"The Imperial Vot'ress": Divinity, Femininity, and Elizabeth I in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Discussions of Elizabeth I's relevance to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are similar to Reformation arguments over transubstantiation: Is she present in the text? This may exaggerate the case but does so for a purpose: to argue religion plays a central role in this seemingly secular comedy through the pervasively implicit presence of Elizabeth I. Although the play assigns temporal power to male figures such as Oberon and Theseus, divine authority in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is associated with femininity. This is why Elizabeth is such a potent presence in the play--the queen's strategies of self-representation as a woman whose divinity comes from her femininity inform the play's connection of its female characters to religious power. This connection between femininity and divinity, an integral aspect of Elizabeth's public persona, appears in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and undercuts the play's re-establishment of masculine order.

The connections between Elizabeth I and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been extensively studied, most notably by Louis Montrose.[1] In Montrose's readings, Elizabeth's nearly overwhelming influence shapes the playwright's engagement with the cultural and political issues of the late sixteenth century: As a woman on the throne, the queen provokes enormous anxiety about female dominance and male inadequacy, an anxiety that must be managed through the play's effective suppression of queenly power by a final assertion of male authority. But as Katherine Eggert notes, while successive critics have thoroughly examined the queen's influence as a pervasive "cultural presence," they have also tended to perpetuate the misogynistic view that frames femininity as a constraining, deforming presence and the performance of masculinity as empowering (4). Likewise, Valerie Traub argues that this view of a constraining femininity reinforces the assumption that "the only way for an early modern woman to be powerful was to imitate men" (153). In contrast, Traub emphasizes the complexity of Elizabeth's gender politics, the ways in which the fluidity of her gender performances eludes any stable identification of weak femininity and strong masculinity. This gendered complexity informs *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although, by the time the play was first published in quarto form in 1600, Elizabeth was widely celebrated by her subjects as the Virgin Queen, as Diana, and as

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Astraea, the virgin goddess of justice, these depictions of Elizabeth as various virginal, if pagan, goddesses also invoke her mystical role as God's chosen vessel of his will in England. Furthermore, English celebrations of their Virgin Queen strengthened the connections between Elizabeth and the divine by appropriating much of the symbolism and the devotion once accorded the Virgin Mary (Strong 126). As Philippa Berry points out, Elizabeth's authority as Supreme Governor of the Church blended divine power with her gender, inevitably troubling the conventional attribution of God's likeness to men alone: "As in the case of the biblical Wisdom figure, Elizabeth's combination of spiritual authority with a feminine gender indirectly contaminated the masculinity of the God whose regent she was deemed to be" (65).

Berry's use of the word "contaminated" to describe this process implies a masculinity quite separate from femininity, yet vulnerable to femininity's encroachments, its dirty pollution. One can imagine this viewpoint seeming natural to those who felt threatened by a powerful woman on the throne. But in Elizabeth's own writing, femininity appears as an essential component of divine worship, the subject position most appropriate for the human worshipper and, perhaps, most easily performed to God's satisfaction by those worshippers gendered feminine. For example, in a prayer composed in Spanish and published in the 1569 *Christian Prayers and Meditations in English, French, Italian, Spanish, Greeke, and Latine*, Elizabeth writes:

> O Lord, my God and my Father, I render undying thanks unto Thy divine majesty with my mouth, with my heart, and with all that I am, for the infinite mercies which Thou hast used toward me--that not only hast made me Thy creature, made me by Thy hands to be formed in Thy image and similitude; . . . more yet because Thou hast done me so special and rare a mercy that, being a woman by my nature weak, timid, and delicate, as are all women, Thou hast caused me to be vigorous, brave, and strong in order to resist such a multitude of Idumeneans, Moabites, Muhammadans, and other infinity of peoples and nations who have conjoined, plotted, conspired, and made league against Thee, against Thy Son, and against all those who confess Thy name and hold to Thy holy Word as the only rule of salvation. (*Collected Works* 157)[2]

This prayer not only pointedly critiques those who challenged Elizabeth's divine right to her throne--most especially, of course, the Spanish themselves--but also claims God's special favor towards the queen precisely through the evidence of Elizabeth's "weak, timid, and delicate" female body, which, as in her speech at Tilbury before the Armada invasion, becomes proof of God's approval and support.[3] Elizabeth simultaneously points out her drawbacks as a female monarch and enlists those drawbacks as signs of her status as God's chosen ruler, paradoxically emphasizing a stereotypical, essentialized weakness of the female body and mind

to stress God's special favor in choosing and strengthening her.

Such a claim places Elizabeth between God and her subjects, implying that the queen is the mediator between human and divine and, to a limited extent, combines attributes from both in her own person, a point made more explicitly in Elizabeth's *Precationes privatae*, first published in 1563, in which the queen seems to be admonishing Christ for nearly allowing her to die from smallpox in 1562:

> But Thou has likewise gravely pierced my soul with many torments; and besides, all the English people, whose peace and safety is grounded in my sound condition as Thy handmaid nearest after Thee, Thou hast strongly disregarded in my danger, and left the people stunned. (*Collected Works* 140)[4]

Though here, as in the first passage, Elizabeth stresses her humility and weakness as God's "handmaid" (*ancilla*, in the original Latin), she also stakes out her position as unquestionably superior to her subjects and possessed of a direct link to the divine in her role as queen. In her published prayers, then, Elizabeth does not so much imitate male behavior as she stresses her femininity as a link to God. While, for the queen, God becomes a kind of significant Other, the focus of her self-defining address, for those who read the prayers Elizabeth represents herself as the Other, the authorizing figure who promises the fulfillment of God's will. A metonymic chain forms: As Elizabeth places herself in God's role, she models the kind of desire, aimed in her case at God, that her subjects are supposed to feel for her.

