

The Sun, the Moon, and Three New Sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Marianne Kimura

The orthodox view on sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that there is “no source known for the main plot” as my *The Riverside Shakespeare* claims (Evans 51). Shakespeare Online agrees, asserting that:

There is no known source for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As with *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to have been entirely a product of Shakespeare's own imagination. But although there is no specific text upon which Shakespeare relied, we can see threads of earlier narratives woven throughout the play. In constructing the characters Theseus and Hippolyta, Shakespeare no doubt had in mind a story by the literary genius, Geoffrey Chaucer. In Chaucer's masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, or, more specifically, in the *Knight's Tale*, we are introduced to Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his wife, Ypolita, the Queen of the Amazons.¹

Shakespeare Comes Alive!, a site run by San Diego State University, Similarly concludes that:

Bottom's humorous plight of being changed into an ass could have been

1 <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sources/mssources.html>

inspired by Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, which was written in the second century but translated into English in 1566. In the story, a man named Lucius is changed completely into a donkey, and one of the many things that happens to him is that a woman then falls in love with him, adorns him and showers him with accoutrement, before she uses his donkey-sized phallus for her sexual pleasure. Aside from *The Golden Ass* and the storyline of the actors performing Pyramus and Thisbe, there are no other works that one can decisively conclude were used as inspiration for major plot points, such as Oberon and Titania's conflict over possession of the changeling, or the four mismatched lovers and their enchantments.

In this paper refuting the orthodox point of view, I would like to propose three new sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Birds* by Aristophanes, and *Gli Eroici Furori* by Giordano Bruno, and the "Diana and Actaeon" story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

***The Birds*²**

"Latin translations of (Aristophanes') plays by Andreas Divus (Venice 1528) were circulated widely throughout Europe in the Renaissance and these were soon followed by translations and adaptations in modern languages" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes>). Shakespeare was born in 1564 and began to be active in London in the early 1590s, making it entirely possible that he found a copy of *The Birds* in either Latin or English there.

The setting in both plays is Athens during classical times. Thus we are in the

2 I first proposed this theory in a paper published by Tsukuba University's *Area Studies Journal*, but I wrote about it in more detail in *Essays and Studies* (March, 2016) published by Kyoto Women's University: https://www.academia.edu/17016501/Did_Shakespeare_Use_Aristophanes_The_Birds_as_a_Source_for_A_Midsummer_Night_s_Dream

same pagan land in both plays. Second, in Aristophanes' comedy, two characters, Euelpides and Peisthetaerus, are looking for a better place to live than Athens ("not greater (than Athens), but just easier to live in" (Aristophanes, 159)), recalling the miseries with land and place that Titania has listed in her long 'complaint' speech (2.1.81-117) involving rural places: contagious fogs, the green corn rotting, the seasons altering, "the human mortals want their winter here", etc.

Euelpides and Peisthetaerus are looking for Tereus to ask his advice and they find him, but he has been transformed into a large Hoopoe, a type of crested bird. Like Bottom, Hoopoe used to be a man. Also, like Bottom, Hoopoe (like his wife, Procne) has only the head of an animal (and both have the body of a human): "*Procne, who like her husband has retained her human shape, except for the bird-mask...*" (Aristophanes 176).

A further comparison between Hoopoe and Bottom reveals numerous other similarities. The most important one is the fact that both Hoopoe and Bottom, both in the state of having an animal head, both sing two-stanza songs about birds that awaken a lady with whom they either are or shortly will become romantically involved with.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directly after his transformation (i.e: he has an ass' head) Bottom sings a song that awakens Titania:

Bottom (*sings*): The woosel cock so black of hue,
With tawny-orange bill,
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill—

Titania (awakening): What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

Bottom (*sings*): The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
The plain-song cuckoo gray,

Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer nay – (3.1.125-133) (my emphasis)

In a similar way, Procne is woken up by Hoopoe's song about birds, which is sung because Hoopoe, Peisthetaerus and Euelpides want to build a city in the air and they need to ask the other birds to cooperate. "How will you call them together, though?" asks Peisthetaerus (Aristophanes 162). Hoopoe replies, "That's easy. I can just step back into the wood here and wake up my nightingale, and we'll send out a call..." (Aristophanes 162). Note that Hoopoe and Bottom are both in "a wood" also. Then in *The Birds*, we read, "*The Hoopoe retires into the wood and is soon heard singing his Song to the Nightingale*":

Hoopoe (sings): Come, dearest mate, shake off your sleep
Set free the notes of your hallowed songs
That pour divinely from you, lamenting
Itys our dear dead son,
Your tawny throat throbbing with liquid music—
Through the tracery of leaves the pure sound is heard
And echoes up to the very throne of Zeus,
Where golden Phoebus, hearing,
Takes up his lyre inlaid with ivory,
Catches the notes as they fly, and soon
To his sad music the gods are dancing, and your cry of grief
Is echoed by the voices of the blest. (*The sound of a flute, representing the song of the Nightingale, is heard offstage*). (Aristophanes 162)

The sound of the flute, then, which indicates that Procne has woken up, can be thought of as corresponding to Titania's line (also indicating the action of wak-

ing up) “what angel wakes me from my flowery bed?”

