“All imagination compact:”

The Ambiguous Relationship between Human Nature and Nonhuman Nature in Shakespeare’s *A* *Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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Introduction

Underneath the façade of midsummer celebration, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* probes the mysterious Elizabethan relationship between human and nonhuman nature. The common belief at this time saw nature as an almighty force of God; yet, there were many contradicting opinions as to where humans belonged in regards to the natural world. Two of the most influential works of the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne's "Of Cannibals", and Thomas Wilson's *The Art of Rhetoric,* contributed to the period's ambiguous understanding of humanity's relationship with nature, as the two texts presented opposing ideas regarding nature's presence. Shakespeare presents ideas similar to those of both Montaigne and Wilson’s, leading us to question whether the indulgence of wild human nature within the forest setting of *A* *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the result of a hostile physical environment, or if the natural environment is a reflection of humans’ inner animalistic selves. *A* *Midsummer Night’s Dream* allows for both the benign potential of humans living in harmony with beauteous nature, and the malevolent possibility of humans living in brutish nature. On the one hand, the play suggests that human nature grows wild when in contact with dangerous non-human nature, demonstrating Wilson’s idea of nonhuman nature as something to be feared. Yet, other moments within the play lead us to believe Montaigne’s assessment of nature, as the text suggests that paradisal nonhuman nature is despoiled by its contact with human nature. These two perspectives of nature alternate within the text, and ultimately reflect both the idealized and demonized versions of human nature versus nonhuman nature. This idea is reinforced by the play’s fluid ability to move from one perspective of nature to the other, ultimately representing nature as subjective within our human imagination.

The two contrasting ideas of human nature concerning nonhuman nature reflect early modern anxieties and uncertainties about the natural world, and this play ultimately tackles both portrayals as a reflection of our imagination. As the title of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* suggests, our belief is that nature is a human creation, and like dreams, they survive only through our imagination. Whether we see the landscape that Shakespeare's language is asking us to imagine as a pastoral paradise or a degraded wasteland, we are ultimately the creators of that perceived version of the natural world. This is what allows Shakespeare to represent both the benign and malevolent qualities of the natural world. These diverse conceptions are presented to us through language, and we, as audiences and readers, are given the materials to create a landscape that fits either interpretation. In moments of the text where we see glimpses of Montaigne's arguments, we are also given counter-arguments that are similar to Wilson's, which provides audiences and readers with the tools to explore all facets of nature. By studying this play and the place of nature in Shakespeare’s culture, we can further unravel the ambiguous description of human nature in relation to nonhuman nature, and gain a better understanding of how dueling perspectives allow for open-ended interpretations in literature.

Nature in the Sixteenth-Century

Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a story that can be thought of as a mirror of the human experience during the Elizabethan period. Throughout the mid-sixteenth century, when *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was first performed, many areas of Europe were disturbed by the geological event known as the Little Ice Age. The Little Ice Age saw years of cold and dry weather, beginning in the late fifteenth century and extending into the early nineteenth century. Cold summers and excruciating winters drastically impacted the quality of life as early modernists had become accustomed to; destruction of crops, diminishing chances of livestock survival, and the increasing likelihood of pathogens and disease were all side effects of the changing climate (Markley 132). As a result of this environmental emergency, art and culture produced during the sixteenth century sought to understand the mysterious relationship between human nature and nonhuman nature. However, the differing views of writers regarding this matter furthered the debates regarding man’s place within the natural world.