As published works, Elizabeth's religious writings were crucial to her public self-representation. As Susan Frye notes, we know that Elizabeth "felt that monarchs created themselves through language and the images that language created in its audience" (4), and religious devotion was an integral part of that self-creation for the queen. For many of her subjects the prayers would have been the most well-known of the queen's works, next to her speeches, some of which were also printed and circulated throughout the kingdom. In these speeches, as in her prayers, Elizabeth continually emphasizes her religious service and, therefore, her power, as God's chosen vessel. For example, one version of her 1593 speech dissolving Parliament claims "For before God and in my conscience, I protest (whereunto many that know me can witness) that the greatest expense of my time, the labor of my studies, and the travail of my thoughts chiefly tendeth to God's service and the government of you, to live and continue in a flourishing and happy estate" (*Collected Works* 331). Here Elizabeth connects her government with her service to God, placing that service first as if a necessary precondition to her second task of ruling. In her famous "Golden Speech," delivered in 1601, the queen reminds her subjects of her divine right to the throne even as she reminds them of her affection: "and though God hath raised me high, yet this I

count the glory of my crown: that I have reigned with your loves. This makes me that I do not so much rejoice that God hath made me to be a queen, as to be a queen over so thankful a people" (*Collected Works* 337).

Elizabeth's rhetorical connection of God's power to her own forms part of what Frye has termed the "competition for representation"--the struggle to shape what Elizabeth represented, what her image would become (4). From the beginning of her reign, Elizabeth contended with those who wanted to control her image for their own purposes. In her analysis of Elizabethan court entertainments, Jean Wilson notes that the queen realized the implications of court spectacles: "Where James merely sat, Elizabeth answered back, entering into the mythological games played, and showing her consciousness of her multiple mythological and real personae and relationship to the action being presented to her. She was a real participant, as James never was" (13). But while Elizabeth obviously wielded considerable influence over her portrayals--and while claiming her femininity as a paradoxical strength seems to have worked in many ways--Frye argues that "Elizabeth lacked complete control over her images and the subject of representation, as was evident in the many negative representations of her that were performed and published during her lifetime" (12). Frye includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in her short list of "negative representations."

Certainly *A Midsummer Night's Dream* looks at female authority with a critical eye, seemingly transforming its queens into dutiful wives who accept their husband's rule. But critics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are divided between those who feel the play's subversive gender possibilities are largely contained by the end of the play, and those who argue that those possibilities are uncontained and uncontainable. Though Montrose acknowledges the power of the play's gender anxieties, he tends toward the former camp, as, more vigorously, do Berry and Theodora A. Jankowski. While Lisa Hopkins notes the play's awareness of the difficulties and dangers of marriage--and that the marriages occur not at the end of the play but at the end of act 4, thus failing to provide complete closure--she nevertheless argues that "both Theseus and Oberon end the play with very much the upper hand in their relationships" (27). On the other hand, a number of critics have argued that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fails to establish a system of masculine dominance that keeps women in their place. Douglas E. Green points out what he calls "moments of 'queer' disruption and eruption" (370), moments that significantly unsettle the ending's apparent restoration of heteronormative restraints; in a chapter of *Tough Love*, Kathryn Schwarz examines Hippolyta and her Amazonian background to demonstrate how that queen's past continues to disturb the play's present and future; and Bruce Boehrer comments that the play "seems more nervous than reassuring, less convinced of its own happy fantasies than aware of their evanescence" (115).

These latter critics are correct in recognizing that the last act of the play fails to re-establish male, heterosexual dominance. Rather, the anxieties surrounding female unruliness and authority refuse to go away, even when the female characters have seemingly submitted to their husbands and resumed their subordinate positions, and one important reason for the persistence of these anxieties is the divine aspect so strongly connected to femininity in the play. This is not to suggest that femininity must be conceived as an essential attribute of female bodies, but rather that Elizabeth's rhetorical connection of feminized weakness to religious strength provides the space within which that strength can be performed within the play. However, femininity is far from unproblematic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Elizabeth's construction of her own divinity failed to stifle the suspicion attendant on a female ruler in early modern England, and, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the rumors of sexual deviance that grew around the queen in later life also play out in Theseus' very negative attitude towards female celibacy, and perhaps even in Titania's affair with Bottom. While female divinity is not uncritically represented in this play, it nevertheless indicates an undeniable power that adheres to the play's female characters and not to the males, and that thus provides an internal critique of masculine dominance that undercuts the play's seemingly solid resolution of its marriage plots.

The split between masculine, temporal power and feminine, religious power in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not seem to reflect the culture of late sixteenth-century England. For Elizabethans, both kinds of power inhered in the queen, who was head of state and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. While there was often considerable tension in the kingdom about this state of affairs, Elizabeth successfully managed her position such that she never lost her control or her influence. Although the recent past included such a split between state and Church power when Mary Tudor was on the throne and handed spiritual authority back to the male Pope, the play seems rather to be looking forward, beyond the queen's death. In 1600 Elizabeth was 67, and the issue of who would assume power when the queen died was becoming increasingly urgent. While many eagerly anticipated the prospect of a male ruler--James VI of Scotland was by far the strongest candidate--*A Midsummer Night's Dream* may well be imagining a future in which the inclusion of all power, religious and secular, in one figure would become increasingly difficult to maintain. However, Elizabeth's ability to cast her rule in terms of divine femininity gave her an advantage that the play depicts in its reference to the "imperial vot'ress" who resists yet provokes desire, whose femininity should make her vulnerable yet who remains self-sufficient and authoritative.