After two or three lines of comic dialogue between Peisthetaerus and Euelpides, Hoopoe starts singing again. And *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows a similar pattern since Bottom also starts singing again after Titania's comic line “What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?” (3.1.29)

The second stanza of Hoopoe's song is:

Hoopoe: epo, popo, popo, popo, popo, popo, poi

Io, io, io, ito, ito, ito,

Come along, come along, birds of my own feather,

Birds who live in the farmers' well-sown fields,

Eaters of seeds and barley, myriad flocks

Of a hundred species, fluttering quickly,

Uttering gentle calls,

Twittering together on the furrowed soil

In a pleased voice, tio, tio, tio!

Birds who live in gardens, or in the mountains,

Birds who feed on the wild olive

And the fruit of the arbutus,

Quickly fly to my call, trioto, trioto, triobrix!

Birds of the watery places,

Snapping up the sharp-mouthed midges

Along ditches or in marshland

Birds of the swamp and the fenland

And the pleasant meadow of Marathon;

Bird of the stripy wing, godwit, godwit, godwit!

All of the tribes that fly with the halcyon,
 Over the waves of the sea, come along, come along!
 Come here to be informed
 of a revolution, hi! All long-neck birds, you too
 Come along!

Come and meet a shrewd old fellow,
 Full of wisdom, new in outlook,
 Enterprising. Come along now,
 Come along now, join the meeting!

Toro toro toro torotix!
 Kikkabau! Kikkabau!
 Toto, toro, toro, lililix! (Aristophanes 163)

In Hoopoe's first stanza, Procne is said to grieve (in song) for her dead son Itys, and her lament is heard by Phoebus Apollo who then echoes her voice with his lyre. This sort of situation, lamenting or complaining in relation to the topic of a little boy is the origin of the "little changeling boy" (2.1.120) that is at the heart of Oberon's and Titania's conflict (the changeling boy is not dead but his mother is dead, reversing the situation between Procne and Itys).

Furthermore, Bottom's song is a catalogue of bird species and Hoopoe's song is another list of bird types (grouped according to their natural environment). Hoopoe's song features many bird calls (toro, toro, io, io, etc.) and Bottom's song similarly refers to sounds in expressions such as "the note so true" of the thristle, the "plain-song" of the cuckoo gray and the "note" of the cuckoo. And in fact, Bottom has already listed a few bird species back in Act 1. Were he to play the Lion's part, he says, "I would roar you as gently as any *sucking dove*, I will roar you

and ‘twere any *nightingale*” (1.2.82-3). (my emphasis) This early association of Bottom with birds is one signal that there is something special *and very deliberate about birds* in relation to him. Shakespeare, an artist honoring another artist’s work by using it creatively, must have wanted to make quite sure that this source was able to be detected. It seems extremely unlikely that all of these similarities taken together can be mere coincidences, and this scene where Hoopoe awakens Procne, with too many parallels to be a coincidence, is therefore one major source of the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

There are other strong similarities that need to be explored and that add to this likelihood. It is interesting that the first stanza of Hoopoe’s song is partly about Phoebus Apollo being inspired by Procne’s song. In Act 1, Bottom also has a special dramatic recitation (almost a song) about Phoebus Apollo:

Bottom: I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.
 The raging rocks,
 And shivering shocks,
 Shall break the locks,
 Of prison gates;
 And Phibbus’ car
 Shall shine from far,
 And make and mar
 The foolish Fates (1.2.29-39)

Phoebus Apollo was obviously one of the more important Greek gods and Bottom’s association with him through their spoken lines carries some unique solar significance. Aristophanes’ play is full of lines expressing reverence for and religious devotion to Apollo. According to my research, Shakespeare secretly defended the Divine Feminine and the idea that the sun is a major source of spiri-

tual power. His plays cleverly use allegories to disguise his real loyalties to nature and to the Goddess. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is no exception³: Bottom is the sun figure, who has an interlude with the land (symbolized by Titania, who is also a goddess, as I will show in the second part of this paper) and restores peace and goodness to the world. But what is really being expressed is the future historical situation when coal and fossil fuels are withdrawn from the land (as they are depleted, become banned, and/or become uneconomic to produce) and mankind (the little boy in the allegory) has to join Oberon (Shakespeare) in the forest: "Oberon would have the child/ Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild" (3.1.392-3) which means living in a way with more environmental integrity and responsibility towards nature.