The effects of prolonged cold and dry winters led to a rise in unemployment and economic difficulties, as these factors were dependent on the survival of crops and livestock for many early modern people. In order to make a profit, forestry industries of the Elizabethan period believed they could remedy economic difficulties through mass deforestation, which ultimately resulted in further failure to maintain sustainable life (Nardizzi 4). These results led some scholars, including Wilson, to believe that nature’s disturbed powers were to blame for all of humanities’ grievances; due to the failure of crops and other areas that supported one’s livelihood, scholars like Wilson saw nature as a destructive force against human nature. However, since there were no particular sciences to conclude practical explanations for this geological event, early modern men and women turned to each other for explanations of the famine, disease, and social strife that they were facing. These answers quickly turned to that of blame as humanity began to turn on one another, supporting Montaignian ideas that pin humans to be the fault for the disruption of nature. For example, the rise of economic disparity and disease produced reactionary scapegoating and increased criminal activity, as the increasingly hostile climate change acted as an enabler for troubling action to take place (Markley 135). People of minority groups (i.e., those of non-Christian faith, women, racialized minorities, etc.) were scrutinized during this time, as their targeted group fell victim to blame for the indirect causation of the Little Ice Age’s consequences (Behringer 336). The most prominent example of these violent acts of blame would be the surge of crimes attributed to witchcraft. According to recent studies of cultural responses to climate change, witches were blamed for unknown diseases, the loss of livestock, geological effects such as late frost, etc., which led to violent witch trials that subjected poor women and widows to torture and murder (Behringer 341). Ultimately, the view of nature that Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” presents drastically differs from what can be found in Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric*; however, similar to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, they both attempt to understand the natural world in which they were writing in. These sixteenth-century sources will allow us to understand the dualistic tradition which Shakespeare was working within, and further our consideration for Shakespeare’s engagement with the period’s complex definition of nature.

Understanding Nature as Benign: Montaigne and Shakespeare

Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" explores the idea of untouched nonhuman nature through his observation of Brazilian "savages" who live according to the laws of nature, and do not strive to accomplish anything beyond that order. By contrast, Montaigne describes how society has disrupted nature by the art of our own human "interventions" (102), and that we have strayed so far from the common order of natural life that we have become the savages we thought we had eradicated, and proposed that civilized individuals are the true savages. In "Of Cannibals,” Montaigne observes nature in its simplest state, and describes how apparently “civilized” man has further uncivilized himself by despoiling nature through human intervention:

They are even savage, as we call those fruites wilde, which nature of hir selfe, and of hir ordinarie progresse hath produced: whereas indeede, they are those which ourselves have altered by our artificiall divises, and diverted from their common order, we should rather terme savage. In those are the true and most profitable vertues, and naturall properties most lively and vigorous, which in these we have bastardized, applying them to the pleasure of our corrupted taste. And if notwithstanding, in divers fruites of those countries that were never tilled, we shall finde, that in respect of ours they are most excellent, and as delicate vnto our taste; there is no reason, arte should gaine the point of honour of our great and puissant mother Nature. We have so much by our inventions, surcharged the beauties and riches of her workes, that we have altogether over-choaked her: yet where ever her puritie shineth, she makes our vaine, and frivolous enterprises woonderfully ashamed (102).

Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” redefines the term “savage,” declaring that the people of Brazilian tribes are one with nature, and that those who “diverge from the common order” (i.e., the civilized individual who subjects nonhuman nature to human intervention) are the ones who are the true savages, while the latter are the true “wild” creatures who have degraded nature by subjecting it to their vices and ornaments of destruction (102). Ultimately, Montaigne’s essay articulates the notion of how the splendour of “our great and puissant mother Nature” (102) has been irreversibly destroyed by selfish acts of man. There are similarities between this vision of nature and the description of nature’s benevolence as presented in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Although Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals” was not translated into English until 1603, the similarities between Montaigne and Shakespeare’s portrayal of nature as a pristine, beautiful place could lead us to believe that Shakespeare may have had access to the original French version, which was published in 1580. The proposed mannerly balance between human nature and nonhuman nature within *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* echoes that of Montaigne’s idea of the natural order, as Shakespeare features many instances of the forest being better off when left untouched by humans.

In various moments throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare describes nature as a land of pastoral bounty and beauty. The first instance of this is in Act One, where Hermia and Demetrius discuss their plans to meet in the woods outside Athenian law. Hermia provides an idealistic description of the forest as a place of communion and romance:

And in the wood, where often you and I

Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie

Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,

There Lysander and myself shall meet,

And thence from Athens turn away our eyes,

To seek new friends and strange companies (Hermia, 1.1.214-19).

