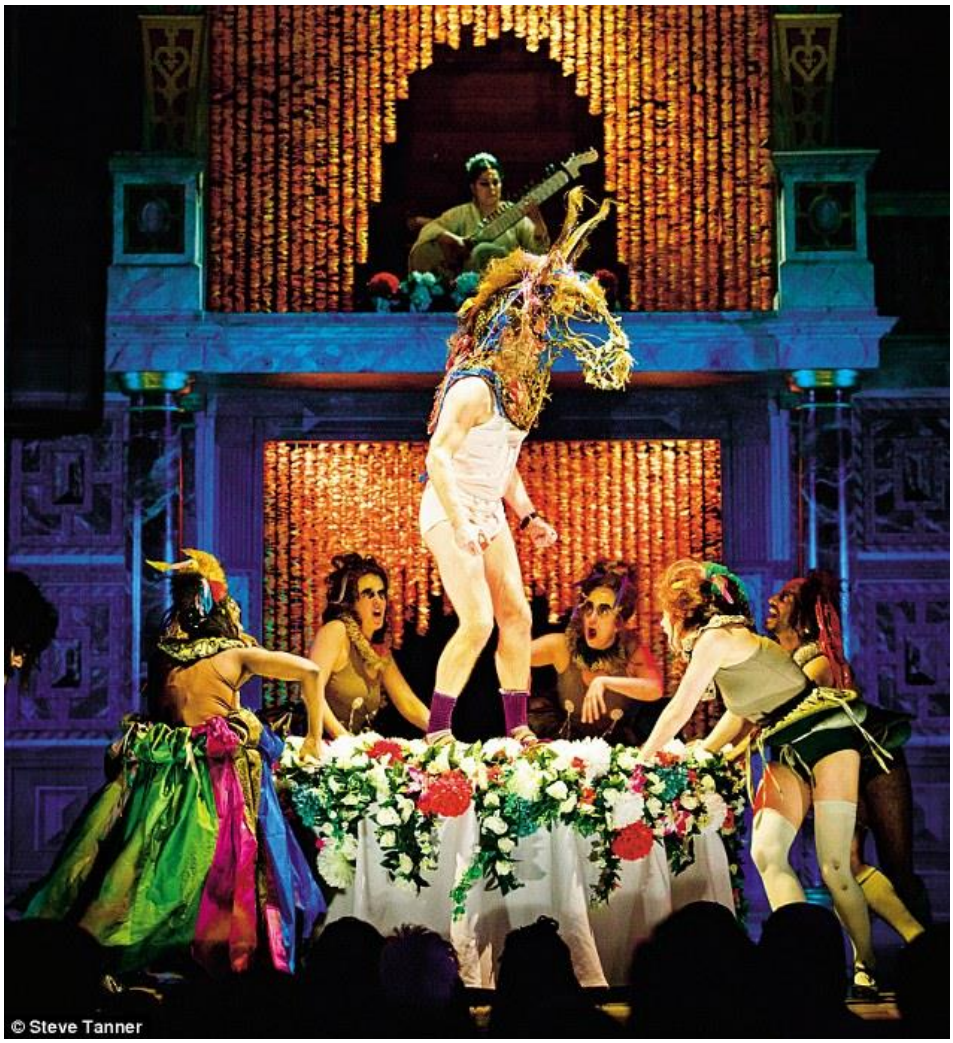
A queer reading of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Eva Dalmaijer
5880580
BA Thesis Literary Studies
Utrecht University
Supervisor: Codruta Pohrib MA
Second reader: Prof. dr. Ton Hoenselaars
June 2019
6447 words

Contents

Introduction

There is not much knowledge available about William Shakespeare's life, and what we do know about his later life is largely based on the works he has written and that have been performed on the London stage. One rumour, or rather one uncertainty about Shakespeare's life is about his sexuality. Despite his marriage to and children from Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's sexuality has been questioned. Might he have been homosexual or bisexual?[1] I think it is futile to try and anachronistically label Shakespeare's romantic and sexual life, but doing something similar to his plays is not.

