

**Mischief in the Wood: Pastoral,  
Domestic Abuse, and the Environment in  
*The Merry Wives of Windsor* and  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream***

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Interplay between urban environments and natural environments in Shakespeare's plays is often presented as evidence of pastoral sensibilities. William Empson appears to be largely responsible. In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, first published in 1935, Empson identifies certain literary themes that show evidence of pastoral sensibilities. The themes can be broad. For example, Empson identifies "as a possible territory of pastoral" "this grand notion of the inadequacy of life, so reliable a bass note in the arts."<sup>1</sup> I understand the impulse to look beyond a specific cultural phenomenon for signs of a broader influence on literature and culture, but I worry that Empson expands the reach of pastoral so far that it ceases to be a useful critical term.

The broad application of the term "pastoral" that Empson ushered in continues in more contemporary criticism.<sup>2</sup> For example, Camille Wells Slight attempts to locate pastoral sensibilities in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when she notes that

. . . while Windsor does not provide a wholly natural contrast to urban artificiality, the green world is all around and easily accessible. The basic staples of pastoral landscape are ready

to hand: fields with birds, woods with deer, a flowing river, and even an ancient oak all play notable parts in the action and serve the traditional function of bringing sophistication, ambition, and greed to terms with natural simplicity.<sup>3</sup>

While it may be useful to identify the pastoral elements of the play, the elements that Slights identifies are not exclusively or even primarily a reference to the pastoral tradition, and her list of pastoral elements in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* leaves out sheep and shepherds, which are arguably the mode's *sine qua nons*.<sup>4</sup> My point is not to be pedantic about the application of the term "pastoral" but to suggest that a more basic understanding of the forces at work in the play would be more useful. In trying to force *The Merry Wives of Windsor* into an ill-fitting pastoral frame, Slights seems to overlook a more fundamental juxtaposition between the urban domestic environments in the town of Windsor and the more natural environment of Windsor Park.<sup>5</sup>

Equally loose is C.L. Barber's identification of pastoral elements in Shakespeare's fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

His fairies are creatures of pastoral, varied by adapting folk superstitions so as to make a new sort of arcadia. Though they are not shepherds, they lead a life similarly occupied with the pleasures of song and dance and, for king and queen, the vexations and pleasures of love. They have not the pastoral "labours" of tending flocks, but equivalent duties are suggested in the tending of nature's fragile beauties, killing "cankers in the musk-rose buds." They have a freedom like that of shepherds in arcadias, but raised to a higher power: they are free not only of the limitations of place and purse but of space and time.<sup>6</sup>

At least *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes some scenes in court and some in the country, and it blurs the lines between both by presenting the natural environment as the court of Oberon and Titania. But the claim that fairies are creatures of pastoral adds little to our understanding of the play or the pastoral mode. There is little evidence aside from their presence in a more or less natural environment that supports associating them with pastoral, and the pastoral association might actually obscure a different essential function of placing the fairies in Windsor Park. Readers will necessarily reach different conclusions if they think of the fairies

as representatives of England's native pagan mythology instead of representatives of pastoral.

While it is good to highlight the court/country dichotomy as one of the distinguishing features of Renaissance pastoral, failing to move beyond how that dichotomy services the aesthetic ends of the pastoral mode can leave unexamined the practical and political uses of the dichotomy in literature, as Louis Montrose and others have shown.<sup>7</sup> Montrose suggests that the presence of pastoral elements in Elizabethan literature can be political and should be understood as such: "Elizabethan pastoral forms may have worked to mediate differential relationships of power, prestige, and wealth in a variety of social situations, and to have variously marked and obfuscated the hierarchical distinctions—the symbolic boundaries—upon which the Elizabethan social order was predicated."<sup>8</sup> It is problematic enough to see pastoral overtly employed in literature because its presence may obfuscate essential hierarchical distinctions in the culture that created it; it is more complicated and risky when critics apply their own alien values and cultural biases to explore pastoral themes in literature that is written in an entirely different mode. Hunting for pastoral elements often reduces the natural environment to a setting, and, more crucially, can distract critics from seeing native themes and patterns specific to a text or author. As the example from Barber shows, and as William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* demonstrates, this has been going on for a long time.<sup>9</sup>