Here, the natural world is alluded to as a place of refuge from the cruelty of civilization, thus presenting the natural setting as a paradise of innocence and beauty. Another example of nature’s bounty can be drawn from Oberon’s description of nature in Act Two, where he maps out the beauty of nature for Robin:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,

Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,

Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,

With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.

There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,

Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight; (Oberon, 2.1.249-54).

However, despite the splendour that these characters witness, their admiration of nature is almost always poisoned by their manipulation of nature’s ornaments to serve their destructive purposes. As previously mentioned, the deforestation crisis of early modern England was the result of an abusive relationship with the land’s natural resources; this may have acted as an inspiration for Shakespeare, for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* describes similar instances where characters abuse objects of the land for personal gain. There are various moments throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where natural objects of the forest (flowers, insects, etc.) are exploited, which not only highlights the original beauty of the natural world by contrast, but demonstrates the human potential to degrade nature. Here, Oberon describes to Robin how he will manipulate nature's ornaments (i.e., a flower) to force Titania into falling in love with a creature of nature:

Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell:

It fell upon a little western flower,

Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound,

And maidens call it love-in-idleness.

Fetch me that flower: the herb I showed thee once.

The juice of it, on sleeping eyelids laid,

Will make or man or woman madly dote

Upon the next live creature that it sees.

[…]

I’ll watch Titania when she is asleep

And drop the liquor of it in her eyes.

The next thing when 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 (Oberon, 2.1.165-82).

Once Oberon successfully completes his plan, and Titania falls in love with the now-transformed Bottom, Titania orders her fairies to mutilate the natural environment to serve her new lover:

Be kind and courteous to this gentleman.

Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes.

Feed him with apricots and dewberries,

With purple grapes, green figs and mulberries.

The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,

And for night-tapers, crop their waxen thighs

And light them at the fiery glow-worm’s eyes,

To have my love to bed and to arise;

And pluck the wings from painted butterflies

To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes (Titania, 2.2.158-67).

Similar to Titania plucking the wings of butterflies, Bottom asks Cobweb to kill a bee by the “weapons of your hand” (4.1.11), implying an intimate and brutal murder:

Monsieur Cobweb, good Monsieur, get you your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and good Monsieur, bring me the honey bag. Do not fret yourself too much in action, Monsieur; good Monsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not. I would be loath to have you overthrown with a honey-bag (Bottom, 4.1.10-6).

In the context of exploring the natural environment in this text, we consider the fairies members of humanity, as they are not distinctively born of nonhuman nature; considering that the fairy characters are performed by humans, we can assume that their actions are reflective of mankind, and not of the natural world. Therefore, these examples illuminate human nature manipulating the beauty of nonhuman nature to fulfil selfish desires. The most prominent example of this abuse of power over nature can be seen in Oberon’s use of the flower. Through Robin, Oberon uses the flower to manipulate others into falling in love with both intended and unintended partners. Although Oberon does intend to use the flower to aid Helena in her pursuit of Demetrius, for he sees them fighting and offers to “Anoint his eyes / [so that] he may prove / More fond of her, than she upon her love” (2.1.261-5), his main objective is to punish Titania by forcing her to fall in love with a beastly creature (2.1.180). Furthermore, the flower points to the play’s prevalent theme of manipulating nature’s creations and objects. The flower is valuable to our understanding of how the play represents human interference with the natural order, as it acts as an instrument for Oberon’s disturbances (Chaudhuri 166). In the same way that Oberon has manipulated the characters of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he has also manipulated nature to serve his disruptive desires. Returning to Montaigne's description of the natural world, we can see that the natural ornaments of nature (flowers, grass, trees, etc.) are the epitomes of splendour. Therefore, in manipulating the environment beyond its intended purpose, the civilized individual has consequently destroyed the beauty of nature. The idea of nature being manipulated beyond its intended purposes aligns with the power the Athenians and the fairies believe they have over the natural world.

As proposed in Montaigne’s argument, the benign perspective of nature presents its magnificent qualities to be destroyed in the presence of human nature. Shakespeare accomplishes this in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by employing language that is used to degrade not only nature, but also the self. There are various instances in the text where characters describe themselves, and each other, as monsters and animals. Here, in order to degrade both herself and Demetrius, Helena refers to wild creatures:

I am as ugly as a bear,

For beasts that meet me run away for fear;

Therefore no marvel through Demetrius

Do, as a monster, fly my presence thus (Helena, 2.2.98-101).