In this thesis, I will ask the question of how Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lends itself to queer interpretation and, consequently, queer adaptation. This comedy has been adapted into queer performances (between 2011 and 2016 more than eight queer performances of the play were produced in the UK and the US, both on professional and amateur levels), and in this thesis I will research to what extent the text itself supports these queer adaptations. In order to analyse the queer possibilities of the play, I will use the notion of metamorphosis and discuss this concept on three different levels. The first level is a textual one. By close reading the passages in which metamorphosis occurs or is referred to, I will show how these passages can be interpreted from a queer perspective. In the close reading, the focus will be on the queer possibilities of the play's setting, plot devices, characters, and the character's relationships with one another. The second level is an intertextual one. Shakespeare read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and used several of Ovid's myths to base characters and plot lines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on. As the title already suggests, *Metamorphoses* is a collection of stories about metamorphosis, about bodily change. By tracing which of Ovid's myths Shakespeare used and in what way, I will exemplify how the myths in themselves and Shakespeare's use of them can be read as queer. The third level

[1] See Waugaman, Richard M. "The bisexuality of Shakespeare's sonnets and implications for De Vere's authorship." *The Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 97, no. 5, 2010, pp. 857-79.

is that of remediation and adaptation. In this case, the metamorphosis takes place as a change from script to performance. I do not choose to exclusively close read the script of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, since it was not meant to just be read. It was meant to be seen and heard as a performance. By discussing Emma Rice's queer adaptation of the play for The Globe in 2016, I will show the relationship between text and performance and argue why queer readings and adaptations are important.

Queering Shakespeare is not new, and many texts have been written in order to analyse the queer history, context and subtext of Shakespeare's plays[2] such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. When it comes to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the queer possibilities, according to the existing literature, seem limited. There is literature on homosexual puns[3] and sexuality and identity as a whole[4] in the play, as well as research into darker adaptations of the play[5]. Queer readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* include more traditional observations like the crossdressing in the play[6], the homosocial relationships between the characters[7] and the play's disruption of the heteronormative forces of society[8]. Even though these are all valid observations, the queer readings of the play are limited to either the text itself or an adaptation of the play. The readings also limit themselves to a more conservative definition of "queerness", only relating it to homosexual experiences. In this thesis, I want to add to the existing readings by combining three different aspects of the play - the text itself,

[2] See Menon, Madhavi. *Shakesqueer: A queer companion to the complete works of Shakespeare*, Duke University Press, 2011.
[3] See Quinsland, Kirk. "The Sport of Asses in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*" *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*, edited by Goran Stanivukovic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
[4] See Weller, Barry. "Identity Dis-Figured: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'" *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1985.
[5] See Lewis, Allan. "'A Midsummer Night's Dream': Fairy Fantasy or Erotic Nightmare?" *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1969.
[6] See Chess, Simone. "Male Femininity and Male-To-Female Crossdressing in Shakespeare's Plays and Poems." *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*, edited by Goran Stanivukovic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
[7] See Bullion, Leigh. "Shakespeare and Homoeroticism: A Study of Cross-dressing, Society, and Film." *Honors Theses*, Paper 600, 2010.
[8] See Lemonnier-Texier, Delphine. "Myth, intertext and transgression in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". *Lectures et écritures du mythe,* edited by Renaud-Grosbras, Pascale, and Sophie Marret, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006.

the texts it is based on and the text's adaptation - in order to come to a full understanding of the queer possibilities of the play.

Furthermore, I will broaden the definition of "queerness" by not only using the word "queer" to refer to homosexual, bisexual and lesbian people, as it is often used (and even then, the focus is mostly on male homosexuality). "Queer", in this thesis, will be used to describe non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people, as well as sexually transgressive practices and desires, as Sanchez argues is often missing in the discussion of queer and feminist theory (493). I recognise Song's description of queer theory, which is that "[t]he term "queer" implies resistance to the "normal," where "normal" is what seems natural and intrinsic", and that queer theory critiques both heteronormativity and heteronormativity, meaning "a set of norms based on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, gendered as male/female and monogamous, along with the assumed and implied permanency and stability of these identities" and the assumption that "non-heterosexual relationships are expected to resemble heteronormative ones, for instance in being gender-normative, monogamous, and rooted in possession of a partner" respectively (3). My working definition of queerness, then, does not only relate to sexuality and gender. As Sanchez describes it, a lot of people's valid and interesting desires and practices could get glossed over when the definition of queerness is solely based on the gender of the "object choice" (506). For this reason, I will also discuss other instances of "sexual otherness" under the term of queerness. I will, however, also use more traditional concepts from queer and transgender theory such as same-sex desire, body dysphoria and gender performativity as coined by Judith Butler. I will, then, not only add to the academic debate by proposing a more detailed and complete queer reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I will also add to existing queer readings by expanding the definition of queerness and by combining analysis based on queer theory, transgender theory and feminist theory.