The court has a presence in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but it is more or less incidental, and focusing too closely on it can distract from considering the concerns of Shakespeare's audience, including the more quotidian concerns of inequality and sustainability. The natural environment, presented for the purposes of this essay as the parts of the environment that are generally free from the structuring labor of humanity, is an important feature of both plays, but the significance of its presence goes beyond its relationship to whatever pastoral conventions it might serve. I propose to reframe the court/country and town/country dichotomies in a way that promotes reflection about justice and fairness along gender and ecological lines. In the words of Sylvia Bowerbank, I would like to perform one of the essential tasks of ecological feminism, "to critique the

very definitions and practices that perpetuate 'nature' as a system of violence and injustice."<sup>10</sup> These two plays frame the natural environment as a beneficial place where women can assert their wishes and pursue justice. The transition from urban to rural environments in these plays signals a transition from traditional proscriptive justice to a more basic sense of fairness that is not compromised by social conventions, traditions, or arbitrary laws and dictates. This serves as a correction to pastoral conventions that are often deployed to justify subjugating women, minorities, and the natural environment.

Contemporary criticism is beginning to rethink the significance of the city/country dichotomy in literature. In *The Shakespearean Wild*, Jeanne Addison Roberts offers an alternative way of looking at the natural environment that avoids easy associations with the pastoral mode or the "green world" of Northrop Frye. Instead, Roberts shows that attitudes about the natural environment in Shakespeare reflect male cultural desires and anxieties about women. She writes, "for Shakespeare the Wild is the locale for the male's necessary, seductive, and terrifying confrontation with the female, his braving of the perils of maternal regression and destructive erotic abandon in order to annex a woman into his cultural context."<sup>11</sup> Even though I find this claim to be accurate in most cases, the two plays under discussion in this essay, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, seem to invert this scheme identified by Roberts. Instead of focusing on a male's experience of the feminine wild, projecting male anxieties and desires about women onto nature, these two plays focus on women's encounters with men in a feminine wild. They privilege women's desire and suggest that the natural environment, while sometimes wild and frightening, is a place where women can pursue their own wishes and expect to be treated fairly.

The natural environment in Shakespeare's plays is sometimes fraught with danger, and it is often characterized as lawless and uncontrollable. The rape of Lavinia by Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius in *Titus Andronicus* is perhaps the most extreme example. Such moments are not only isolated to tragedies and romances as we might expect, either. Demetrius threatens to do Helena "mischief in the wood" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2.1.237).<sup>12</sup> Randall Martin notes that in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the isolation

afforded by the rural environment of Petruchio's country house "enables the abuse of the urban Katherine." He continues, "This environmental cause-and-effect suggests Shakespeare's dramatic interest in how shifts in, or detachments from, place could remould personal subjectivity, for better or worse."<sup>13</sup> Martin is careful to characterize this as a two-way street, but relatively little work has been devoted to showing that the urban environment can be every bit as dangerous and wild as the rural, especially for women.<sup>14</sup>

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is unique among Shakespeare's play in showing the natural environment to be almost entirely benevolent and the urban and domestic environments to be dangerous. Early in the play, for example, at Caius's house, Mistress Quickly sets Rugby as a lookout so that she will not be caught meeting with Simple. Simple is Parson Hugh Evans's representative in seeking to marry Anne Page, and Quickly knows that if Caius sees Simple, he will be jealous and angry. Quickly says to Rugby, "I pray thee, go to the casement and see if you can see my master, Master Doctor Caius, coming. If he do, i'faith, and find anybody in the house, here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the King's English" (1.4.1-5). In fact, Quickly and Simple also face the threat of physical abuse. Caius does return, and Quickly tries to hide Simple in Caius's closet (1.4.33-118). Caius discovers Simple and commands, "Rugby, my rapier!" (1.4.63-4). Simple is not harmed, but Caius threatens various acts of violence towards Evans: cutting his throat in the park, cutting "all his two stones," and killing him (1.4.102-113). Caius's discovery of Simple in his closet is a function of the limited space and close quarters of the domestic environment, and his threats of violence, including the threat of sexual violence, are not out of place in his home. This scene indicates early in the play that the domestic environment is not a place where characters may successfully hide or feel safe. It is not private; it is open; it is under careful surveillance. It is also a place that will tolerate violence or the threat of violence.