The Imperial Vot'ress, Fancy Free

The most explicit reference to Elizabeth in the play occurs in Oberon's account of how the flower from which he distills the bewitching drug came to be invested with its power:

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free. (2.1.155-164)

While Elizabeth is not explicitly named here, scholars generally agree that "vestal throned by the west" refers to England's Virgin Queen. The term "imperial vot'ress" links power and femininity, but it also highlights religion as an essential aspect of Elizabeth's authority, since the word "votaress" means a woman devoted to religious service.[5] The queen's authority encompasses both the worldly and the sacred and is tied to her ability to remain "fancy-free." Protected by the moon--the virgin goddess Diana--the queen is immune to Cupid's arrow, and thus the validity of her rule is confirmed by divine sanction.

This is the second use of the word "vot'ress" in the play. The first reference makes the link between religion and female community even clearer. Only forty lines earlier, Titania describes the mother of the changeling boy:

His mother was a vot'ress of my order,
And in the spiced Indian air by night
Full often has she gossiped by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th'embarked traders on the flood,
When we have laughed to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind,
Which she with pretty and with swimming gait
Following, her womb then rich with my young squire,
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifles, and return again
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;

And for her sake I will not part with him. (2.1.123-37)

This speech evokes a relationship between mistress and devotee that, through the word "vot'ress," is marked as explicitly religious and links the "imperial vot'ress" and Titania's "vot'ress" as females similarly devoted to religious service--service, moreover, that is dedicated to female divinity. It does, however, seem strange that Titania has a "vot'ress" and an "order" at all. Why does Titania rate such devotion? Her words suggest that she is the center of a group of worshippers, the divine figure to whom others devote their lives.[6] The Fairy Queen, although married, resembles this aspect of Elizabeth more than Titania's dead votaress does. Wilson has made this connection between the two queens clear: "The transformation of Elizabeth which underlay all the others, which contributed to the neo-medievalism of the court culture, and which provided a basis for a rationalization of her relationship to her courtiers was to the Lady of a romance, and especially to a Fairy-Lady" (22).

As a Fairy-Lady, or as Edmund Spenser called her, a "Faerie Queene," Elizabeth reigned as a divinity over her subjects who, even if male, remained only mortal. When Spenser directly addresses Elizabeth in Book VI, Proem 7 of *The Faerie Queene*, he emphasizes her status as the center of a virtuous court:

Then pardon me, most dreaded Soueraine,
That from your selfe I doe this vertue bring,
And to your selfe doe it returne againe:
So from the Ocean all riuers spring,
And tribute backe repay as to their King.
Right so from you all goodly vertues well
Into the rest, which round about you ring,
Faire Lords and Ladies, which about you dwell,
And doe adorne your Court, where courtesies excell.

The poet's celebration of the monarch's virtue springs directly from the monarch herself, only to return to her like the rivers to the ocean, although it is interesting that Spenser chooses the masculine title of King rather than that of Queen--even here, Elizabeth's status is anomalous, less natural than Spenser's watery metaphor might seem to suggest. Spenser's mention of "Faire Lords and Ladies" represents the queen as ringed by both male and female courtiers, a point that assumes more importance when we note that, as Berry's work on Elizabeth's court has shown, the traditional emphasis on Elizabeth's court of noblemen has tended to obscure the extent to which Elizabeth presided over a household of noble women, who gained considerable power through their association with the body of the monarch. Berry stresses how Elizabeth's association with the moon goddess Diana led to her depiction as "a woman

with other women" (65); while Frye notes that as the queen aged, "She seems to have preferred the pleasures of her life in the company of selected women. . . . The scarcity of her personal appearances gave her body a value that her contemporaries increasingly characterized as 'sacred'" (104-05). Frye's account shows how closely connected Elizabeth's perceived divinity was to her practice of secluding herself with her women, whose lives in her service could take on the aspect of priestesses ministering to their goddess, fostering the image of a holy queen, a true representative of God's sacred powers.

As "A fair vestal throned by the west," Elizabeth's power is connected to her "vestal" virginity, a virginity that grants her divine and secular authority[6] and that seems to separate her from the problems of desire that so trouble the relationships in the play. Indeed, Elizabeth is very much a constitutive absence in this speech, one who creates the conditions of desire even as she herself escapes its effects. Freud's emphasis on the contingency of desire is useful here: "It seems probable that the sexual instinct is in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions" (14). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, desire is accidental in exactly this way: Characters love, but can't explain why; characters desire, but not in the ways they thought they would. Even the ability of the "imperial vot'ress" to avoid desire is accidental. Although the queen very deliberately fashioned a Petrarchan image of herself as always desired, never the desiring one, the play imagines a divine virgin who, because of her religious dedication, is invulnerable to Cupid's arrow, which fails its purpose and lands instead on "a little western flower-- / Before, milk-white; now, purple with love's wound" (2.1.166-67). The flower is, as it were, de-flowered, suffering the "wound" as it loses its virginity to "Cupid's fiery shaft." Such invulnerability comes at some cost to others, who must suffer because, presumably, their religious devotion is not strong enough.