More similarities between *The Birds* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be enumerated. In *Festival, Comedy and Tragedy*, Francisco Adrados points to a common element in ancient Greek Comedy he calls the "hymn or prayer", which "may be followed by a *ritual action*" (Adrados 91) (my emphasis). A blessing takes place in both *The Birds* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *The Birds*, as Peisthetaerus descends from above with his new wife (who is a goddess named Sovereignty) he holds Zeus' thunderbolt, and then a Heavenly Herald calls out "O feathered race of birds! O lordly ones! Thrice blest are you this day!" (Aristophanes 212). Peisthetaerus' words commemorate the new peace as Zeus and the other Greek gods have been persuaded to cease their war on the country the birds have established.

Similarly, the vexing and seemingly irreconcilable conflict over the changeling boy between Oberon and Titania also similarly is peacefully resolved through the interlude that Titania and Bottom share *and this interlude begins with a religious*

3 For more on this allegory, see my article "And Phibbus' car shall shine from far": the Sun, a 'green' Mummers' Play and hieros gamos in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in Tsukuba University's *Area Studies Journal*, March 2013.

blessing and has some elements of a wedding in the pairing of the couple. Therefore, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Bottom receives the head of an ass, Peter Quince, before exiting, bestows a religious consecration upon him: "Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated" (3.1.118). The first stanza of the song of Hoopoe, which awakens Procne, also contains a reference to a blessing: "...and soon to (Apollo's) sad music the gods are dancing, and your cry of grief is echoed by the voices of the blest". So, too, Peter Quince's blessing finds parallels in both the Heavenly Herald's wedding blessing (since pairing up and transformation are involved) and in Hoopoe's blessing (since Procne awakens with the Hoopoe's blessing and Titania awakens shortly after Peter Quince's blessing).

The last line of *The Birds* is spoken by Peisthetaerus:

And now in gay procession move to Zeus' lordly hall,
 For you, my feathered comrades, are invited one and all
 To celebrate this happy day! Come, Sovereignty, my treasure,
 Stretch out your hand and take my wing, and we will dance a measure.
 (Aristophanes 213)

The war between the utopian bird city of Much Cuckoo in the Clouds and the Greek Gods has ended peacefully and the marriage of Peisthetaerus and Sovereignty (who "holds the key to the Gifts to Mankind department, where Zeus keeps all the blessings of civilization: good government, wise policies, law and order, dockyards, endless slanging matches..." (Aristophanes 206)), symbolizes a new societal harmony. Similarly, after Titania hands over the changeling boy to Oberon (also bringing new "amity" (4.1.87)) and harmony to the world, Oberon uses very similar language to Peisthetaerus' above, including the idea of taking his wife's hand and dancing and celebrating in the hall of a lordly character:

Sound music! Come my queen, take hands with me
 And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be
 Now thou and I are in new amity
 And will tomorrow midnight solemnly
 Dance in Duke Theseus' house triumphantly
 And bless it to all fair prosperity. (4.1.84-90)

Ovid's "Diana and Actaeon" and Gli Eroici Furori as sources of A Midsummer Night's Dream

There is general agreement that Shakespeare takes Titania, the name of his Fairy Queen, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where it means "Titan's daughter" and is used to refer to various divinities, such as the huntress and moon goddess, Diana, as well as Latona, Pyrrha, and Circe, descendants of the Titans, the gods and goddesses who, according to Greek myth, ruled the world in the beginning.⁴ As a Fairy Queen, a supernatural creature, with connections to the Titans, Titania's connection to pagan deities is firm. In the allegory under the surface, I have identified Titania as "the land" but more specifically, she is the Goddess, the Divine Feminine, the sacred material world and universe around us.