The urban environment in general is set up for careful surveillance. A street in Windsor serves as the setting for an unpleasant encounter between Meg Page and Frank Ford. Frank discovers that Meg is on the way to see his wife, and he fantasizes about catching his wife with Falstaff while his neighbors look on: "Good plots! They are laid; and our revolted wives share damnation

together. Well, I will take him, then torture my wife, pluck the borrowed veil of modesty from the so-seeming Mistress Page, divulge Page himself for a secure and willful Actaeon; and to these violent proceedings all my neighbors shall cry aim” (3.2.34-9). If Frank has anything to say about it, he will show himself to be the master of his domestic environment by publicly torturing his wife and humiliating the Pages as his neighbors cheer him on. In a way, Frank’s violent fantasy seems like some kind of disease brought on by the environment itself, as if living in close contact with others both exposes him to ridicule and encourages him to publicly beat and humiliate his wife and her friend. Although the play presents Frank Ford’s jealousy as extreme, it is also clear that there are few checks on his extreme behavior; he feels he has the right to suspect his wife, to disrupt her life on the basis of a suspicion, and to involve “all the officers in Windsor” (3.3.98) to expose her. It is doubtful that she would be afforded the same privilege if the situation were reversed.

Even details that may or may not be true suggest plausible actions that are extreme and unreasonable. During Alice Ford’s second assignation with Falstaff, Meg Page reports, “three of Master Ford’s brothers watch the door with pistols, that none shall issue out” (4.2.44-5), and when Falstaff proposes various hiding places within the house, Alice tells him, “There is no hiding you in the house” (4.2.56-7). These claims are not verified, but they seem to be plausible based on what we are shown about Frank Ford’s temperament. In addition, Ford’s beating of Falstaff, whom he believes to be a woman, shows that Alice Ford lives under the threat of real violence in her house.

It is possible to object that because they are held up to be laughed at, these situations should be dismissed as comedic fantasies that have no basis in real practice or attitudes. It would be a mistake to do so. As the introduction to *The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* reminds readers, “feminist critics also recognize that the greatest artists do not necessarily duplicate in their art the orthodoxies of their culture; they may exploit them to create character or intensify conflict; they may struggle with, criticize, or transcend them. Shakespeare, it would seem, encompasses more and preaches less than most authors.”<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare’s plays do not always invite laughter uncritically or unproblematically.<sup>16</sup> The

depiction of domestic abuse and the invitation to laughter about domestic abuse do not necessarily indicate tolerance or acceptance.

Objects of ridicule should also not be dismissed as fantasies that exist entirely outside the realm of the real. Jokes about domestic abuse have currency in the world in which Shakespeare's plays were written because they operate within the boundaries of what is possible and socially acceptable; the jokes about domestic abuse in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* must reflect to some extent Renaissance England's real problems with domestic abuse. The dominant agents in culture define the scope of what is appropriate material for jokes. In our culture as in Shakespeare's, jokes almost always come at the expense of women or minorities. As Angela Watson reminds teachers when encountering defensiveness and denial about racial disparities in America, "I'm also not going to make excuses about how it's just a joke and everyone says it so people should stop being offended by everything. Remember, the offense is rooted in systemic oppression and marginalization over hundreds of years."<sup>17</sup> Like racist humor, domestic abuse humor is rooted in thousands of years of systemic oppression and marginalization, and it goes without saying that it needs to be examined. The work has already begun; Stefan Horlacher points out that laughter has functioned throughout history to reinforce sexism, patriarchal norms, and misogyny, and he brilliantly synthesizes a variety of sources to support his assertion:

Analysing the possible subversion or affirmation of gender identities through humour, the comic, and laughter becomes even more relevant if we consider Sigmund Freud's line of argument that we 'are inclined to give the *thought* the benefit of what has pleased us in the *form* of the joke', so that we 'are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure' (162). From this it follows that to 'perceive a situation as humorous causes it to appear less discriminatory, and more acceptable' (Bill and Naus 659). But if sexism 'disguised by and delivered through humor' is potentially interpreted 'as being harmless and innocent' (646), and thus tends to escape criticism altogether, if '[p]erceiving and labeling an incident as humorous appears to diminish its sexist content' (660), this only increases the necessity for a critical analysis of the 'comic mode' (Lodge 170) with special attention to its ability

to hide patriarchal, sexist, and even misogynist tendencies in literature, plays, films, and other media.<sup>18</sup>