An important point here, too, is how virginity comes under attack from desire. Indeed, virginity arouses desire, as in *Measure for Measure*, where Angelo's sudden infatuation with the novice Isabella seems to be a result of her status as a holy virgin, as he says to himself:

> Most dangerous
> Is that temptation that doth goad us on
> To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet,
> With all her double vigour--art and nature--
> Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid
> Subdues me quite. (2.2.185-90)

But though the attractiveness of virginity in *Measure for Measure* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does evoke the idealization of virginity usually associated with Catholicism, it also endorses Elizabeth's own strate-

gies of self-representation, in which virginity serves as an essential quality of a powerful and divine femininity. While it is a marked aspect of Elizabeth's religious writing that virginity is seldom or never mentioned, the topic comes up in speeches when the queen responds to demands she marry and produce an heir. For example, in her 1576 speech closing Parliament, Elizabeth counters her subjects' latest demands regarding marriage: "Not that I condemn the double knot or judge amiss of such, as forced by necessity, cannot dispose themselves to another life, but wish that none were driven to change save such as cannot keep honest limits" (*Collected Works* 170). As usual, the queen does not absolutely rule out marriage, but makes her own preferences for singleness clear.

As Ilona Bell observes, Elizabeth was absolutely determined to control the issue of her marriage and to decide if or when that marriage should take place. When, in 1579, John Stubbs published his tract opposing the queen's proposed marriage to the duke of Alençon, he framed his argument as an attack on Elizabeth's right to choose her husband, and on her susceptibility to male control should she marry (Bell 112). Stubbs assumed that no woman could maintain political or religious autonomy when married, and that they would invariably submit to every husbandly command, while Elizabeth asserted her determination to allow no one else to rule, whatever her marital status might be. In the end, public opinion made the marriage impossible, although we can also see the outcome as a victory, of sorts, for the queen, since she retired on her own terms: either a husband she chose, or none at all.

But although Elizabeth's withdrawal might have contributed to her semi-divine aura, her inaccessibility also contributed to rumors of non-normative sexuality, especially given the queen's virginity. Sixteenth-century Protestants tended to regard virginity with suspicion,[7] an attitude taken most firmly by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he admonishes Hermia that she must obey her father or face either death or the sterility of the convent. The potentially negative implications of Titania's closeness to her "vot'ress" suggest some parallels with Elizabeth's situation, especially in the 1590s. As Carole Levin has noted, the rumors of sexual misbehavior that arose during Elizabeth's reign became more numerous towards the end of the century--exactly the time that Elizabeth began to withdraw more frequently into her private world (90-91). Traub has examined some of the accusations of deviant sexual behavior that were aimed--particularly by reformers--at communities of single women (63-64). These suggestions of dangerous sexualities color Titania's claim to be the center of a circle of worshippers. While such a claim gives Titania power, it also raises the specter of sexual "perversion" --that is, lesbianism and bestiality--and idolatry. Similarly, Elizabeth's appropriation of aspects of the Marian cult allowed her to stress her links to God and to portray herself as the desired of all beholders, but it also laid her open to charges of popery, and of making an idol of herself, espe-

cially from those reformers who disapproved of a woman claiming power from God. For example, John Knox, in his *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, explicitly frames female government as idolatry:

> And no less monstrous is the body of that commonwealth where a woman beareth empire; for either doth it lack a lawful head (as in very deed it doth), or else there is an idol exalted in the place of the true head. . . . For in despite of God (he of his just judgment so giving them over into a reprobate mind), may a realm, I confess, exalt up a woman to that monstriferous honor to be esteemed as head. But impossible it is to man and angel to give unto her the properties and perfect offices of a lawful head. (56)

Knox maintains that a woman is essentially so inferior to males that she can never properly represent God, since her "properties" are completely insufficient to do so. Indeed, a realm with a woman at its head is no less than "monstrous." Louis Montrose cites the example of a Puritan preacher in the 1580s who protested against the celebration of the queen's Accession Day, "Which, he said was to make her an idol" (qtd. in *Subject of Elizabeth* 76), illustrating how Knox's attitude persisted in the culture throughout Elizabeth's reign and, in fact, gained strength as the queen aged.

Knox's association of monstrosity with female rule plays on the image of the body politic "headed" by a woman. The potentially disturbing possibilities of female rule emerge through Titania's infatuation with Bottom and his ass's head, a relationship which may refer to some of the rumors of Elizabeth's deviant sexuality that circulated during the 1580s and 1590s. Indeed, Titania's bestial affair, to early modern audiences, would have recalled another story of a queen overwhelmed by her desire for an animal.[8] In ancient myth, King Minos of Crete was supposed to sacrifice an especially beautiful bull to Neptune. When Minos failed in this religious duty, Neptune punished him by making his wife Pasiphae fall in love with the bull, to whom she bore the monstrous man-bull Minotaur. In some versions of the story, Pasiphae was punished by Venus for lack of respect--a significant variation that suggests the rejection of "natural," heterosexual love will be punished with an abnormal, freakish craving. Like Titania, the Cretan queen has desire imposed on her, as what Jean Laplanche calls an alien external agency--that which seems natural and internal, but in fact comes from outside to shape one's desires (42). Both queens act on those desires with great intensity, suggesting that while the origin of female passion may be obscure, once felt it will overrule all control. Though the consequences of Pasiphae's lust are tragic--the Minotaur devours human flesh and must be contained and pacified with teenaged tributes from Athens, Titania's love for Bottom is rendered as comedy. Like the Minotaur, Bottom's body remains human while his head is ani-

mal; but unlike the Minotaur, Bottom's head takes on the far less threatening guise of an ass, and he calls for honey and hay to allay his appetite (4.1.10-31). The ridiculousness of Titania and Bottom's coupling makes the queen seem laughable rather than threatening; but the suggestion that passion can so easily override right reason in women makes female rulers seem dangerously fickle, placing the country at the mercy of whatever has caught their fancy.