Shakespeare's concept of "the Goddess" (the Divine Feminine) is based on Giordano Bruno's works. Bruno had selected the "Diana and Actaeon" myth as the vehicle (in his book *L'eroici furori* (1585)), to illustrate his philosophical idea of the Heroic Lover who chooses nature as the place to search for the mysterious and beautiful divine truth:

But yet, to no one does it seem possible to see the sun, the universal Apollo, the absolute light through supreme and most excellent species; but only its shadow, its Diana, the world, the universe, nature, which is in things... Many then

4 <http://www.longlongtimeago.com/once-upon-a-time/fairytales/fairies-in-lore-and-literature/who-is-titania/>

wander amongst the aforesaid paths of this deserted wood, very few are those who find the fountain of Diana. Many are content to hunt for wild beasts and things less elevated, and the great number do not understand why, having spread their nets to the wind, they find their hands full of flies. Rare, I say, are the Actaeons to whom fate has granted the power of contemplating the nude Diana and who, entranced with the beautiful disposition of the body of nature, and led by those two lights, the twin splendor of Divine goodness and beauty become transformed into stags; for they are no longer hunters, but that which is hunted. For the ultimate and final end of this sport is to arrive at the acquisition of that fugitive and wild body, so that the thief becomes the thing stolen, the hunter becomes the thing hunted; in all other kinds of sport, for special things, the hunter possesses himself of those things, absorbing them with the mouth of his intelligence; but in that Divine and universal one, he comes to understand to such an extent that he becomes of necessity included, absorbed, united. (Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts* 66)

Because of the centrality of the “Diana and Actaeon” myth to Bruno’s philosophy, Shakespeare made every effort to use allusions both to Diana and to this Greek myth in his plays⁵ and therefore important allusions to Diana occur in his plays in relation to female main characters including Titania, Rosalind, Olivia, Hero, Viola, Portia, Kate, Ophelia, Jessica, Hermia and Luciana, among others.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a relatively early play, where Shakespeare was still working out how to convey the idea of the Goddess in a disguised way, he uses a plethora of references to the moon in order to strengthen the connection between Diana and Titania. Titania’s close link to Diana, goddess of the moon, is made very clear when we first see her, as Oberon greets her with the line: “ill met by moonlight, proud Titania” (2.1.60). The moon or moonlight is mentioned 38 times in this

5 https://www.academia.edu/37234061/_The_fair_the_chaste_and_inexpressive_she_the_Divine_Feminine_in_As_You_Like_It

play (far more than in any other play), and a character named Moonshine is found in the play-within-a-play, so Shakespeare clearly meant to emphasize the earth's lunar body. Titania, a goddess under siege as she is disrespected in the coal-hungry and monotheistic world (the underlying historical situation in Shakespeare's England), uses the moon's sadness as a way to convey her own:

The moon methinks looks with a watery eye;
And when she weeps, weeps every little flower,
Lamenting some enforced chastity (3.1.198-201)

A specific allusion to Diana occurs when Theseus tells Hermia:

Take time to pause; and, by the next new moon—
The sealing-day betwixt my love and me,
For everlasting bond of fellowship—
Upon that day either prepare to die
For disobedience to your father's will,

Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would;
Or on Diana's altar to protest
For aye austerity and single life. (1.1.82-89)

Theseus' words specifically in relation to a woman, Hermia, reinforce the cruel patriarchal regime which controls everyone, which is parallel to a religion such as Christianity or another Abrahamic religion. When Oberon, the powerful figure in the fairy world, undoes the spell which he had cast on Titania, he refers to Diana too but now the association is to flowers and fertility:

Be as thou wast wont to be;
See as thou wast wont to see.
Dian's bud [o'er] Cupid's flower
Hath such force and blessed power.
Now, my Titania, wake you, my sweet queen. (4.1.71-75)

And just as Oberon greets Titania with a reference to the moon, he symmetrically refers again to the moon in his final words to her in the main part of play:

Then my queen in silence sad,
Trip we after night's shade,
We the globe can compass soon,
Swifter than the wandering moon. (4.1.95-98)

(Oberon addresses Titania later in Act 5, but I exclude that section as it is more like an epilogue.) So Oberon signals with his speech, containing references to the moon and Diana, especially when he is near Titania, how we should consider Titania. She is a nature goddess.

While Titania is allegorically the Goddess, Helena and Hermia also share in this identity. Demetrius, awakening and spotting Helena, says "O Helena, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!/ To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?" (3.2.136-7) and Helena repeats the word "goddess" to emphasize it while also enumerating some excellent qualities of a goddess:

Have you not set Lysander, as in scorn,
To follow me and praise my eyes and face?
And made your other love, Demetrius,
Who even now did spurn me with his foot,

To call me goddess, *nymph, divine and rare,*
Precious, celestial? (3.2.222-7) (my emphasis)

It is extremely significant that, in Act 4, Theseus's long passage about his hunting dogs, "bred out of the Spartan kind" echoes the same language Ovid uses in his long passage on Acateon's hunting dogs ("While thus he stood in doubt his hounds had seen him./Blackfoot of Spartan breed; Swift as the wind, the rest came rushing on" (Ovid 57)).