Another example of degraded language can be seen in Lysander’s reaction to Hermia, once he had been made to fall in love with Helena by the juice of the flower. Here, Lysander refers to himself as a serpent, and to Hermia as both a cat, and a vile creature:

Hang off, thou cat, thou burr, vile thing let loose,

Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent (Lysander, 3.2.260-1).

Finally, Hermia employs degrading language to reject and insult Demetrius:

O me, you juggler, you canker-blossom,

You thief of love! What, have you come by night

And stolen my love’s heart from him? (Hermia, 3.2.282-84).

These examples indicate that the characters’ attempts to degrade one’s self and others through language also belittles the creations of nature that they describe. Although the characters express fear of these wild animals by using their names to insult and strike terror, the characters’ clearly stated intentions of causing harm to one another are where the true threat lies, indicating that the danger within the forest comes from human nature and not the physical environment itself.

A close reading of Helena and Demetrius’s accusations of one another being “beasts” (2.1) can further develop our understanding of how Shakespeare uses language to show nature being degraded by humans. The term ‘savage,’ as used in the early modern period to describe individuals who live outside modern civilization, is interchangeable with the word ‘beast.’ The two words were commonly used as a derogatory language to relate someone's behaviour to that of a violent or uncontrollable animal or force within the natural world, and provoke fear from individuals when they believe they have encountered such creature (MacKenzie 101). In this sense, ‘beast’ does not refer to an animal, but rather an uncivilized human. There are various moments in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Shakespeare uses the synonym for savage (i.e., beast) to describe the violent treatment the Athenians give one another. The most prominent of examples are the interactions between Helena and Demetrius, as Helena will frequently degrade herself in her attempts to court Demetrius. For example, in Act Two, Helena uses degraded language when she begs for Demetrius to abuse her like a dog:

And even for that do I love you the more.

I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,

The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.

Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,

Neglect me, loose 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? (Helena, 2.1.202-10).

Demetrius proceeds to tell Helena that he cannot stand the sight of her, and she eventually prompts him to respond with the threat of abandoning her alone in the woods to be at “the mercy of wild beasts” (2.1.228). Following Demetrius’s threat, Helena responds with “the wildest hath not such a heart as you” (2.1.229). Montaigne's “Of Cannibals” helps provide context for this response, as the employment of the term “wildest” echoes Montaigne’s use of the word “wild” to describe the civilized individual. Here, Helena tells Demetrius that he is wilder than any beast, as he is crueler than any uncivilized creature or being. Demetrius reaffirms his bestiality by assuring Helena that it is he who “shall do thee mischief in the wood” (2.1.37); further reiterating the fact that Demetrius is the threat, not the natural environment. This exchange between Helena and Demetrius follows the trajectory of degrading language being used by Shakespeare to demonstrate not only the nature of human relationships, but also the greater theme of human nature when involved with nonhuman nature. Helena first uses the term “spaniel” (2.1.205) to degrade herself for Demetrius to accept her. According to Sukanta Chaudhuri, the word “use” is being utilized here in the sense of “ill-treatment” (163). However, I argue that this is an instance of Shakespeare’s exploitation of language to suit double meanings. Although Helena does intend for Demetrius to figuratively ‘use’ her through cruelty, the word ‘use’ is also being employed literally, meaning that Helena wants to be used in the sense that she wants to belong to or be objectified by Demetrius. Because Helena is describing her relationship with Demetrius as akin to that of an abusive human relationship with an animal, Helena degrades the connection humans have with nature, and further illuminates the abuse of power we believe we have over nature’s creations. Although the idea of humans being superior to animals was not uncommon in Shakespeare’s time, the act of viciously degrading nature is illuminated by Montaigne’s essay, where he argues that true savagery involves the manipulation of nature’s ornaments.

