male lover performs to the expectations of a masculine lover. Rather, Helena’s challenge of their masculinity contests such a development, as she opposes both for their fickle and inconstant nature towards her and Hermia within the text. In challenging both men, Helena expresses Shakespeare’s critique of the patriarchal gender order’s flaws and failings for the performative development of its people. Through Puck/Robin’s magically disruptive influence, Shakespeare exposes the artificial stability of patriarchal society, and subsequently traditional views of romance due to its reliance on constructed standards for gender performance. For this reason, we regard Puck/Robin’s magical mistakes as a means not only to disrupt the patriarchal gender order, but also to aid women’s and men’s fluid exploration of identity beyond its artificial limits of acceptable performance or relationships. And so, this analysis marks the significance of the fairy magically altering Shakespeare’s male lovers to provoke conflicts of desire between men and women. Simply put, any and all possible binary pairings between Shakespeare’s lovers are disrupted. As the possibility of romance with Demetrius is severed for her, then, Helena becomes free to explore her gender identity beyond her role in Athens. Along with shifting her to perform as an aggressive lover, however, Helena also fluidly shifts her desire to Hermia in a renewal of their same-sex intimate bond. Yet, this renewal invokes not only the female lovers’ latent feelings for each other, but also dormant issues in their relationship as well.

In the aftermath of Puck/Robin’s liberation of Shakespeare’s couples, we observe how Helena’s aggressive pursuit of Hermia incites a clash that disrupts the dynamics within their bond. While Shakespeare’s focus on women’s same-sex intimacy clearly
counters the romantic-comedy\textsuperscript{11} tradition, he uses the pair’s conflict to critically validate their feminine bond as equal to his binary romances within \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}. This value is displayed when Helena lashes out at Hermia:

\begin{quote}
Helena

Injurious Hermia, most ungrateful maid!

Have you conspired, have you with these contrived

To bait me with this foul derision?

Is all the counsel that we two have shared,

The sisters’ vows, the hours that we have spent,

When we have chid the hasty-footed time

For parting us—O, is all forgot?

All schooldays’ friendship, childhood innocence?

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,

Have with our needles created both one flower,

Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,

Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} As most romantic-comedies followed a narrative template during Shakespeare’s period, it was--and somewhat still is--considered within modern discourse that “[romantic] comedy, then, dramatizes that longing for a happy ending which is a wish-fulfillment fantasy of attaining all of one’s desires without social, emotional, or moral cost” (Rose, 27). Though most of Shakespeare’s works end in marriage or the promise of one, this literary concept does not subtract from his radical, contemporary messages, but rather enhances their nuance.
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds
Had been incorporate. So we grew together
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted
But yet an union in partition,
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;
So with two seeming bodies but one heart,
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,
Due but to one and crowned with one crest.
And will you rend our ancient love asunder
To join with men in scorning your poor friend?

(3.2. 195-216)