In the preceding ways, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* presents the domestic environment as a place of extreme male violence, almost always directed against women, where women are subject to suspicion and jealousy and where they have no reasonable expectation of privacy. Such living conditions are obviously unjust, and the play suggests that a change of environment is necessary to achieve a fair solution to the problem of injustice in the domestic environment.

Repairing to the more natural environment of Windsor Park at the end of the play serves several purposes. It marks the reconciliation between Frank and Alice Ford; it serves as Falstaff's ultimate punishment for disrupting the domestic environment; most importantly, it provides the cover that Anne Page needs to avoid marrying either of the suitors favored by her parents and assert her own choice of husband. The threat of domestic violence earlier in the play is dissipated by the public shaming and corporal punishment of Falstaff, who deserves his punishment and publicly admits his guilt: "I was three or four times in the thought they were not fairies; and yet the guiltiness of my mind, the sudden surprise of my powers, drove the grossness of the foppery into a received belief, in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and reason, that they were fairies. See now how wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent when 'tis upon ill employment!" (5.5.121-7). Falstaff confesses to guiltiness and admits that his wit was upon ill employment. He does not equivocate, even though he complains a little about being ridiculed by Evans. A little further on in the same scene, he accepts his treatment as fair: "Well, I am your theme. You have the start of me. I am dejected. I am not able to answer the Welsh flannel. Ignorance itself is a plummet o'er me. Use me as you will" (5.5.159-62). Falstaff's remorse eliminates the need for further violence or humiliation. The serious, authoritarian, violent elements of the urban and domestic environment are displaced by the benevolent comic cheer that seems to have been made possible by the natural environment.

There are some complications when thinking of Windsor Park as part of the natural environment; it is obviously some mixture of natural and urban. Can we credibly refer to it as a natural



environment if it is essentially a garden? The deforestation that is still apparent today had already begun; Mistress Quickly and her fairies hide in a saw pit (4.4.53). The fields created when the trees of the park were harvested are clearly delineated today. A satellite photograph shows a cultivated, ordered space, at least in parts. It has just a tiny, tiny bit in common with Heathrow Airport a couple of miles to the east. But Windsor Park was almost certainly “wilder” than it appears today, and it would be a mistake to think of it as an extension of the urban environment of the town. The naturalness of Windsor Forest is emphasized by Mistress Quickly, playing the Fairy Queen. Bespeaking a harmony between the culture of men and the natural environment, she chants:

The several chairs of order look you scour  
 With juice of balm and every precious flower.  
 Each fair installment, coat, and several crest  
 With loyal blazon evermore be blest!  
 And nightly, meadow fairies, look you sing,  
 Like to the Garter's compass, in a ring.  
 Th'expressure that it bears, green let it be,  
 More fertile-fresh than all the field to see;  
 And "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" write  
 In em'rald tufts, flow'rs purple, blue, and white,  
 Like sapphire, pearl, and rich embroidery,  
 Buckled below fair knighthood's bending knee;  
 Fairies use flowers for their charactery. (5.5.60-72)

The denizens of the urban environment of Windsor are transformed into representatives of the natural environment of the park. Falstaff's bestial behavior leads to his adoption of bestial language and bestial appendages. The tendency of literature to depict the natural environment as dangerous and mysterious is repurposed to the benefit of Anne Page, who takes advantage of the chaos in the forest to assert her wish to choose her own husband. In the natural environment, removed from the home, city, and court, justice can play out free from the restrictions, obstructions, and obscurities of urban life.

It is interesting that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the decision of the Fords and Pages to pursue ultimate revenge against Falstaff in the natural environment and Anne Page's ability to choose to marry Fenton. Anne has the freedom to

select her own husband precisely because her parents have chosen to publicly shame Falstaff for pursuing illicit sexual relationships with the two wives. It serves as an interesting critique of parental prerogative to suggest that acceding to her parents' choice of husband is unnatural and to suggest that choosing for herself is natural.