By researching the queer possibilities of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I will propose a new reading of the play which shows that the play's characters, relationships, setting and intertextuality contribute to a comedy about the broad possibilities of sexuality and gender experience. As I have mentioned before, labelling *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not a futile, but important practice. I do not propose that Shakespeare intentionally wrote a queer play or that he was a queer theorist avant la lettre, but I do argue that this play can be read in a queer way and is suitable for queer adaptation, and that these readings are important. Shakespeare's plays lend themselves to different interpretations and adaptations because it is difficult to know precisely how they were performed during Shakespeare's lifetime, so there is no original performance to rely on when it comes to turning the play into a new performance. This means that directors are free to experiment with the source material and put emphasis on what they deem important, what they think stands out in the play or what message they want to convey to the audience. In an age where there is more and more awareness of queer experiences, queer representation in media should not be left out and directors like the ones mentioned in this introduction understand this. By proposing a queer reading of the play, this representation comes to light in a place where it might be unexpected – in a play that was written and first performed over 400 years ago – but not unwelcome. The characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* end up in heterosexual relationships and the play's ending seems to focus on conformity, but I want to show that the play is more than its ending. The play's magical character allows for an escapist "dream" in which anything can happen without judgment, in which sexuality can be explored safely and without consequences.

Chapter I: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through a queer lens

In this chapter, I will examine passages from the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in order to argue that it supports a queer reading, and that therefore a more explicit queer adaptation follows logically. I will discuss these passages by noting the metamorphosis in them, as well as concepts from queer and transgender theory that can be linked to these passages.

The first instance of metamorphosis I will discuss is the metamorphosis of the physical space the story takes place in. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* commences at the court of Athens, but quickly moves to the wood near Athens. The reader or watcher of the play is quickly made to realise that Athens is a lawful, patriarchal place. After Egeus has found out his daughter Hermia does not want to marry Demetrius, the man Egeus deemed right for her, he comes to the Duke of Athens to ask the latter to enforce Athenian law:

> EGEUS: I beg 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
> Immediately provided in that case. (1.1.41-45)

In order to escape the laws of Athens and the power of her father over her, Hermia and her lover Lysander decide to leave for a wood near Athens. This escape takes place at night, so when the scene changes from Athens to the forest, the day also changes to night. The night and the general atmosphere of the wood allow for a contrast with lawful Athens: as soon as the lovers (Hermia and Lysander, as well as Helena and Demetrius who followed them) enter the wood, all laws and rationality disappear. This allows for the lovers' desires and passions to run free. The wood near Athens has been interpreted as representing the labyrinth in the myth of the minotaur, where Bottom occupies the role of minotaur (Lamb 479). This labyrinth is a place of vice, where children are sacrificed to the minotaur. When we see the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a similar place, it represents vice in the form of "sensual

delights, in which sinners lose themselves until aided by some external power" (Lamb 479), this external power being the love juice. Lemonnier-Texier argues that the lovers' desire is without "law, society, conventions, or morals" (2). This can be seen in the forbidden love between Lysander and Hermia, but also by Helena's desperate attempt to get Demetrius to love her and by the quick switch of the lovers' passions for one another. The forest has been interpreted as a place of irrationality and as a place where passion and desire rule, but I want to explore this further in relation to queer transgression. The forest is a place where transgressions of Athens' laws and morals are made possible. The heteronormative patriarchy can potentially be challenged in the wood, which creates space that allows for queer, transgressive passions.

Whereas the physical space of the wood potentially allows for sexual transgressions that would not be acceptable in Athens, the flower juice practically allows for such transgressions to take place. The flower juice is first introduced by Oberon:

> OBERON: Fetch me that flower, the herb I showed thee once;
> The juice of it on sleeping eye-lids laid
> Will make or man or woman madly dote
> Upon the next live creature that it sees. (2.1.169-172)

The love potion allows for a metamorphosis to take place within the lovers and their desire for one another. Because Puck mistakenly puts the juice on Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius' eyes, Lysander falls in love with Helena instead of Hermia, and then so does Demetrius. Even though the male lovers in the play both fall in love with the female Helena when they wake up after having the juice put on their eyelids, the lovers could have woken up and seen a person of their own gender when first opening their eyes and fallen in love with them. Even though this does not happen in the original play, there is room for it in an adaptation and it would not contradict the workings of the juice as described in the original

text. Oberon explains it works when someone sees any "live creature". It does not even have to be a fully human creature, as is the case with Titania and Bottom, let alone be a creature of the opposite gender. Even though Taylor argues that the love juice cannot be blamed entirely for the lovers' crassness and irrationality (266), the love created by the juice is artificial love because it is created by an exterior force. The queer implications of the juice have not been explored thoroughly in literature, which is why I want to add to the debate by arguing that the flower juice emphasises the fluidity of love. Through the juice, a character can suddenly fall in love with someone they did not expect to fall in love with. The belief that gender and sexuality are fluid is a key concept in queer theory (Gamson 397). Through use of the love juice, a character's love for another person is not fixed, and neither is their sexual orientation.