Readers shall note amongst details regarding their prior intimacy a more in-depth understanding of their relationship than established by Hermia. In fact, allusion of their bond as “Like to a double cherry, seeming parted/ But yet an union in partition/ Two lovely berries molded on one stem/ So with two seeming bodies but one heart” implies that the intimacy between Shakespeare’s women nearly overshadows their relations with either male lover (3.2. 209-12). And yet, the violent nature of their clash seems to suggest otherwise as multiple disruptions surface to upset their relationship’s stability. Within her speech, Helena expresses such fluid complexities as she accuses her “most ungrateful maid” to “Have you conspired, have you with these contrived/ To bait me with this foul derision?” over her attempts to achieve romantic desire (3.2. 195-7, 216). While expressing her hurt feelings, Helena also appears to mistake Hermia’s presence during both men’s courtship as proof of her collaboration in mocking Helena. This she takes to
be Hermia’s second betrayal of their same-sex intimacy. Perceiving another potential
disruption and disavowal of her pursuit of romance from her companion, Helena is forced
to assert the validity of her affections against Hermia, acting as both a suitor and equal.
Despite her display of masculine aggression, though, Helena’s accusation discloses not
only an underlying pain at the loss of one bond, but also an uncertainty regarding her
current relationship to Hermia. Melissa Sanchez chalks this instability to the patriarchal
gender hierarchy’s restriction of women’s socialization within society, thus making “each
woman’s subjective experience...inaccessible to the other” (Sanchez, 503). Based on this
theory, we discern Helena’s aggressive reassertion as an attempt to explicitly yet
implicitly express the sincerity of her love for Hermia as a traditional masculine suitor.
Helena expresses her romantic desire in two forms: first, explicitly by reminiscing about
their relationship being as close as “like two artificial gods” prior to Lysander or
Demetrius (3.2. 203); second, implicitly through attacks towards Hermia’s loyalty, such
as when she asks “is all forgot?/ All schooldays’ friendship, childhood innocence?” of
their bond since pursuing her romance with Lysander (3.2. 201-2). Reiteration of their
once-close bond attempts to evoke Hermia’s lingering attachment towards her friend.
However, since each woman’s own feelings are inaccessible to the other, Helena
combines these personal memories with accusations to impart doubts towards Hermia’s
romantic desires with her own to renew their relationship. This assertion is evidently
similar to Lysander’s demand for intimacy in both masculine aggression and discord from
patriarchal norms of masculinity. In this sense, “Helena’s exchanges with Demetrius and
Hermia reveals that women’s unapologetically perverse desires—whether for women or
for men—can threaten ideals of proper, ‘normal’ sexuality” along with patriarchal
standards of feminine or masculine performance (Sanchez, 506). Ergo, we find Helena’s confession to Hermia to be a masculine expression of romantic desire. Ironically, Helena’s passage presents a masculine assertion of romance not as a suitor, but more like that of either Lysander or Demetrius as being outside patriarchal gender norms. As such, Helena’s pursuit of Hermia proves disruptive not only to the patriarchal gender order, but to Hermia’s autonomous choice as well. That is to say, Helena performatively shifts to become the very type of masculine suitor she despises in her final pursuit of romance.

Through Hermia and Helena’s performative fluid changes, Shakespeare presents a challenge to the patriarchal gender hierarchy of his Elizabethan society. As this structure appeared most often within romantic-comedies, the author directs his critique towards the literary tradition that “Jack shall have Jill” within his play (3.2. 461). As Helena reasserts her pursuit of romance with Hermia, however, she inadvertently makes the mistake of challenging Hermia’s will for having “join[ed] with men in scorning your poor friend” (3.2. 216). Her comment comes right after Hermia confronts Lysander, to which he expresses no remorse towards his change in preference; moreover, he confirms the end of their binary romance together within the narrative, thereby disrupting Hermia’s will by performing outside societal standards of masculine loyalty. Consequently, Lysander’s rejection of her natural desire disrupts Hermia’s will, forcing her to performatively shift from an equal to an unrequited lover. Even so, the devastation of her lost relationship does not diminish Hermia’s inherent masculine aggression. Instead, this loss inspires the female lover to reassert her will against anyone in the way of her chosen romance. As Hermia has clearly chosen Lysander over Helena, she seeks to retain this pairing regardless of any lingering attachments for her companion. Believing Helena to be the
cause of Lysander’s separation, Hermia thus turns her fury upon her friend, presenting to readers an aggressive clash between two masculine-like rivals. Though some literary critics mark this dispute as another of Puck/Robin’s disruptions, this literary analysis agrees with Sanchez that “the competition between Helena and Hermia as evidence of the intensity of their bonds to each other, not a sign of those bonds...coming undone” (Sanchez, 504). Though each woman performs in an aggressive or volatile manner, Shakespeare uses such an intense dispute to highlight the intensity of his female lovers’ relationship. Given the multiple issues that emerge during the pair’s conflict, we discern how such an intense “break-up” reignites inherent fluid multiplicities within women’s gender performances, more so by disrupting such an intense same-sex bond than by separating a traditional romance. As such, this reading infers how Puck/Robin’s mistakes upon Shakespeare’s couples further disrupts patriarchal order by inciting lingering homosocial feelings within their relationship to complicate each woman’s pursuit of natural desire.