For Montaigne, the Brazilian savages are not ‘savage’ at all; their harmony with earth’s natural order has made them far more sophisticated than the civilized individual, as the Brazilian savages had learned to work cooperatively and peacefully under the rule of nature. By contrast, “civilized” humans are responsible for the breakdown of nature as the result of their intervention. Titania’s famous soliloquy describes this action, as, according to the fairy queen, the disturbing imbalance of the mortals’ interaction with one another has resulted in violent weather conditions. This idea is representative of the early modern cyclical ideology of how human relationships were connected with changing weather patterns. As previously mentioned, since neither science nor reason existed for people to turn to for answers regarding climate change, scapegoating surged in the Elizabethan period as people blamed one another for the consequences of violent weather patterns. We can see this practice in Titania’s weather speech, as much of what is brought up in her monologue is a reflection of how poisoned relationships (particularly hers and Oberon’s) have resulted in violent weather conditions. Titania’s monologue makes various references to the weather patterns of the Little Ice Age and its consequences, including the “distemperature” (2.1.106) of the raging winters that destroyed crops and livestock:

These are the forgeries of jealousy;

And never, since the middle summer’s spring,

Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,

By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,

Or in the beached margin of the sea

To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,

But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,

As in revenge, have sucked up from the sea

Contagious fogs, which falling in the land,

Hath every pelting river made so proud

That they have overborne their continents.

The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,

The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn

Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard.

The fold stands empty in the drowned field,

And crows are fatted with the murrain flock.

The nine men’s morris is filled up with mud,

And the quaint mazes in the wanton green

For lack of tread are undistinguishable.

The human mortals want their winter here;

No night is now with hymn or carol blessed.

Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,

Pale in her anger, washes all the air

That rheumatic diseases do abound.

And thorough this distemperature we see

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 mazed world,

By their increase, now knows not which is which.

And this same progeny of evils comes

From our debate, from our dissension:

We are their parents and original (Titania, 2.1.80-117).

Here, through Titania, Shakespeare makes specific references to the real world by punning on the word “mazed” (2.1.113); “mazed" is both used in the sense of bewildered, and to refer to produce or crops (Chaudhuri 155). The “mazed world, / by their increase, now knows not which is which” (2.1.113-14) describes how the prolonged winter has crept upon harvesting seasons, but as the crops do not know the difference between changing weather patterns, they are unable to withstand the change in soil conditions. However, aside from the specific connection to the horrible weather that corrupted much of the mid to late sixteenth century, Titania’s weather speech describes a broader pattern of the disrupted connection within human nature and nonhuman nature. Similar to the way Montaigne’s essay describes the disruption of the natural world through human intervention, Titania details how the quarrels between her and Oberon transform weather. Titania describes herself and Oberon as the “parents” and the “originals,” indicating that her problems with Oberon have resulted in the detrimental consequences of horrible weather (2.1.117). According to Chaudhuri, this self-incrimination recalls Adam and Eve, whose fall was the source of natural destruction (155). Adam and Eve’s ill-advised involvement with the natural world by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, even after God’s warning, replicates Montaigne’s belief that human intervention in nature will always lead to the destruction of the natural order. Although Titania describes nature as spoiled, the previously beautiful state of nature that once existed is hinted at through the “wanton green” (2.1.99), which, according to Chaudhuri, refers to “luxuriant grass” (154); this is then indicative of the once abundant and sustainable forest. The suggestive remembrance within the text of a once beautiful, natural world is comparable to Montaigne’s description of the Brazilian savages’ state, and his longing to return to this simple form of nature. Thus, nature in Titania’s speech is not only described as a horrendous wasteland of man’s creation, but the descriptive language also asks us to imagine nature as it once was.

Yet, nature, as portrayed in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is not always described as a benign space. There are often moments in the text where audiences and readers are prompted to imagine the dangers of the forest setting as they work against the characters. This contrasts with the vision of nonhuman nature as corrupted by human nature; however, Shakespeare purposefully employs this diverging perspective to provoke an engaging dual perspective of nature as both benign, and as malevolent. Understanding Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric* will aid in our perspective of nature as the latter.