The use of the love juice is at its climax after Puck puts the juice on Titania's eyes, and she wakes up to see Bottom's "translation". He metamorphosed into a human with the head of an ass. Even though his body has changed, the desire and love Titania feels for him is not hindered. Lemonnier-Texier argues that heir love is both a social and sexual transgression (21), since they are from different social classes and different species, but does not relate this transgression to queerness. If we see queerness as non-normative and possibly transgressive, the love scene between Titania and Bottom is definitely queer. Even though Shakespeare shows the love between these two characters in a comedic way, he did choose to incorporate this taboo love in his play. After all, Titania is not simply in love with Bottom. Their relationship "hints at sexual promiscuity", as Lemonnier-Texier argues (17), when Titania orders her servants to "lead [Bottom] to [her] bower" (3.1.181). The discussion of one subversive love might lead to another on sexuality. Because the love between a fairy and a half-human, half-animal is accepted within the story world, a director would most likely get away with another form of queer relationship. There is no moral or, as McPeek calls it, "hint of forbidden lust" (77) to the love between Titania and Bottom. Even though Oberon orders

Puck to put the love juice on Titania's eyelids as a form of revenge, Titania and Bottom's relationship has no unhappy end. The exploration of different kinds of love and the happiness of different kinds of lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then, does not exclude the possibility of queer lovers in the play.

Oberon is the one who orchestrates Titania falling in love with whomever she sees on waking up. This action is firstly a revenge on Titania for not giving the Indian changeling to him, which brings Oberon a sort of perverse pleasure. If they are married, should Titania falling in love with someone else not be a punishment for Oberon too? No, he is delighted with his scheme. When he asks Puck how his plan worked out, Puck answers: "My mistress with a monster is in love!" (3.2.6), to which Oberon says that "[t]his falls out better than I could devise" (3.2.35). Oberon makes Titania cheat on him with a creature and enjoys it. Lewis mentions that in Jan Kott's adaptation of the play Titania rapes Bottom and Oberon is the voyeur (257). Even though I will not get into whether or not the relationship between Bottom and Titania is consensual, I do agree with a reading of Oberon as voyeur. There now exists a relationship between Oberon, Titania and Bottom: a polyamorous or "open" relationship – even though Bottom and Titania did not actively consent to this. Song argues that polygamy is typically queer, since queer theory "critiques homonormativity, in which non-heterosexual relationships are expected to resemble heteronormative ones, for instance in being […] monogamous" (3). The love between Titania and Bottom is, then, queer on multiple levels.

When Bottom changes into an ass this change is physical, but Bottom's identity is also fluid and malleable. Bottom is the only one of the mechanicals to take the play and the roles he performs very seriously. When asked to play Pyramus, Bottom says he will "move storms", as well as "condole" the audience (1.2.20-21). He also wishes to perform the role of Thisbe since Flute does not want to play a woman, and already decides to speak in a

"monstrous little voice" (1.2.44). Bottom also imagines how he will play the lion, too: "I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me" (1.2.59-60). Bottom does not secure the roles of Thisbe and the lion, but is insistent on showing his talent in the roles he performs. Because of this, Weller argues that Bottom leaves an imprint of himself on each of the roles he performs (75). Bottom is not only able to transform into an ass, but also into a lover and a lion. Bottom is, Weller notes, "Shakespeare's satirical comment on the Renaissance notion of mankind's infinite plasticity" (75).

Adding to Weller's reading of Bottom's fluidity, I also read Helena's identity as fluid. Or rather, she wishes for a fluid identity. Helena wishes to be transformed, as is exemplified in the following passage after Hermia wishes "fair Helena" good-bye (1.1.179):

HELENA: O, were favor so,
Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go;
My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye;
My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody.
Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated,
The rest I'll give to be to you translated.
O, teach me how you look, and with what art
You sway the motion of Demetrius' heart. (1.1.186-193)

In this passage, Helena wishes to be transformed into Hermia in order to have Demetrius' heart. Helena wishes to occupy another body. Not only does Helena want to have another body, she emphasises the negative way in which she views her own. When Helena, in soliloquy, compares her body with that of Hermia, she says the following:

HELENA: Happy is Hermia, wheresoe'er she lies,
For she hath blessèd and attractive eyes.
How came her eyes so bright? Not with salt tears –

If so, my eyes are oftener washed than hers.

No, no, I am as ugly as a bear,

For beasts that meet me run away for fear.