This is not to claim that Titania is an allegorical representation of Elizabeth. Like Pasiphae, Titania is married, and she reigns as a queen consort, not as queen in her own right. However, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is deeply concerned with the problems of female sexuality--especially the sexuality of female rulers--and with what happens when that sexuality escapes or resists male control. Margaret W. Ferguson has highlighted this aspect of the play: "if a 'maiden'--like Queen Elizabeth or Hermia in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its central if enigmatic figure of a 'fairy queen' who resists husbandly control-- should refuse to become or stay a wife, the society may be threatened by 'disorder'" (8). The rumors of Elizabeth's alleged sexual adventures drew on this perception of female sexuality, its dangerous strength and its need for control from a firm masculine hand. In Protestant England, as Jankowski points out, virginity was supposed to be a transitional state that existed only in the interval between a woman's birth and her inevitable marriage (90-110). However, early Christian women redefined virginity as a deliberate choice that could grant them more autonomy and more power in public life,[9] and this model remained available if more problematic to women in the Reformation. As her reign continued, it became increasingly clear that Elizabeth's virginity was not a temporary condition, and that--because there could be no legitimate heir of the queen's body--the succession would not be straightforward or easy to determine. Here the play offers an unusual solution through the figure of the changeling boy, who seems to have been born of the devotion between Titania and her dead "vot'ress," at least according to Titania. The boy is the locus of desire for Oberon and Titania, the ostensible center of their quarrel, but he also represents the possibility of an heir for the fairy kingdom. However, because the fairy king and queen are immortal, and therefore--technically, at least--need no heirs, what's at stake in their confrontation is devotion itself. There is never any suggestion that Oberon has his own "order," and while he does have a "train," as Puck tells us (2.1.25), he seems to spend most of his time tormenting Titania's followers rather than forming bonds with his own (2.1. 81-87). When Puck describes Oberon's desire for the boy, he describes the child by his father's identity as "a lovely boy stol'n from an Indian king" (2.1.22). In contrast, Titania mentions only the boy's maternal heritage, the memory of the dead mother, which is what connects her so powerfully to the child. In this way Titania strengthens her own image as divine because, by omitting

any mention of a father for the child, she suggests a strictly homosocial world in which women seem to conceive miraculously through the "wanton wind" and, possibly, through their homoerotic relationships. The love and affection Titania bears towards her dead "vot'ress" emerge in her remembrance of their closeness and the jokes they shared, in language that contrasts strikingly to the hostility of her words to Oberon and to her description of the stricken natural world that suffers as a consequence of their estrangement.

Titania and Oberon blame each other for the natural disasters that are the result of their quarrel. Together, their only children are discord and hate. As Titania says,

> The spring, the summer,
> The chiding autumn, angry winter change
> Their wonted liveries, and the mazed world
> By their increase now knows not which is which;
> And from this same progeny of evils comes
> From our debate, from our dissension.
> We are their parents, and original. (2.1.111-17)

In the world of the play, sexual misbehavior and marital estrangement have drastic consequences, disrupting the seasons, provoking crop failures, and arousing the anger of the moon (2.1.203-05). In this sense the play evokes a profound anxiety about sexuality that seems to center on the possibility of both male and female sexual infidelity and perversity. While in a Renaissance context the possibility of female infidelity was far more serious than the infidelity of a male--and, as Henry VIII's marital career demonstrates, infidelity was treason in a queen--the responsibility for the quarrel rests equally on Oberon and Titania. Titania's behavior in defying her husband surely makes her culpable in early modern terms, and her near-bestial affair comes as punishment for such defiance, yet Oberon's insistence on the boy and nothing else also seems obsessive in the play.

Indeed, the boy signifies a feminine *jouissance* that, as Jacques Lacan puts it, is beyond the phallus and instead emerges from a secret and Other world of female pleasure (74). Oberon clearly wants the changeling boy because the child marks this *jouissance* and marks a desire directed towards the boy's dead mother. For Oberon the boy also signifies more than his own masculine authority, but also the sexual rights he as Titania's husband ought to command. His jealousy seems to arise because Titania has worshippers and is therefore in some ways more powerful and more loved than he. Indeed, Oberon's instant response to the rejected Helena's plight in the forest suggests his identification with Helena's unloved situation (2.2.245-67). When he tells Puck to "Effect it with some care, that he may prove / More fond on her than she upon her love"

(2.2.265-66), he attempts not just to rectify the problem but to put Helena in a position of power over Demetrius, echoing his own plan to regain his power over Titania. By making the boy the occasion of his demand for Titania's obedience, Oberon casts that demand as, explicitly, a shattering of the bonds of female community and homoerotic affection constructed through religious devotion.