I am surprised by the tendency for critics to see the events of the play through the perspective of the male characters and to treat the women as accessories. Slights, for example, spends most of her time exploring Falstaff's experiences in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and her observations about the play privilege the male perspective:

The narrative patterns of *The Merry Wives* draw heavily on the conventions of the pastoral tradition and dramatize its assumption that outside the pressures and rigidities of sophisticated society people can achieve harmony with their environment. In one line of action, a man embroiled in conflict retires to a natural setting, where, after a period of contemplation, he puts away his sword, makes peace with his enemy, and re-enters society as a peacemaker and moral instructor. In another plot line, a young aristocrat, who is good at heart but corrupted by worldly society (indicated by his mercenary motives and reputation for profligacy), falls in love with a village lass. Purified by the experience, he overcomes obstacles and wins her hand in marriage. In the main plot, a knightly exile from court enters a rural society where, although evil exists, moral issues are simplified and clarified and where his pride is humbled. Impelled by disappointment in love, he moves further from man-made institutions into the natural world until he reaches a sacred place where the human and divine meet. Here he experiences humiliation and a revelation about the natural sources of social harmony and then re-enters society a sadder but wiser man.<sup>19</sup>

This passage begins with an idea that is very much in line with what I am arguing: harmony is to be found in the natural environment through a temporary repudiation of the urban environment's structures of life, thought, and action. But to suggest that it is the experiences of Evans, Fenton, and Falstaff that are central to this idea is to fall into the trap of thinking about the relationship between city and country only in terms of pastoral. It is striking

that in thinking about a play titled *The Merry Wives of Windsor* a critic should focus on the experiences of the male characters and neglect or subordinate the experiences of the female characters.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, Anne Page does not have much to say, and several male characters revolve around her in interesting ways, but her disobedience and assertion of her own wishes are essential features of the play. That *Slights* treats it as incidental to the fulfillment of Fenton's good nature is surprising. That *Slights* would ignore the influence that Meg Page and Alice Ford have on the development of Falstaff's character is equally surprising.

This illustrates an important reason why we must develop a different critical approach to the city/country dichotomy in literature. Attributing it to pastoral impulses not only diminishes environments to a binary (nature/not nature), but it tends to privilege a male perspective in a way that is not always appropriate.

The progress of Hermia and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains elements of the progress of Alice Ford and Meg and Anne Page, and it gives the same general impression as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: that it is necessary for women to leave the urban environment to pursue justice for themselves. The play establishes the injustice and violence of the court in several ways at the beginning. Theseus's statement about his courtship of Hippolyta links marriage and abuse in the play's first lines: "I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries; / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling" (1.1.16-9). And even though Theseus offers to wed Hippolyta in a different key than he wooed her in, the terms he uses to describe the wedding, pomp and triumph, suggest that the reveling will come at her expense.<sup>21</sup> This moment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is evidence of a phenomenon that Jan Kott identifies in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*: "In no other tragedy, or comedy, of his, except *Troilus and Cressida*, is the eroticism expressed so brutally."<sup>22</sup> Kott, as most others seem to do, examines the eroticism of the play independent from ideas of marriage, but the brutal eroticism of the play has at least something to do with the link between marriage and brutality that Theseus establishes at the outset.

Hermia's treatment early in the play shows the role that the state can have in perpetuating the link between marriage and violence.

Her father Egeus seems willing to see her dead if he cannot bend her to his will: "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" (1.1.42-5). Theseus offers Hermia little choice, "Either to die the death or to abjure / Forever the society of men" (1.1.65-6). Facing this threat, Lysander proposes to meet Hermia in the woods outside Athens and flee to the house of his widow aunt. There, they may be married in a place where "the sharp Athenian law / Cannot pursue" them (1.1.162-3). Theseus and Egeus make it clear that the will of the father and the will of the ruler must always override the will of daughters in the ancient Athens of the play. There may be hope that Lysander is not cut from the same cloth as Egeus and Theseus, and that he will remain concerned about what she wants, but there is no way to resist and stay; Hermia and Lysander must leave the city behind and enter the natural environment if they want to live according to their own will.