Understanding Nature as Malevolent: Wilson and Shakespeare

Following the success of his book titled *The Rule of Reason*, Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric*, published in 1553, focused largely on the art of reasoning through language. Although we cannot be certain whether Shakespeare would have studied Wilson, Wilson has been credited as a source of inspiration for many Shakespearean works, including Sonnets 1 and 14 (Corish 453), and it was “natural for a poet” of Shakespeare’s time and stature to study *The Art of Rhetoric* (Craig 619). Ultimately, many themes and conventions are employed throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that allows Shakespeare to represent the opposing idea of nature as a malevolent force, which echoes Wilson’s description of nature. The Preface to Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric* offers a contrasting view of nature to that of Montaigne, positioning it as vindictive energy that suggests humans are the superior natural being, and that nature is, in fact, dangerous and corrupting.

For *The Art of Rhetoric* to articulate the practicality of studying persuasive language, Wilson relates rhetorical practice to the Biblical beginning of time. The Preface describes what Wilson defines as the “Eloquence first geuen by God, after loste by man,” *(*Preface), which refers to God’s gift of reason being revoked after a dangerous encounter with nature. According to Wilson, the human ability to reason grants them superiority over all other living beings. In contrast, when humans neglect God’s gift, they are then compared to beasts; a statement that Wilson had already proposed in *The Rule of Reason*, where he concludes that, “[man] is endued with reason […] I [Wilson] am man, therefore I should not be vsed like a brute beaste” (106). Concluding from the Bible’s Fall of Man, Wilson describes how, when tempted by sin, humans were unable to function rationally:

Man (in whom is poured the breathe of lyfe) was made at hys firste beinge an euerliuynge Creature, vnto the likenes of God, endued with reason, and appoynted Lorde ouer all other thinges liuing. But after the fall of our firste father, Sinne so crepte in, that our knowledge was muche darke|ned, and by corruption of this oure fleshe, mans reason and entendement were bothe ouerwhelmed (Preface).

Wilson articulates this sense of fear by reaffirming his conviction of nature’s power to evoke some force of evil in humans through the story of Adam and Eve; for when the serpent provoked Adam and Eve, and granted them knowledge of evil and sin, nature was then positioned as a tempting force that provokes us to renounce our ability to reason:

Longe it was ere that man knewe himselfe, beinge destitute of Gods grace, so that al thinges waxed sauage, the earth vntilled, societye neglected, Goddes will not knowen, man againste manne, one agaynste another, and all agaynste order. Some liued by spoyle, some like brute Beastes grased vpon the ground, some wente naked, some romed lyke woodoses, none did anye thing by reason, but most did what they could, by manhode. None almoste considered the euerliuynge God, but all liued moste communely after their owne luste. By death they thoughte that all thinges ended, by life they loked for none other liuynge. None remembred the true obseruation of wedlocke, none tendered the education of their chyldren, lawes were not regarded, true dealinge was not once vsed (Preface).

Hence, nature’s corruption of humans, triggered by the serpent’s involvement in the Fall of Man, led to a correspondence between human nature and nonhuman nature, both fallen from a civilized grace (Genesis 3.17: God says to Adam: “cursed is the ground for thy sake”). Wilson then describes God’s divine intervention, as He employed “appoynted ministers” (Preface) to complete his biddings through persuasive speech, and re-civilized the unreasonable beasts that humans had become:

And therefore, whereas Menne lyued Brutyshlye in open feldes, hauing neither house to shroude them in, nor attyre to clothe their backes, nor yet anye regarde to seeke their best auayle: these appoynted of God called theim together by vtteraunce of speache, and perswaded with them what was good, what was badde, and what was gainefull for mankynde. And althoughe at firste, the rude coulde hardelie learne, & either for straungenes of the thing, would not gladlye receyue the offer, or els for lacke of knoweledge could not perceyue the goodnes: yet being somewhat drawe and delighted with the pleasautnes of reason, & the swetenes of vtterauce: after a certaine space, thei became through nurture and good aduisement, of wilde, sober: of cruel, gentle: of foles, wise: and of beastes, men. Suche force hath the tongue, and such is the power of eloquence and reason, that most men are forced euen to yelde in that, whiche most standeth againste their will (Preface).