By reigniting Hermia and Helena’s latent feelings, Shakespeare instigates a conflict between the women that subsequently incites multiple problems as well as gender complexities to resurface within their bond. Helena’s accusations incite Hermia’s performative development, as the latter mistakes her reference of their time as “one” before as the “realization of a beloved’s inaccessibility [being] felt as a betrayal that provokes suspicion and anger” (Sanchez, 503). Interpreting Helena’s comments as yet another rejection, then, Hermia takes the initiative to end their same-sex intimacy herself, thus reasserting her will upon her own terms as an autonomous lover. We note this performative development when Hermia attempts to attack Helena, shouting “O me! You
juggler! You cankerblossom!/ You thief of love!” in a complete rebellion against patriarchal norms of femininity (3.2. 282-3). Indeed, by Helena’s comment “O, when she is angry, she is keen and shrewd/ She was a vixen when she went to school/ And though she be but little, she is fierce,” Shakespeare uses Puck/Robin’s magical ‘mistakes’ to incite Hermia’s inherently violent and aggressive multiplicities within her gender performance (3.2. 323-5). In response to Hermia’s violent rejection, Helena’s romantic desire towards her former-companion becomes disrupted as their same-sex intimacy is severed once again. Accordingly, this disruption forces Helena to shift her gender role from an aggressive masculine suitor to an unrequited rival to combat Hermia’s violent nature. Due to Puck/Robin’s second mistake, then, not only are the female lovers’ romances with their respective men disrupted, but also their bond to each other. Such complications occur in their relationship as the women’s gender roles and dynamics fluidly shift from potential lovers to bitter rivals. In spite of these multiplicities and complexities in their relationship, Shakespeare critically upholds the inherent depth of their same-sex intimate bond, which considering “Helena’s memories of harmony and hostility” evidenced in their performance “indicate [an] ambivalence and complexity that inflect almost all intimate relations” (Sanchez, 504). For example, to allow Hermia to assume her desired feminine role as maiden, he articulates through Helena’s gender performance “an image of a courtly, melancholy, obsessive lover, doomed to frustration and rejection, a little foolish for putting so much hope and faith in the desire for a woman,” or man in a mimicry of a masculine suitor when forging their romance (Rose, 21). Therefore, in spite of the volatility of their bond, this reading determines from Hermia and Helena’s conflict Shakespeare’s critical assertion of the inherent fluid
multiplicity of each individual’s gender identity. While noting the artificial gender traits presented within each lover’s performance, Shakespeare uses his fairy trickster’s mistakes to highlight where his male and female characters differ from societal norms. Thus, contrasting each lover’s gender performance within conflict holds significance to mark their performative fluid changes and multiple adaptations throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Since Shakespeare attributes his lovers’ inherent multiplicity within performance to Puck/Robin, we may thus associate the potential for mistakes to human nature as well. Essentially, that each individual’s gender “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow…[but] rather...tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” as each of the Athenians has undergone throughout the play (Butler, 140). From Hermia and Helena’s conflict, then, we thus determine how natural desire disrupts patriarchal order by inciting multiple mistakes within each individual, thereby forcing all the lovers to fluidly adapt their gender identities in a permeable exploration of nature. Given Shakespeare’s understanding of humanity’s natural fluidity of gender and desire, we can more clearly understand Puck/Robin’s function within the text as they proceed to perform alongside the Athenian couples.