In Shady Cloister Mewed

These issues of female sexuality, control, and religious devotion also emerge in Hermia's dilemma at the beginning of the play. As she resists her father's choice of a husband for her, Theseus sternly chides Hermia for her filial disobedience, telling her "To you your father should be as a god, / One that composed your beauties" (1.1. 47-48). "Should be" is the rub, since Egeus is anything but godlike in this play, and by Act 4 even Theseus will refuse to back his authority. Although Egeus claims to wield the power of life and death over his daughter, Theseus presents Hermia with another option, the nunnery:

Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
You can endure the livery of a nun,
For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,
To live a barren sister all your life,
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
Thrice blessed they that master so their blood
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
But earthlier happy is the rose distilled
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness. (1.1. 67-78)

Theseus grants these nuns faint praise--"Thrice blessed they that master so their blood"--but his distaste for their celibate lives is clear. Of course, given Theseus' sexually rapacious reputation, such distaste hardly seems out of character. Historically speaking it also reflects the unease many of her subjects felt about Elizabeth's virginity, especially as she aged and the succession came to seem increasingly problematic. While Theseus expands the options available to Hermia, he also represents the choice of celibacy as cold and barren--a typical evangelical view during the Reformation in England and abroad[10]--and specifically connects virginity to the "cold fruitless moon" that Oberon will later in the play evoke in connection to Elizabeth. The potentially disturbing erotic possibilities that celibacy might offer never emerge in Theseus' speech,[11] and as he continually reminds Hermia that, as a nun, she will be "barren" and

"fruitless," he not only brackets chastity as a sexless option but also evokes the "barren" queen whose lack of children placed the succession in such doubt.

Hermia's assertion of the right to choose her own husband looks very much like Elizabeth's own assertion, which continued from her first days on the throne to the point where her age made the issue of marriage moot. Hermia's response to Theseus' offer is a swift, if temporary, acceptance:

So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke
My soul consents not to give sovereignty. (1.1. 79-82)

While her true desire is for Lysander, Hermia nevertheless find the convent attractive in contrast to marrying Demetrius or dying. For her, the nunnery would not be the living death Theseus seems to think it is. Instead, it allows her to claim and maintain "sovereignty" over her body and her desires. While Protestant England fostered a deep suspicion of celibacy in general and nunneries in particular--note that "nunnery" was a synonym for brothel--virginity remained an unmarried woman's most valuable or, indeed, only virtue, and the celibate life continued to appeal, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie point out, as a way of evading the "hold" of marriage (18). Although Theseus' reference to a nunnery links virginity to Catholic practices, his description of the self-control necessary for such a life would appeal also to Protestant beliefs that only religious devotion could facilitate such behavior.[12]

To commit oneself to religion is to "master" one's "blood" and to place oneself outside the ordinary life of mortals, linking the devotee to divinity and to power far more directly than other human beings. Thus, alongside its negative connotations in this play, virginity also signifies female self-control and the instability of male dominance. To assert one's virginity, for a woman, is to articulate one's sexual independence within the same patriarchal structure that denies that independence. When in the wood, for example, Hermia's determination not to sleep with Lysander before marriage does signify her "concern for propriety," as Lisa Hopkins notes (26). But in refusing Lysander's advances, Hermia also claims the right to her own sexuality, and to determine when and where she will begin sharing that sexuality with others. For Hermia, the real issue is consent, which implies her retention of "sovereignty" even as she gives it away. As Schwarz argues, "Virginity is a speech act that masquerades as a bodily state, a male fantasy that locates feminine will at the heart of heterosocial production, a licensed performance that incorporates, co-opts, and conspires with the body beneath" ("The Wrong Question" 15). By preserving her virginity, Hermia also claims the right

to her own will, implicitly citing the queen who also claimed the right to decide who should have access to her body and when that access might be permitted.

The cloister represents a group of women who, though "mewed," attain a kind of autonomy through religious devotion. The mechanicals are the only equivalent male community in the play, and while their performance may arise from their devotion to the ruler--as Theseus views it (5.1. 81-105)--their comic behavior renders such devotion laughable. Religious community, then, is associated only with females, those who paradoxically gain greater control over their lives by conforming to an especially ascetic norm of female behavior. Although this is a decidedly Catholic norm, Hermia's acceptance of it as an option for herself suggests some potential in it for women, even in a Protestant country. As Traub notes, nuns "experienced considerable opportunities for political, emotional, and erotic independence within a female community of work and support that, while marginal geographically and politically, nonetheless figured importantly even in a post-Reformation culture" (62-63). Traub emphasizes the lesbian possibilities of convent life, possibilities that formed the basis of much anti-convent invective, as she shows; and same-sex devotion is hardly absent in the play. Indeed, Helena describes her intense friendship with Hermia in religious and homoerotic terms--together, they are "artificial gods," who grow so close they seem "Like to a double cherry: seeming parted, / But yet a union in partition, / Two lovely berries on one stem" (3.2. 204-12). However, and more importantly, religious devotion also ties such a female community together. As with Titania and her votaress, such devotion creates a space within which a certain measure of resistance to patriarchal discourse can be maintained. And, significantly, this community is focused on a female deity, not a male one: "the cold fruitless moon." Theseus' negative view of the convent and its worshippers coexists with the possibilities such spaces offer to women to control their own sexuality. Through religion, women form links that allow them to live as independently as possible in a male-dominated world.

Does Jack Have Jill?

As noted earlier, critics often read the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a victory for patriarchal forces and as a shattering of female community and power. Oberon's success in tricking Titania into agreeing to give him the changeling boy seems to ensure his control over her in their marriage, and Theseus establishes his dominance over Hippolyta through their wedding; while Hermia and Helena cease speaking after their marriages, silently watching the mechanicals' performance while their husbands make caustic comments. One of the problems with these readings is that they are based on the assumption that all power in the

play is concentrated in male hands and that the female characters are effectively under masculine dominance in this final act. But the association of femininity with divinity makes this assumption more difficult to sustain. While Oberon and Theseus wield considerable power, none of that power is religious, and this limitation creates a certain tension in the ending that makes it hard to read the resumption of masculine dominance as unproblematic.