Therefore no marvel though Demetrius

Do as a monster fly my presence thus. (2.2.96-103)

In this passage, Helena sees her body as other than it is, and wishes it to be something else. In Bottom's case, his fluidity is positive – he can add something of himself to a role when he wishes to. In Helena's case, the absence of fluidity or transformation makes her miserable. Bottom's and Helena's fluidity can be tied together into a queer reading. In queer theory, the concept of fluidity, as mentioned before, is an important one. The idea that one's sexuality is fluid is, in this play, exemplified by the love juice, and the idea that one's identity is fluid is exemplified by Bottom and his continual metamorphosis. As Weller says: "Metamorphosis, after all, would imply that the form of one's existence is not final, necessary and definitive" (77) or, in other words, metamorphosis implies that one's form is fluid. Helena's monstrous view of her body and her wish to have another body can be compared to the concept of body dysphoria. Body dysphoria, in transgender theory, is the feeling that one's body does not match their gender identity. Helena does not wish to occupy another body in order to feel like her body matches her gender, but she does see her body as other than it is ("as a bear") and wishes to have another one.

Even though Helena wishes to look like Hermia, McPeek argues that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare shows the "universal woman in all her variety" (70). There is, then, not one way to be a woman, and the female characters in the play show this. Helena and Hermia are both archetypes – Hermia is the fair, beautiful one and Helena is the dark one – but one is not preferred over the other. The plot of the love juice makes sure of this. The lovers are all fairly interchangeable, and the way Helena and Hermia look and behave is not

of interest to the male lovers. Helena and Hermia are contrasted (tall and short, fair and fark, sober and easily agitated), but this contrast is without prejudice (McPeek 70). Following McPeek's argument of the universal woman as different but equal, the play leaves the possibility for more contrast between female characters in an adaptation. If there is not one preferable way to be a woman, an adaptation might include transgender actresses or characters, without the prejudice of one being the better, fairer, more desirable or more real woman. Inclusive feminist activists argue for exactly this: every person who perceives themselves as a woman is one, and there is not one way (when it comes to things like behaviour, appearance and sexual orientation) to be a correct woman. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the characters of Helena and Hermia, can convey this message if a director chooses to emphasise this point.

Helena does not only have the desire to look like Hermia, but she also has transgressive sexual desires. Sanchez argues that women's transgressive sexual desires that are linked to power are often seen as incompatible with feminism, and are therefore overlooked in queer theory (493). In order to talk about queer theory and sexuality, it is important to understand and validate the full scope of possible sexual desires and fantasies. What has gone unexplored, according to Sanchez, is "the way in which women's desires for sodomy, group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochism can […] challenge gender hierarchies and sexual norms" (451), which is exactly what queer theory strives to do. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is the previously examined case of bestiality in the case of Titania and Bottom, but Helena also expresses a desire for (symbolic) bestiality and sadomasochism. Helena's desires become apparent in the following lines:

> HELENA: 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.

What worser place can I beg in your love

(And yet a place of high respect with me)

Than to be used as you use your dog? (2.1.203-210)

In this passage, Helena begs Demetrius to treat her as his inferior and to abuse her. In return, she will love him more. This desire reads as masochistic, which can in turn be read as un-feminist, as it upholds a traditional norm of a woman being inferior to a man. Helena is, however, the agent in this passage: she is the one who voices the fantasy and is therefore in control of it. This sexual agency in a woman may pose a challenge to patriarchal norms and to the idea of what constitutes as "good" and "bad" sex for someone (Sanchez 505), which in itself challenges heteronormative concepts of sexuality and can therefore be labelled as queer.

Chapter II: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as inspiration

In this chapter, I will explore in what ways the intertextual references to Classical mythology in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be read as queer in themselves or are made queer by Shakespeare, in order to argue that the inspiration of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and thus the basis of the text has queer potential, out of which the queer potential of the play itself follows. I will discuss Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the foundational text of the myths Shakespeare used, but it is not the only text he employed.

Ovid's narrative poem was first published in 8 AD. In this time, the concept of homosexuality did not exist, but when discussing sexuality in Ancient Rome the word is often used nonetheless. It is important to note that Classical mythology was transmitted and written down in a time where sexual relationships between men were not uncommon, and that the modern and Christian views on homosexuality differ greatly from Roman views. Furthermore, mythology lends itself to the discussion of subjects modern readers might view as taboo (subjects like rape, bestiality and brutal murder) because these events are made possible by the gods, which makes anything possible. These taboo events are often necessary to punish humans and other gods, or to lead to the creation of a specific concept, object or people.