With Puck/Robin’s complete disruption of both binary pairs, Shakespeare turns his drama towards Athens, intent to complete his characters’ transformations within society. Upon seeing the disruptions incited in the Athenian lovers, Oberon becomes furious with Puck/Robin’s tricks and “knaveries willfully” done to oppose his patriarchal authority (3.2. 346). To resolve such insolence, he commands Puck/Robin to finally amend their “mistakes” and magically restore the right pairs to Athens. Readers may
perceive the fairy trickster’s obedience to Oberon as acquiescing to patriarchal
dominance over desire; contrary to this assumption, I believe Shakespeare returns to
Athens in order to directly challenge the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Using Puck/Robin
to transition his lovers back to Athens, Shakespeare attempts to disrupt the patriarchal
gender order’s stability through his couples, whose altered gender performances act as
proxies of his true agent of change. For this reason, the fairy trickster complies with
reuniting Shakespeare’s intended binary pairs, enacting a final “mistake” to mislead the
lovers’ perceptions in their own gender performance. As “Puck associates acting and the
theatre with [their] ability to transform” (Walters, 119), Shakespeare likewise associates
the fairy with this same fluid multiplicity as they mimic Lysander and Demetrius’s
masculine behaviors, calling “Here, villain; drawn and ready” or “Come, recreant; come,
thou child/ I’ll whip thee with a rod. He is defiled/ That draws a sword on thee” (3.2. 402,
409-11). By luring the male lovers through such taunts and challenges, Puck/Robin
performs a parody12 of masculinity, highlighting the artificiality of Lysander and
Demetrius’s performative behaviors throughout the play. Moreover, we notice from the
fairy trickster’s portrayal of masculinity the inherent ease in which gender may shift to
integrate multiple behaviors within one’s performance. Right before Puck/Robin begins
taunting the male lovers, neither the fairy nor Lysander or Demetrius present within the
patriarchal standard of masculinity. Rather, the latter two perform outside such gender
norms as primarily fickle and aggressive in their romantic pursuits, only adopting

12 “The notion of gender parody...is of the very notion of an original,” and thus by
mimicking patriarchal standards of masculine gender performance Puck/Robin mocks
gender binary notions of ‘original’ or ‘true’ performance (Butler, 138).
society’s approved masculine behaviors the instant they perceive their masculinity challenged by the other. Essentially, Lysander and Demetrius don’t transform their gender identities, but merely perform as masculine rivals just as Puck/Robin acts to mislead them. Considering these three parodies of masculinity, then, we further discern from Shakespeare’s text his modern thinking regarding gender performance and identity. Specifically, we apply Butler’s critical theory that “gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 24). Based on the causal performative changes presented by Shakespeare’s male lovers and Puck/Robin, this reading perceives how gender performance and identity differentiate, but are also mutually constitutive in the development of individual identity. This development of identity first occurs externally by adopting gender norms within society, then internally by exploring or adapting gender qualities into one’s nature. As such, Puck/Robin displays the inherent fluidity of gender identity as they attempt to disrupt Athens’s patriarchal gender order. The fairy instigates their disruption by parodying both Lysander and Demetrius’s behaviors, thus luring all the lovers into the clearing. Once present, Puck/Robin casts a last magical influence upon Shakespeare’s couples, putting them to sleep. When they awake, Lysander, Hermia and Helena’s natural desires are restored.

Through this final “mistake,” Shakespeare uses his fairy to magically resume the romantic-comedy conclusion. Traditionally, this follows the patriarchal expectation of a binary romance, noted by Puck/Robin as “Jack shall have Jill/ Naught shall go ill” (3.2. 461). However, not all is completely restored to the play’s original setting. Given the women’s intense clash as rivals and the men’s fickle inconstancy as suitors, each of the lovers’ performative fluid changes remain even as they return to Athens. For example,
when confronted by Theseus and Egeus about their escape from Athens, Lysander admits to his and Hermia’s deception, as well as confirming his contrary gender performance from patriarchal standards of masculinity. At the same time, Demetrius confesses to his own fickle nature, admitting that his “love to Hermia/ Melted as the snow” during his pursuit of the couple (4.1. 164-5). In line with this admission to his inconstancy, Demetrius professes his shift in affection towards Helena, which he compares to as a return of “health, come to my natural taste” from his previous pursuit of Hermia (4.1. 173). Whilst Hermia and Helena also exhibit performative changes, we first note such remnants of their natural fluidity from Lysander and Demetrius, particularly since the latter’s renewed desire for Helena retains Puck/Robin’s magical influence. Shakespeare’s text also implies this inherent quality with the fairy’s transition into society. Inside Theseus’s court in Athens, Puck/Robin fluidly shifts to a feminine gender performance, claiming “Not a mouse/ Shall disturb this hallowed house/ I am sent with broom before/ To sweep the dust behind the door” as they clean the entrance while awaiting the reconciled fairy nobles (5.1. 382-5). Since Puck/Robin’s “primary role appears to have been the performance of particularly onerous household tasks” in folklore, the fairy’s performative shift to a woman’s role seems to implicate remnants of nature within the lovers, especially within Shakespeare’s female lovers (Lamb, 295). This extension is further corroborated by the fact that in literary discourse “[fairies] were associated with femininity insofar as house fairies occupied traditional female work spaces performing domestic chores” (Walters, 123). By acting as a woman within the societal realm, Puck/Robin extends the inherent potential for change to both Hermia and Helena’s gender performances in society. Shakespeare essentially demonstrates through Puck/Robin’s
shifts how natural “performance…plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the
performer and the gender that is being performed,” “suggest[ing] a dissonance not only
between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (Butler,
138). Considering the fairy’s association with acting, we may also attribute such gender
fluidity to the theatre as well, which is particularly relevant to Hermia and Helena’s
characters being originally performed by men. And so, Shakespeare extends the
multiplicity of gender identity as innate within his characters, overwriting dramatic
tradition even as the play concludes under patriarchal order. Lisa Walters argues as
much in her literary article “Monstrous Births and Imaginations: Authorship and Folklore
in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream," wherein she similarly notes how “[the]
text suggests that ideas from the imagination, and by implication the theatre, can
influence and affect society” since “the fairies do alter the socio-economic order at the
conclusion of the play” as “Demetrius is still under a fairy love spell when he marries
Helena” (Walters, 132). By keeping Demetrius under their magical influence, Puck/Robin