We could attempt to justify or explain the actions of Theseus and Egeus in a few ways. Egeus invokes "the ancient privilege of Athens" (1.1.41) in his suit to Theseus, and Theseus tells Hermia, "To you your father should be as a god" (1.1.47); they represent ancient attitudes that are not current, one could argue, so we should accept them as relics of a bygone age. On the other hand, maybe we could say that they are not being sincere, and they don't actually intend to harm Hermia. But the point of this moment in the play is that it encourages the audience to sympathize with Hermia; it is her actions we should look to justify and explain. Her treatment by Egeus and Theseus is designed to generate outrage, which justifies her decision to flee to the forest.

Fairness and English law at the time the play was written require Hermia's consent to marry. The removal of her consent would have shocked and worried most audiences for this play when it was first performed. The law allowed a woman to choose her own husband as long as she had reached the age of consent. I like how Stephen Orgel states it in *Impersonations*: "English fathers were legally entitled to arrange their daughters' marriages as they saw fit, and of course had control of all property that accompanied the daughter; but until 1604 the legal age of consent was twelve for women (fourteen for men), which meant that daughters over

the age of twelve were also legally entitled to arrange their own marriages. They might make themselves paupers by doing so, but they could not be stopped.<sup>23</sup> Early modern English audiences would have recognized Hermia's right to arrange her own marriage, and she clearly chooses Lysander. The severe attitude of Egeus and Theseus would heighten the audience's indignation at Hermia's mistreatment. Early modern English audiences would perceive the difference between Theseus's laws and their own laws; the play encourages the audience to take Hermia's side in this dispute.

Hermia's choices may be constrained in various real ways, but Hermia gets what she wants by play's end, just as Alice Ford and Meg and Anne Page get what they want.<sup>24</sup> She flees the restrictive urban environment and enters a natural environment that affords her the freedom to arrange her own marriage.

How then are we to take the removal of Titania's consent? Although she lives in the natural environment, she doesn't enjoy the same freedom that Hermia and Helena do in that environment. Quite the opposite. The natural environment is the setting for Titania's subjugation and humiliation at the hands of Oberon.

In important ways, Titania and Oberon are presented in the play as the masters of the natural environment. They have some ability to consciously control and command it, but the larger part of their power seems to be influencing it indirectly through their state of mind. Titania claims that their quarrel over the changeling Indian boy is reflected in certain irregularities in the environment:

The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts  
 Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,  
 And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown  
 An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds  
 Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,  
 The childing autumn, angry winter, change  
 Their wonted liveries, and the mazéd world  
 By their increase now knows not which is which.  
 (2.1.105-114)

Their quarrel is causing the seasons to overlap, and the overlap of the seasons is causing disorder. Titania continues by claiming that the disorder evident in nature is the direct result of their quarrel. She tells Oberon, "And this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension. / We are their parents and original"

(2.1.115-17). That word “parents” comes with a host of associations. As the parents of the natural environment and its problems, their authority and responsibility would not have been considered to be coequal. The play frames their division of responsibility for the natural environment in terms of the division of labor and responsibility in a marital relationship, and the play establishes the power that comes with parental and paternal prerogative at the very beginning. As the natural environment’s father, then, Oberon would feel entitled to treat it as his property. As Titania’s husband, he would be justified in assuming dominance over her. Titania seems to be urging Oberon to take responsibility for his role in the disarray in the natural environment, but he seems more concerned with taking possession of the Indian child than fixing the disorder that he is responsible for creating. Oberon restores order at the end of the play, but only after he forces Titania to submit to his will. Surely the play can’t be suggesting that heteronormative patriarchy must be enforced to maintain order in the natural world.

While *The Merry Wives of Windsor* consistently shows the masculine claim to dominance and superiority to be a sham, Oberon’s treatment of Titania might seem to reflect more orthodox patriarchal attitudes. He tries to force her to do something that she doesn’t want to do, and when she refuses, he forces her to fall in love with Bottom temporarily. Titania loses what she wants and has her consent taken away by Oberon, who seems to delight in humiliating his wife without having to face any consequences.