It is generally accepted that Shakespeare read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the translation by Arthur Golding, and used the content of these myths as well as some of Golding's phrasing of them in the play. Golding's translation often came with moral interpretations of the pagan stories (Forey 325), and even though Shakespeare was inspired by Golding, he did not use the myths literally or morally in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Rather, Shakespeare plays with his source and his "parodic irreverence" keeps with the mood of Ovid's original, instead of Golding's moralistic tone (Forey 329). Shakespeare subverts the myths, most notably in the case of the myth of Daphne and Apollo. In *Metamorphoses,* Ovid describes how Cupid makes Apollo fall in love with Daphne, but how "Daphne fled from the very thought of a lover" and how she "joyed in the forest lairs" (I.473-5). Daphne then literally flees from Apollo as he

chases after her. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Daphne and Apollo are mirrored in the characters of Helena and Demetrius. In this instance, however, the genders are changed: Helena takes on the role of Apollo and chases her love Demetrius into the forest. There is an inversion of gender roles when Helena takes on the traditionally masculine role of chaser and Demetrius becomes the object of desire. The two characters, then, do not cite their traditional gender roles but perform their gender non-traditionally (Butler xxi). Not adhering to gender norms is intrinsically queer, because it means going against the expected hetero- and cisnormative way to behave – a way that is critiqued in queer theory.

As explained before, the relationship between Bottom and Titania transgresses the ideal of a "normative" relationship on multiple levels. Their relationship is very likely based on the myth of Pasiphae and the bull, in which King Minos makes his wife Pasiphae fall in love with a bull. Pasiphae, in turn, has a sexual relationship with the bull and gives birth to the Minotaur – a creature that is half-man, half-bull. The similarities between this myth and the story of Titania is clear: King Oberon makes his wife fall in love with a creature, with whom she starts a relationship. Bottom is, however, not fully ass in the way the Cretan bull is fully an animal. Bottom, instead, takes on the form of the Minotaur, as Lamb suggests (480). In Ovid's telling of the myth, Pasiphae is described as an "adulterous queen" (8.31) and her son the Minotaur as her "monstrous offspring" (8.156). Even though the relationship between Titania and Bottom is taboo, transgressive and might therefore be called queer, the myth it is based on is even more so. Pasiphae does not fall in love with a man who happens to have the head of an ass, she falls in love with an animal with no human parts. The myth, then, describes bestiality on a level it does not occur in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and is even more transgressive and queer than its counterpart in the play. Interestingly, in the story of Iphis in *Metamorphoses*, Pasiphae's love for the bull is referenced in contrast with the love Iphis feels for Iánthe: "Pasíphae lusted after a bull – but her love was a male. My passion is

wilder than that, if truth be told" (9.736-8). In this myth, the two girls Iphis and Iánte fall in love with each other. The love between two human girls, then, is seen as "wilder" (and thus less normative) than the love between a human woman and a male bull. Iphis sees homosexuality as less normal than "heterosexual" bestiality, which makes the concept of "queer" as non-heterosexual as well as non-normative more problematic.

Even though the myth of the Amazons is not directly referred to in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and is only referred to casually in the stories of Hercules in *Metamorphoses* (9.189), it is a story that lurks in the background of the play. When Theseus tells Hippolyta "I wooed thee with my sword" (1.1.16), viewers familiar with mythology will know that Theseus refers to his brutal conquest of Hippolyta. Theseus went to the island of the Amazons, in which Hippolyta was queen, and abducted her in order to take her as wife. The Amazons are a warrior tribe consisting of only women. Because the tribe consists of only women and no men are allowed to reside with them, it follows logically that the Amazons are a matriarchal society. Without men, the classic divide of gender roles becomes impossible, since women carry out all of society's roles. They are also specifically a warrior tribe, their main concern being war – a concern that is typically associated with men. When there are no men allowed in the tribe, it also follows that if there are sexual and romantic relationships within the Amazons, they exist between women. The society of the Amazons, then, is queer in its resistance of a patriarchal and heteronormative society in which gender roles exist. Again, Hippolyta's background is only casually referred to in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in order to understand these references, viewers and readers of the play need to be familiar with mythology. It is interesting, however, that queerness resides under the surface of the play, and within relationships in which a history of queerness might not be expected.

