



Shakespeare on nature

Description

There's not much in Shakespeare that extolls the beautiful, sacred and sublime in nature. That came much later with the Romantics, and in contemporary performances and adaptations.

The BBC aired a production of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* last month. It was abridged and adapted for television by Russell T Davies with a punk fairy *Dr Who* element. Of note, the attendants in the court of the Duke of Athens consulted tablet computers, and Lysander and Hermia used a wall mounted digital display screen to plan their escape to the forest.

Flash back to 1968 and the full word-for-word film production by Peter Hall. It starred Judy Dench, Helen Mirren, Ian Richardson and Diana Rigg among others. That hippy woodland semi-nude romp is available in full on Youtube.

Though the events of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* may have been remarkable to Tudor audiences, the nature setting was neither exotic nor glorious. It had a familiar ring. The play echoed common carnival and fantasy themes, but according to a 1959 paper by Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer, journeys into nature (mostly forests) were a means of gaining access to the healing properties of plants and other folk remedies.



Common folk didn't need to be specialists to know about the medicinal properties of plants, insects and animals. So Titania introduces Bottom to the four fairies Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mustardseed and

Moth. Less than obvious to us now, cobwebs would be deployed to wrap cut skin and dried moths would be ground into medicinal powders. In a way, the story is about commonplaces.

Thereâ??s obvious reference to potions as purple and white flowers are used to confound and cure the love relations among fairies and mortals.

According to Reynolds and Sawyer, â??In *A Midsummer-Nightâ??s Dream*, Shakespeare seems to have taken this familiar folklore concerning the magic power of plants as a meeting point between the supernatural and the natural worldsâ?• (517).

This interpretation of the play is useful as an indicator of the strong cultural legacy associated with natural settings as a source of healing. Not many of us now forage for herbs, but still think a walk amongst plants and animals has therapeutic value, and such natural commonplaces can restore, if not enchant.

Reference

- Roy, Patricia. 2004. *Shakespeareâ??s Midsummer Fairies: Shadows and Shamen of the Forest*. Tampa, FL. Master of Arts Thesis, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences, University of South Florida. [Online](#).
- Reynolds, Lou Agnes, and Paul Sawyer. 1959. Folk medicine and the four fairies of *A Midsummer-Nightâ??s Dream*. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, (10) 4, 513-521.

Note

- The picture is of a butterfly in July 2010, Monte Isola, Vicenza, Italy. Could be Aphrodite Fritillary according to my butterfly matching app.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. enchantment
2. fairies
3. forests
4. Shakespeare
5. solstice

Date Created

June 18, 2016

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