From a certain perspective, however, Oberon’s triumph over Titania diminishes him. When he fantasizes about forcing Titania to fall in love with animals, he shows how little he cares about his queen and how highly he values his own amusement and his own selfish fancies:

Having once this juice,  
 I’ll watch Titania when she is asleep  
 And drop the liquor of it in her eyes.  
 The next thing then she waking looks upon,  
 Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,  
 On meddling monkey, or on busy ape,  
 She shall pursue it with the soul of love.  
 And ere I take this charm from off her sight,  
 As I can take it with another herb,  
 I’ll make her render up her page to me. (2.1.176-85)

He'll *watch*. He'll *make* her. He seems to be completely unaware that in defiling his queen in this way, he defiles himself. And this is the being who has the privilege of blessing the marriages at the end of the play.

Despite the patriarchal "all-clear" sounded by Theseus and Oberon at play's end, patriarchal prerogative has in fact been significantly diminished. By conflating Oberon's presumed mastery over his wife, and over matrimony in general, with his presumed mastery over the natural environment, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows how men act against their own best interests when they perpetuate odious notions of male rapacity and privilege that they are allowed to impose equally on women and the environment.

Shakespeare's plays often show how the uncompromising exercise of patriarchal privilege can be self-defeating. Who can sympathize with Egeus in expressing his desire to have Hermia dead if he cannot force her to marry Demetrius? What reasonable person would consider the annihilation of a family member to be an appropriate consequence of that family member's disobedience? Even as property, it seems reasonable to believe that she would have more value alive than dead. As it is, Hermia flees rather than bend to the will of her father and Theseus, and Egeus stands to lose his daughter one way or another. And as Stephanie Chamberlain points out, Egeus's preference for Demetrius may not even be justifiable from a strictly practical point of view. Citing Lysander's assertion of his fitness as Hermia's suitor in Act 1, Chamberlain writes, "I would have to say that Lysander presents a solid and convincing case for himself as more than qualified to court the much beloved Hermia. . . . Based upon Lysander's argument, this father's patriarchal claims seem highly irrational."<sup>25</sup> In seeming to disregard Lysander's fitness as a suitor, Egeus seems determined to act against his own best interests in some ways.

Demetrius attempts to extend the patriarchal authority of Athens into the wild and finds his own consent taken away. Helena gets what she wants through a trick, and even though the source of the trick is naturally derived, she does not get what she wants simply by leaving the urban environment and benefiting from the liberating egalitarianism of the natural environment. Should we see Demetrius's fate as just deserts for telling Helena he is sick when he looks at her (2.1.212), for threatening to leave her "to

the mercy of wild beasts” (2.1.228) and to do her “mischief in the wood” (2.1.237)? That would seem to argue against my claims. Should we just say that all is well that ends well? His motivation matters, and although he finds himself in the forest, he brings with him the constraints that Theseus and Egeus placed on Hermia at the beginning of the play. He says to Helena,

Where is Lysander and fair Hermia?  
 The one I'll slay; the other slayeth me.  
 Thou told'st me they were stol'n unto this wood;  
 And here am I, and wood within this wood  
 Because I cannot meet my Hermia. (2.1.189-93)

Demetrius hasn't come to nature to live beyond the reach of patriarchal society; he has come to extend that reach from the court into the natural environment and impose his will on Hermia and Lysander. In that he is frustrated, driven “wood within this wood.”

Oberon's triumph over Titania is as self-defeating as Egeus's and Demetrius's attempts to assert patriarchal prerogatives. He cuckolds himself in the process of asserting his dominance, just as Ford is in the process of doing in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The reasonable response is modeled by George Page; when George is confronted by the possibility that Meg is being pursued by Falstaff, he says, “If he should intend this voyage toward my wife, I would turn her loose to him; and what he gets more of her than sharp words, let it lie on my head” (2.1.171-4); when he learns that Anne has eloped with Fenton, his response is, “Well, what remedy? Fenton, heaven give thee joy! / What cannot be eschewed must be embraced” (5.5.230-231). It is this attitude that spurs Frank Ford earlier in the play to dismiss George as “a secure ass” (2.2.288), but obviously it is Frank who appears the greater fool. Better to be a secure ass than an insecure ass, the plays seem to suggest. Or cuckold to an ass.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, men may be the masters of their homes and cities, but when they try to assert their dominance or superiority in the natural environment, they look foolish. For the most part, what women bring to the natural environment in these plays is simply a desire to have their wishes respected. They are often satisfied. Examining these plays in terms of pastoral conventions limits our ability to think about relationships between men and women



outside the narrow confines of patriarchy. It tempts us to privilege a man's perspective and dismiss abuse as humor. It discourages us from questioning relationships between people and the natural environment.