The marriage that Titania and Oberon bless, as other critics have noted,[13] would have been known to any early modern audience member versed in the classics as the source of Hippolytus, the son whose adherence to Artemis rather than Aphrodite would result in his bloody death and the suicide of his stepmother Phaedra. Oberon's wish to "Dance in Duke Theseus' house, triumphantly, / And bless it to all fair prosperity" (4.1. 86-87) thus seems singularly impotent. Oberon's most effective exercise of power in the play has been to transform desire through the magic potion, which he accomplishes using Puck as intermediary; but Oberon's ability to exploit this potion comes through his knowledge of the flower love-in-idleness and the chance encounter that enabled him to see Cupid's arrow miss the "imperial vot'ress." His access to the antidote similarly rests on his knowledge of the properties of a certain flower, in this case "Dian's bud," which as the Norton edition's footnote indicates may be "*agnus castus*, or chaste tree: said to preserve chastity" (n. 846). In other words, as seen within the play, his power resides not within him, as an inherent part of his masculine nature, but rather is something acquired and artificial, and in fact dependent on the divine femininity that enables the "imperial vot'ress" to escape the love god's attack. Because Elizabeth escapes, Oberon can use love-in-idleness to manipulate others and increase his own power; but the queen's ability to combine feminine weakness with divine strength suggests a lack in Oberon precisely because he is male. That is, as the play establishes Elizabeth as its Other, the one who creates the conditions for desire by her absence, it also shows how much Oberon falls short of the ideal she represents, perhaps because he too is caught up in the chain of desires that motivate the play, but also because he has none of her divine attributes: aloofness, invulnerability to desire, and divine protection.

Another critical assumption, one that bolsters the conclusion that the male characters establish their control at the end of the play, is that Titania willingly accepts Oberon's authority. Indeed, when she awakes, she calls him "My Oberon" (4.1.73), and she appears with him to bless the lovers, in particular Theseus and Hippolyta. But she also asks Oberon to tell her what's been happening:

Come, my lord, and in our flight
Tell me how it came this night
That I sleeping here was found

With these mortals on the ground. (4.1. 96-99)

The assumption that Titania is amicably joined with Oberon by the time they perform the blessings rests on these lines, which suggest that Oberon tells his wife the story during Act 5 and before we see them at the very end of the play. While this is certainly possible, we never see this stage of the reconciliation--arguably the most difficult stage--and so the relationship reaches no closure to share with the audience, and Titania's submission is never complete. Though she appears with Oberon to bless the "best bride bed" (5.2. 33), the bloody future that awaits the issue of that bed suggests that perhaps the fairy queen's reservations about her marriage continue, making the blessing incomplete, and that there will once more be trouble between wife and husband. As Marjorie Garber puts it, closure can come only "by forgetting or ignoring what comes next" (229), reminding us that this is a play that extends considerably beyond its ostensible borders.

The play's framing narrative of Theseus and his marriage to the Amazon queen Hippolyta also indicates the extent of this play's narrative reach. Louis Montrose has described Theseus as a representative of Elizabeth's princely authority rather than as her "masculine antithesis" ("A Kingdom" 229). While this reading is attractive because it gestures towards the wider gender possibilities available in the play's representation of the queen, Theseus' negative reputation as an irresponsible ruler who killed his father from neglect and who raped and abandoned numerous women makes his marriage to a captive queen much more of a threat to a female ruler and a challenge to her authority, thus negating Theseus' potential as Elizabeth's representative. Theseus' marriage to Hippolyta will, indirectly, result in the deaths of both his second wife and his son, and so Oberon's promise of an especially fortunate future for this couple will prove tragically fruitless. Furthermore, like Oberon, Theseus' power seems purely secular, unconnected to the divinity to which Titania and Elizabeth have access. In fact, Theseus is suspicious of religion because it enables female retreats from the male domain of politics and marriage: "But earthlier happy is the rose distilled / Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn, / Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness" (1.1.76-78). Theseus' story suggests, however, that Elizabeth's "single blessedness" may in fact be more blessed than marriage, especially when Oberon raises the possibility that the couples' issue may well be born deformed (5.2.31-43). While the Fairy King guards against such misfortune, he fails to ensure the potential offspring's safety from more serious problems. In this sense the play appears to endorse the failure of the Alençon marriage negotiations, but it also refers to Elizabeth's own words in one of the first speeches of her reign, where she speculates on the chances of her offspring turning out badly: "For although I be never so careful of your well-doings, and mind ever so to be, yet may my issue grow out of kind and

become, perhaps, ungracious" (*Collected Works* 58). The damage an heir could do to the reigning monarch seems to have been a danger that never left Elizabeth's mind--understandably, given her experiences in her sister Mary's reign--and that became evident in her reluctance to name an heir and her successful resistance under considerable pressure to do so officially (Somerset 566).

While Elizabeth certainly drew on masculine images to portray herself as a prince or, in the famous Armada speech, a king, her personal style and the paintings that circulated throughout the kingdom as representations of the queen very much emphasized her femaleness; and Elizabeth's own writings play up her gender to make God's support of her appear all the greater. Although, as described by Lacan, the identification of the feminine with the Other forms part of a discourse of mystification that enables masculine dominance (69), Elizabeth's self-portrayal as one who gains power precisely through her femininity appeals to a higher form of masculinity in the figure of God. This divine masculinity, the queen's writings suggest, has little or nothing to do with fallible human masculinity. Thus men have no essential connection to divine authority while, paradoxically, women may have a stronger connection to that divinity because of their ability to abase themselves with proper humility. In spite of this strategy, the queen aroused the distrust of those who saw female rule as illegitimate and female power as a frightening monstrosity. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the problems of female rule coexist with a portrayal of female rulers who, like Elizabeth, combine divine and temporal power in a way no male character does. Because of this portrayal, the ending of the play suggests a powerful model of femininity that coexists with masculine control and undermines the misogynistic limitations that come into play through marriage and through sexual humiliation. Elizabeth's implicit presence pervades the play and transubstantiates the text's engagement with gender and power, turning a seeming endorsement of male dominance into a much more ambivalent examination of that dominance under the rule of a higher masculinity--that is, God.