A less obvious myth that Shakespeare used to inspire the relationships between his characters is that of Narcissus and Echo. In Ovid's version of this story, the nymph Echo falls

in love with the beautiful Narcissus, but she is unable to reach out to him. She is only able to watch him as he enters the forest and to echo his words. This story is reminiscent of Helena and Demetrius in Shakespeare's play. In both stories, a woman follows the man she loves throughout the woods, pining for him without success. The endings, however, differ. In the play, Demetrius falls in love with Helena due to the love juice. In the myth, Narcissus sees his own reflection and falls in love with himself. When we speak of queerness and of subversive love, Narcissus is a peak example. He falls in love with his reflection, but at first does not realise that the reflection is himself: "He knows not what he is seeing; the sight still fires him with passion" (3.429-30). Narcissus, then, falls in love with the image of a beautiful man – one he is unable to embrace, kiss and generally touch. Narcissus notes that "[t]he paltriest barrier thwarts our pleasure" (3.453). His love might be even queerer because it is impossible – a reality that homosexual people unfortunately might face in restrictive circumstances. Even though Narcissus' love is not represented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it does show that the myths Shakespeare was inspired by are full of questions of love, sexuality and the general theme of (change in) identity. These are themes that I have demonstrated are also present in the play and are central to queer theory and the discussion of gender and sexual identity and change within these identities.

Conclusion: queer adaptations explored

In this thesis, I have argued that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has the potential for a queer reading. Throughout this thesis, I have used the word "queer" to include both non-heterosexual and non-cisgender as well as otherwise sexually "transgressive" people, desires and practices. I have argued that the play can be read as queer by analysing the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I have concluded that the play's atmosphere, setting, characters and the characters' interpersonal relationships can be read as queer, or have the potential for queerness which, for example, directors of stage adaptations can make use of. I have also argued that Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text from which Shakespeare drew inspiration for his characters and plot, can be read as queer. The myths Shakespeare used to inspire *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are queer in their portrayal of characters' desires, and Shakespeare himself queered them in his play by subverting the mythological characters' genders. Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be read as queer, Shakespeare's text supports queer adaptations that have been made like the one by Emma Rice for The Globe in 2016. Adaptations and readings of a play influence each other. Since a play was meant to be seen, not read, it is possible to watch a performance of a play before reading it. If a viewer sees an adaptation with queer characters or queer subtext, this viewer might read the same subtext in the play's text afterwards. This can also happen vice versa. A director may read (queer) topics in the play they can in turn develop in a stage production. A queer reading of a play, then, does not stand alone but interacts with existing adaptations and media outside of it. I do not pretend to be the first to read queerness into *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as I have proved by building on existing academic literature in my previous chapters, and as is evident by existing queer remediations of the play. The queer reading I have performed is not anachronistic exactly because it does not pretend to say that Shakespeare, consciously or not, made these "queer" choices. My reading is based on my framework of existence in a world in which queerness is a frequently discussed topic and in which queer representation in media is

getting more common. In a world like this, a queer adaptation of a classic play can be fruitful in order to establish such representation.

In the case of Rice's adaptation, the original text supports many of Rice's directorial choices. Many of my findings of queerness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as presented in chapter I, can also be found in this adaptation. The irrational atmosphere of the forest where anything is possible can, for example, be found in Rice's production through the sexual behaviours of Lysander and Oberon when they inhabit the forest. The love juice is used as a vehicle for queer love when Lysander briefly falls in love with Helenus, and the relationship between Titania and Bottom is overtly sexual and promiscuous and does not hide their transgressive love. In Rice's adaptation, the themes of gender and sexuality are explicitly represented through the change of Helena into Helenus, a homosexual character, and the choice of allowing women to play male characters and changing male characters like the mechanicals in the play into women. The play is set in modern-day London instead of in Athens, which makes the play more relatable for audiences seeing it performed in The Globe in London. The queer characters also add to the modernization and relatability of the play, since the existence of queer people is recognised and given a space where it might not have been expected.

By looking at multiple sources in a queer light, I hope I have offered a more complete reading than has been performed before. The different levels, from Ovid to Shakespeare to Rice and similar adaptations, show how deeply rooted and expansive questions of identity, gender, sexuality and desire are and in what ways they can be explored by and inspire creators. Even though I have tried to offer a structured and complete queer analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this topic is not and will likely never be exhausted. With the amount of (queer) adaptations of this play and the continuing research on queer theory, a queer reading of the play might take on a wholly different form if it were to be performed in

several years. Similarly, my definition of queerness might not appeal to each reader in its broadness, and with different definitions come different conclusions.