Shakespeare drew on both Bruno's curated version of the Diana and Actaeon myth and the version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*⁶, actually unifying them in the process. To understand this, it is important to remember how Bruno symbolically used Actaeon's hunting dogs, who devoured their master. According to Bruno, the dogs devouring Actaeon represent that moment when the Heroic Lover spots the Divine Truth (naked Diana bathing in the pool) and then becomes unified with nature (the devouring process) as a result of the realization that man and nature are one. (Bruno's philosophy dissolves the duality between man and nature often found in western thought, and his notion of a goddess based on material nature symbolizes his heretical idea.)

I will quote a significant portion of the lines from Ovid first:

While thus he stood in doubt his hounds had seen him. Blackfoot and
 Tracker first gave Tongue, wise Tracker,
 A Cretan hound, Blackfoot of Spartan breed;
 Swift as the wind the rest came rushing on:
 Glance, Glutton, Ranger (all from Arcady),

6 It is already widely recognized that Shakespeare drew on the story of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a source of the play-within-a-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Fierce Rover, sturdy Stalker, moody Storm,
 Flight unsurpassed for speed, Hunter for scent,
 Bold Woodman lately wounded by a boar...
 ...And many more too long to tell. The pack,
 Hot in pursuit, sped over fells and crags,
 By walls of rock, on daunting trails or none...their baying filled the sky.
 (Ovid, 57)

When we compare Theseus' lines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can see some of the same ideas, the baying of the dogs, for example, the mention of Cadmus (who was Actaeon's grandfather and whom Ovid mentions earlier in this same chapter too) and of course the "Spartan breed" I quoted above. But intensely different is the commentary like "one mutual cry" added in Shakespeare, and lines like "so musical a discord" "such sweet thunder":

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
 When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
 With hounds of Sparta: never did I hear
 Such gallant chiding: for, besides the groves,
 The skies, the fountains, every region near
 Seem'd all one mutual cry: I never heard
 So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.
 My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
 So flew'd, so sanded, and their heads are hung
 With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
 Crook-knee'd, and dew-lapp'd like Thessalian bulls;
 Slow in pursuit, but match'd in mouth like bells,
 Each under each. A cry more tuneable

Was never holla'd to, nor cheer'd with horn,
 In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly:
 Judge when you hear. But soft, what nymphs are these? (4.1.112-128)

Shakespeare used this dramatic moment, which corresponds in Ovid to the moment when Actaeon is tragically devoured by his dogs, to show the realization of the Heroic Lover (Actaeon in *Gli eroici furori*) that he is one with nature: in realizing the Divine truth, he becomes one with it: “one mutual cry”. With this idea of unity, Bruno meant to attack the dualistic notion that man is separated from nature or above it or apart from it in any way. Hence we see the lines in Shakespeare’s artistic revision: “one mutual cry”, “a cry more tuneable” (technically, here “cry” means a pack of dogs but it can be ambiguous and mean a sound as well, as it does in the first case), and “such sweet thunder”.

And Theseus ends the moment with a phrase “But soft, what nymphs are these?” as he sees Hermia and Helena, which echoes Actaeon’s impromptu visit to Diana’s cave and pool, where he saw Diana and her nymphs in the moonlight and, in Bruno’s retelling, beheld the Divine Truth. This is the cure extended to the human world of laws, for shortly after this, Egeus’ patriarchal power over Hermia is dissolved and over-ridden by Theseus. The Goddess wins.

It is surely time to recognize Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, Giordano Bruno’s *L'eroici furori* and the “Actaeon and Diana” myth in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* all as sources of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The first one shines like the sun, bestowing bird imagery, a religious focus on Phoebus Apollo, plot points such as the waking of Titania with a song sung by a man who will become romantically involved with her, and marriage celebrations. The second and third ones glimmer like the moon, offering radical Renaissance pantheistic philosophy, oriented around the Divine Feminine, that was composed by a man later burned alive for heresy and blasphemy. In fact, Giordano Bruno had already been imprisoned in Rome by the

Catholic Inquisition for five or six years before this play was written.

Works Cited

Adrados, Francisco. *Festival, Comedy and Tragedy: The Greek Origins of Theater*, Leiden, Netherlands. 1975. Translated by E.J. Brill.

Aristophanes. *The Birds and Other Plays*. London: Penguin. (Translated by David Barrett and Alan H. Sommerstein). 1978.

Bruno, Giordano. *The Heroic Enthusiasts: an Ethical Poem. Part the Second*. 1889
Bernard Quartitch: London. (Translated by L. Williams). (Nabu Public Domain Reprints)

Evans, G. Blakemore, Levin, Harry eds. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1974.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Oxford UP. 1986. Translated by A.D. Melville.