Notes

I would like to thank the editor and the anonymous readers of *EIRC* for suggestions that have enhanced this essay. I would also like to acknowledge Kathryn Schwarz, who first called to my attention questions regarding the relationship between Titania and her votaress. All references to Shakespeare's works throughout the essay are from the Norton edition.

[1]See "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Shaping Fantasies," "'Shaping Fantasies'," and "A Kingdom of Shadows."

[2]"O Senor Dios mio y Padre mio, immortales gracias hago a tu diuina

Magestad con mi boca, con mi coracon y con quanto yo soy, por las infinitas misericordias de que has vsado con migo: que no solamente me has hecho criatura tuya, hechura de tus manos formada a la imagen y semejanca tuya, . . . mas aun porque me has hacho esta tan senalada y tan rara merced, que siendo yo vna mugger de mi naturaleza flaca, timida y delicada, como lo son todas las demas, me has querido hazer robusta, animosa y fuerte para resistir a tanta multitud de Idumeos, Ismaelitas, Moabitas, Agarenos y otra infinidad de gentes y naciones que se auian juntado, conjurado, conspirado y hecho liga, contra ti, contra tu hijo y contra todos aquellos que confiessan tu nombre y tienen por vnica regal de salud a tu sancta palabra" (*Autograph Compositions* 143).

[3]They are, of course, some of Elizabeth's most famous words: "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too" (*Collected Works* 326). The contrast between the "weak and feeble" female body and the strength of the internal spirit bolstered by God provides the evidence of God's support for Elizabeth and thus, in her rhetoric, for England itself.

[4]"sed et animum partier meum multis angoribus grauiter perculisti: totum praeterea populum Anglicum, cuius ques atque sercuritas, post te proxime, in meae Ancillae tuae incolumitate sita est, meo periculo vehementer preteruisti, attonitumque reddidisti" (*Autograph Compositions* 120).

[5]The *OED* defines the term as "A female votary; esp. a woman devoted to a religious life or to a special saint," and traces its first use to 1589, shortly before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written.

[6]"Vestal" also brings to mind the famous "Siena" portrait of Elizabeth, which draws upon the legend of a vestal virgin required to prove her virginity by carrying water with a sieve--an operation which, of course, succeeds. In this painting, Elizabeth holds a sieve while turning her back to a group of young courtiers whose well-muscled legs are on display. Behind her also is a globe, its surface portraying England and the ocean with ships venturing to the New World. While the globe pays tribute to England's successful explorations abroad, Elizabeth's demeanor suggests one who looks beyond these worldly concerns to spiritual affairs. Her somberness is accentuated by her black dress with white trimmings and ruff, a favorite color scheme of hers. This portrait is dated to 1580-83, though it seems unlikely that Shakespeare would have seen it. The legend of the vestal virgin, however, was widely known and applied to Elizabeth. For two other accounts of the "Siena" portrait, see Goldberg 43-47 and Montrose, *The Subject of Elizabeth* 122-27.

[7]See Jankowski 75-110.

[8]As Montrose writes, "Shakespeare's sources weave the chronicle of Theseus' rapes and disastrous marriages, his habitual victimization of women, into the lurid history of female depravity that includes Pasiphae, Medea, and Phaedra" ("*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Shaping Fantasies" 77).

[9]See McNamara; Winstead.

[10]For example, Martin Luther writes in an early letter that "Although women are ashamed to admit such things, both Scripture and experience teach

that among many thousands there is not one to whom God gives the grace to maintain pure chastity. A woman does not have the power [to do this] herself. God created her body to be with a man, bear children and raise them, as Scripture makes clear in Genesis I" (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 141). Richard Brathwait praises virginal chastity but assumes that it will soon be replaced with marital chastity: "Are you Virgins? dedicate those outward Temples of yours to chastity; abstaine from all corrupt society; inure your hands to works of piety, your tongues to words of modesty. Let not a straid looke taxe you of lightnesse, nor a desire of gadding impeach you of wantonnesse. The way to winne a husband is not to wooe him but to be woo'd by him" (106).

[11]Traub examines some of these possibilities in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*.

[12]See for example Juan Luis Vives' much-reprinted treatise, translated into English as *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1529). Although Vives wrote as a humanist Catholic scholar, his book maintained its appeal throughout the sixteenth century and overlaps with Protestant texts in its concern for chastity and obedience as the primary--indeed the only--virtue a woman needed to possess. As the editors of the 2002 edition write, "for both Vives and the writers who precede and follow him, chastity and obedience remain crucial" (xlvi). For Vives too, religious devotion provides a necessary bulwark against natural female weakness: "Therfore let a yonge woman be in dede, as she sheweth demure, humble, sobre, shamefast, chaste, honeste, and virtuous, bothe let her seme so, and be so: and let her pray unto the holy virgin, whom she shal truly represent with her lyvyng, and be therfore the more pleasant unto her, and also unto Christ, that shal acknowledge her his spouse: let her pray fyrste for her selfe, that she may be increased in vertue, and purpose of her holy chastity, and other vertues" (50).

[13]These critics include Schwarz and Montrose; others may be found in Kehler's collection.

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