13 Although the play concludes according to the traditional romantic-comedy format,
Shakespeare does not default from his modern thinking. By returning to Athens,
Shakespeare actually transfers such performative development through his transformed
lovers, as their “perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an
openness to resignification and recontextualization” even beyond nature (Butler, 138). As
such, Shakespeare uses his characters’ performances to “[ask] his audience to think
critically about the fundamental arbitrariness of the English—indeed, of any—social
system,” no matter the setting (McDonald, 277).
establishes a fluid connection to the fairy forest, thereby extending an underlying link to each lovers’ performative development in Athens as well. Though their romances are fulfilled within society, this bond to nature indicates significant changes within their relationships. Hermia is able to assert her autonomous choice for Lysander and effectively oppose her father Egeus’s power. Simultaneously, Helena achieves her desired romance with a magically enamored Demetrius, allowing her more power as well as authority over whose desires hold primacy within their relationship. That is, Puck/Robin’s magical influence of Shakespeare’s lovers disrupts the patriarchal gender order completely, allowing women to hold equal or dominant roles within their relationships to men.
Conclusion: The Contemporary Significance of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and fairy trickster, Puck/Robin

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has maintained popularity for generations because of its radical understanding of human nature. Although primary focus is directed towards his romances, Shakespeare articulates his critical understanding of gender and identity within his lovers’ performances through his central catalyst: Puck/Robin Goodfellow. Due to the lasting performative fluid changes presented in Shakespeare’s couples, this reading ultimately defines “[the] figure of [Puck/Robin Goodfellow]...as a ‘deeply disruptive force’ that provides a relation with ‘the standards of normality that proves to be uncontainable and ultimately unknowable’” in the eyes of patriarchal society (Walters, 145). This indefinite capacity for adaptation applies not only to their function as an agent of change, but also to each mischievous mistake they made. Through the fairy trickster’s role as an agent of change, modern readers are able to discern their own inherent fluidity of desire in their day-to-day exploration and development of identity. In using his characters to articulate this inherent development, Shakespeare extends his thinking into the audience’s realm of understanding, where he critically deconstructs the patriarchal gender order by displaying the inherent gender fluidity of each lover. As Puck/Robin’s nature and realm relates to the theatre, so too do we most clearly identify the fluid multiplicity of gender identity within Shakespeare’s imaginative realm: the theatre. While our current culture has progressed to extend this understanding of gender to media and discourse, Shakespeare initiated this extension into public awareness through the Elizabethan theatre. In doing so, he inspired individuals--men, women, and others alike--to critically explore their true selves beyond the prescribed limitations of
patriarchal, or any social order. As such, we may consider Puck/Robin as a contemporary representation of humanity’s inherent potential to expand and adapt beyond societal conditions throughout the life-long development of individual identity. Be it gender, character or merely one’s preferences, Shakespeare attributes each individual with the inherent potential for fluidity, thereby fulfilling his own desire to connect to audiences beyond his time.
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