I lastly want to reiterate that Shakespeare likely did not intend for his play to be explicitly queer, but through his plays Shakespeare did offer a different way of looking at society. Shakespeare's plays offer, for example, commentary on the religious climate and monarchy in Elizabethan England.[9] Similarly, queer theory offers a contesting way of looking at society by examining, for instance, the construction of gender and sexuality. Following this argument, queering Shakespeare becomes a logical step in the direction of understanding the society we live in and our place within it. This society acknowledges and validates queer people increasingly, and literature and other media are tools for this. This is why reading through a queer lens matters. Queer readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are important and relevant because they help queer readers insert themselves into a text by offering them a space within it. Queer adaptations make this space bigger and more apparent and, even though the director is free to make choices that Shakespeare might not have made, these choices are based on Shakespeare's original text. Shakespeare's plays have been endlessly discussed and will likely never cease to interest casual readers and academics alike. The possibilities of interpretation and adaptation his plays offer are unparalleled, and with my reading I hope to create more space for the questions on sexuality, gender, identity and desire in the academic debate on Shakespeare's plays.

[9] See Asquith, Clare. *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*, PublicAffairs, 2006.

Works cited

A Midsummer Night's Dream. By Shakespeare, William, directed by Emma Rice, summer 2016, The Globe, London. Performance.

Asquith, Clare. *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*, PublicAffairs, 2006.

Bullion, Leigh. "Shakespeare and Homoeroticism: A Study of Cross-dressing, Society, and Film." *Honors Theses*, Paper 600, 2010. http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses/600

Butler, Judith. "Performativity as Citationality*", Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, 2011.

Chess, Simone. "Male Femininity and Male-To-Female Crossdressing in Shakespeare's Plays and Poems." *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*, edited by Goran Stanivukovic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 227-323.

Dillon, Matthew. *Girls and Woman in Classical Greek Religion*, Routledge, 2001.

Downing, Christine. "Lesbian Mythology." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1994.

Dundas, Judith. "Ovidian Shakespeare: Wit and the Iconography of the Passions." *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1987, pp. 121-133. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23064310.

Forey, Madeleine. "'Bless Thee, Bottom, Bless Thee! Thou Art Translated!": Ovid, Golding, and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'" *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 93, no. 2, 1998, pp. 321–329. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3735350.

Gamson, Joshua. "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma", *Social Problems*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1995, pp. 390-407.

Green, Douglas E. "Preposterous Pleasures: Queer Theories and A Midsummer Night's Dream." *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*, edited by Dorothea Kehler, Garland Publishing, 1998, pp. 369-400.

Hutson, Lorna. "The Shakespearean Unscene: Sexual Phantasies in A Midsummer Night's Dream." *Journal of the British Academy*, no. 4, 2016, pp. 169-195, DOI 10.5871/jba/004.169.

Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Norton, 1974.

Lamb, M. E. "A Midsummer-Night's Dream: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1979, pp. 478–491. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40754586.

Lemonnier-Texier, Delphine. "Myth, intertext and transgression in A Midsummer Night's Dream". *Lectures et écritures du mythe*, edited by Renaud-Grosbras, Pascale, and Sophie Marret, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006, pp. 183-204, http://books.openedition.org/pur/37974.

Lewis, Allan. "'A Midsummer Night's Dream': Fairy Fantasy or Erotic Nightmare?" *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1969, pp. 251–258. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3204566.

McPeek, James A.S. "The Psyche Myth and A Midsummer Night's Dream." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1972, pp. 69–79. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2868655.

Menon, Madhavi. *Shakesqueer: A queer companion to the complete works of Shakespeare*, Duke University Press, 2011.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Quinsland, Kirk. "The Sport of Asses in A Midsummer Night's Dream." *Queer Shakespeare:*

Desire and Sexuality, edited by Goran Stanivukovic, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
Sanchez, Melissa E. "'Use Me But as Your Spaniel': Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities." *PMLA*, vol. 127, no. 3, 2012, pp. 493–511. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41616842.
Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Norton Critical Editions, 2018.
Song, Susan. "Polyamory and Queer Anarchism: Infinite Possibilities for Resistance." *The Anarchist Library*, 2012.
Staton, Walter F. "Ovidian Elements in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'" *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1963, pp. 165–178. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3816813.
Stryker, Susan, and Stephen Whittle. *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Routledge, 2006.
Tanner, Steve. Bottom and the Fairies. *The Daily Mail*, published by Georgina Brown, 2016, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-3589384/A-Midsummer-Night-s-Dream-review-raunchy-dream-dream-Emma-Rice-s-inaugural-production-Globe-s-artistic-director-exuberant-boisterous-illuminating-Midsummer-Night-s-Dream.html.
Taylor, Michael. "The Darker Purpose of A Midsummer Night's Dream." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1969, pp. 259–273. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/449779.
Waugaman, Richard M. "The bisexuality of Shakespeare's sonnets and implications for De Vere's authorship." *The Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 97, no. 5, 2010, pp. 857-79.
Weller, Barry. "Identity Dis-Figured: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'" *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1985, pp. 66–78. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4335604.