Here, the use of the word ‘beast’ is being used much like Montaigne’s use of the word ‘savage:’ to describe a living creature that is uncivilized. However, Wilson specifically uses the term to describe a living being that is incapable of reason. As Wilson previously stated, without reason, we are no longer human, but are rather creatures that are more comparable to animals. In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Wilson positions nature as a threat to mankind, stating that without civilization, man is not able to “withstand his reason” (Preface), which causes him to behave irrationally, and often, monstrously. In contrast to how "Of Cannibals" describes the laws of the natural order, Wilson believes that the natural order, or the life “in open feldes” (Preface), is barbaric. Therefore, humans lose all hope trying to use reason to tame the irrational, natural world, and as a consequence, they descend into nature’s uncivilized acts of savagery. Throughout the text, in addition to Montaigne’s arguments, we can see that Wilson’s vision of nature is useful in illuminating *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s diverging relationship between human nature and nonhuman nature.

Wilson’s vision of nature is ultimately described as a force that is feared by humankind. Although the characters of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (particularly the Athenians) feel themselves to be superior to nature, this belief does not prevent them from fearing the force of the natural world. This idea follows Wilson’s description of nature, as these moments are often articulated in terms that evoke emotions of fear or anxiety, and contradicts the text’s previous idea of nature’s beauty. Throughout the text, we are asked to imagine the characters protecting themselves from weather conditions, nature’s natural cycles, and wild animals. For example, when Titania calls for her fairies to protect her as she sleeps, she lists the potential dangers that pose a threat to her:

Come, now a roundel and a fairy song;

Then for the third part of a minute, hence:

Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds;

Some war with rearmice for their leathern wings

To make my small elves coats; and some keep back

The clamorous owl, that nightly hoots and wonders

At our quaint spirits. Sing me now asleep;

Then to your offices, and let me rest (Titania, 2.2.1-8).

The fairies respond to her demands by lulling Titania to sleep with a song that details the creatures that they will protect her from:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,

Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen.

Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,

Come not near our Fairy Queen.

[…]

Weaving spiders, come not here –

Hence, you long-legged spinner, hence.

Beetles black, approach not near,

Worm nor snail do no offence (Fairies, 2.2.9-22).

The fairies’ ritual is written to suggest the performance of a lullaby; however, their lullaby is deeply ironic, as the intention to sing their queen to sleep without fear of intrusion is juxtaposed with the lullaby’s lyrics, which detail the dangers that put Titania at risk. The juxtaposition of the lullaby’s soothing music with its ominous lyrics allows readers and audiences to conceptualize the forest through menacing imagery, as the nightly ritual performed by the fairies to protect their queen indicates that the natural world holds damaging forces that work against humans. This idea becomes clearer once the fairies exit, and we see Oberon enter with the tainted flower in hand. Oberon then reassures audiences and readers that the fairies’ ritual did not work, as he lists off the various creatures that he intends for Titania to encounter:

The next thing when 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 (Oberon, 2.1.165-82).

This action supports the idea of the forest as a savage and sinister place, where no one can be trusted; not the fairies to be adequate protectors, nor Oberon to be a rational husband. In addition to Titania’s lullaby, Shakespeare features other areas that highlight the idea of sleep as a way of articulating the dangers of the forest. For example, the end of Act Two sees Hermia awaking from a terrifying dream about a serpent:

Help me, Lysander, help me: do thy best

To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast.

Ay me, for pity! What a dream was here!

Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.

Methought a serpent ate my heart away,

And you sat smiling at his cruel prey (Hermia, 2.2.149-154).

Hermia’s dream foreshadows the eventual love disputes that the characters face as a result of Robin’s meddling, but also, Hermia’s dream acts as an example where sleep and dreaming are affected by the evil forces of nature. The dream she has eventually come to fruition, as Lysander is later alluded to as the serpent from Hermia’s dream when he betrays her love (Chaudhuri 211). Here, in Act Three, Lysander refers to himself as a serpent, which reflects the predictions made in Hermia’s dream:

Hang off, thou cat, thou burr, vile thing let loose,

Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent (Lysander, 3.2.260-1).