### Notes

1. William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, (1936; New York: New Directions, 1968), 115.

2. For evidence of the critical extension of Empson's basic premise, see Lawrence Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972). Empson implies that a key feature of pastoral is "putting the complex into the simple" (22), and Lerner writes, "In this book I accept Empson's extension of the term... The starting point of this book is that pastoral is a literary convention that conforms to a social contrast and a psychological attitude; that this attitude outlived the death of the form in the eighteenth century; and that there is therefore a good deal of the pastoral impulse in literature that is not pastoral in form—just as there were pastorals in the sixteenth century that observed no more than the mechanics of the tradition" (39). Lerner also writes, "Much—perhaps most—pastoral is not about the court-country contrast at all, nor even about any similar sophisticated-simple contrast. It is about love and death" (27).

3. Camille Wells Slight, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 155.

4. Louis Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form," *ELH* 50.3 (1983): 416.

5. "Generous" (415) is the word Louis Montrose uses to describe the increasing use of "pastoral" he observed in the early 1980s.

6. C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*, (1959; New York: World Publishing Company, 1963), 145.

7. In *The Uses of Nostalgia*, Lerner identifies pastoral as a "provincial-mediated" (21) mode, which is a tidy way of making the point, following Empson, that it might be a mistake to think of pastoral as proletarian literature.

8. Montrose, "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds," 416-8.

9. Empson seems to doubt his own intuition: "My own difficulty about proletarian literature is that when it comes off I find I am taking it as pastoral literature; I read into it, or find that the author has secretly put into it, these more subtle, more far-reaching, and I think more permanent, ideas" (20).

10. Sylvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3.

11. Jeanne Addison Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 24-5.

12. Quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 7th edition (New York: Pearson, 2014).

13. Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 35.

14. This is aside from the question of whether a male actor can adequately or credibly represent a woman. I would like to sidestep the performance question and treat the identity of characters as a stable fiction. For an exploration of the performance question, see Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild* 13-14.

15. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Green, and Carol Thomas Neely, introduction to *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 4.

16. See Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare and the Awareness of the Audience* (New York: MacMillan, 1985). According to Berry, sometimes the invitation to laughter can produce guilt: "in the later stages [of *Twelfth Night*] the ultimate theatrical effect of guilt requires that we should have participated fully in the garden scene. There is a certain moral responsibility, even culpability, which the audience assumes in *Twelfth Night*: I don't think the play can be understood without it" (64).

17. Angela Watson, "10 Things Every Teacher Should Know When Talking About Race," *The Cornerstone for Teachers* (blog), accessed June 24, 2019, <http://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race/>.

18. Stephan Horlacher, "A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter," in *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, ed. Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stephan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 18.

19. Slights, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*, 168-7.

20. Slights bases some of her conclusions on the characteristics of Renaissance pastoral established by Walter R. Davis. Slights, *Shakespeare's Comic Commonwealths*, 164-169. Roberts writes about the limitations of Davis's model for Renaissance pastoral, noting that it calls for a hero who is "always a male." Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 27.

21. Cleopatra's extreme aversion to being led in triumph through the streets of Rome in *Antony and Cleopatra* comes to mind. She says, "Now, Iras, what think'st thou? / Thou an Egyptian puppet shall be shown / In Rome as well as I. Mechanic slaves / With greasy aprons, rules, and hammers shall / Uplift us to the view. In their thick breaths, / Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclosed / And forced to drink their vapor" (5.2.207-13).

22. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: Norton, 1974), 218.

23. Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

24. Hermia and Lysander seem to be constrained by patriarchal heteronormativity, just as Anne Page is in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

25. Stephanie Chamberlain, "The Law of the Father: Patriarchal Economy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* 11 (2011): 35.