Although this representation of Lysander may be true, the use of the serpent is more obviously related to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, as the serpent is the symbolic figure for the Fall of Man (Chaudhuri 178). The Fall of Man, according to Wilson, was triggered by the inability to reason against the corrupting forces of nature’s creatures (i.e., the serpent). Therefore, Hermia’s dream does not only provide an instance of how sleeping and dreaming are employed as a way to articulate danger, but it also alludes to the recurring imagery of the serpent as a form of dangerous and corrupting nature.

Similar to *The Art of Rhetoric’s* employment of Biblical storytelling, the employment of serpent imagery throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* contributes to Shakespeare’s depiction of a malevolent natural world. For example, snakes are one of the creatures Titania’s fairies work to protect her from:

You spotted snakes with double tongue, (Fairy, 2.2.9).

However, Oberon assures readers and audiences that the fairy lullaby did not work, for when he and Robin watch Titania as she sleeps, they witness a snake approach her:

And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,

Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in (Oberon, 2.1.255-6).

Hermia also refers to Demetrius as a serpent when he withholds the details of Lysander’s whereabouts:

Could not a worm, and adder do so much?

And adder did it; for with doubler tongue

Than mine, thou serpent, never adder stung (Hermia, 3.2.71-3).

Here, Shakespeare utilizes the serpent as a way to portray the more corrupting and vile objects of nature. The serpent acts as a threat to the characters, as the text implies that the serpent only appears at times of danger. This employment of the serpent is akin to its Biblical meaning, as the serpent appears to Adam and Eve as a corrupting creature that influences them to disobey God. Furthermore, this connection to Biblical storytelling lends itself closely to that of Wilson’s Preface to *The Art of Rhetoric*, where he blames nature (i.e., the serpent) for the fall of man. There are various moments in the text where we can see allusions to Adam and Eve; for example, the Biblical story of Adam and Eve may have acted as a reference for Shakespeare when creating Titania and Oberon’s relationship (Chaudhuri 155). With the employment of serpent imagery, we can see that these possible Biblical allusions do not strictly illuminate how humans degrade nature, but also demonstrate how nature can be viewed as a corrupting force. Unlike Montaignian ideas of nature, Wilson’s interpretation of the Biblical story highlights nature’s dangerous and destructive features. Additionally, this different perspective of Adam and Eve proves that there are multiple readings of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that exist simultaneously. On the one hand, the parallels drawn between Adam and Eve and Titania and Oberon reflect the harm that humans inflict on nature; on the other hand, the imagery of snakes as an allusion to the Biblical serpent is symbolic of nature’s dangerous features. This is due to the ambiguity of Shakespeare’s writing, which allows us to craft a personal interpretation of human nature’s relationship to nonhuman nature.

Conclusion

Though the two versions of the natural world presented in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* diverge from one another, they are both equally crucial in understanding Shakespeare’s representation of human nature’s relationship to nonhuman nature. Shakespeare’s ability to draw our attention to both the beauty and dangers of nature allows for readers and audiences to subjectively create meaning out of the text; therefore, there cannot be a single reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that favours either view of nature, as the duality is employed in such a way that allows these two perspectives to work together. They operate simultaneously to ignite our imagination and invite us to conflate our existing, individual understanding of human nature’s relationship to nonhuman nature with the information that is being presented. Like all theatrical pieces, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s* portrait of nature is described to us through language that invites interpretation. Therefore, though understanding Montaigne and Wilson may provide helpful insight into the historical context that Shakespeare was writing in, there is ultimately no one reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that can be credited as superior. Through Shakespeare’s attention to language and its ability to provoke our imagination, we, as audiences and readers, have total power over the play’s interpretation of human nature’s relationship to nonhuman nature. Idealized or demonized, nature is a construction of human imagination, and Shakespeare’s ambiguous writing invites us to interpret his text in a way that suits our human desires. Just as “Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends / The lunatic, the lover, the poet / Are of imagination all compact,” (Theseus, 5.1.2-6), Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dreams* asks us to consider the power of the human imagination and how nature’s value is in the eye of the beholder.

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