

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

# The Inclusion of Homosexuality in Shakespeare

*A Comparison between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine**

Auteur : Malcolm Bancu  
Promoteur : Guido Latré  
Année académique 2018-2019  
Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale  
Finalité spécialisée : langues des affaires







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## **Abbreviations**

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* = MND

*Pyramus and Thisbe* = PAT

*Were the World Mine* = WTWM



## Introduction

Written by William Shakespeare in 1595/96, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the playwright's most popular plays. The plot centers around Hermia and Lysander, an Athenian couple, who are forbidden to marry each other due to the opposition of Hermia's father. The couple escapes to the woods, followed by Demetrius, who loves Hermia, and by Helena, who loves Demetrius. In the woods, the four characters are manipulated by fairies who use a magical juice on them. This juice has the power to make anyone fall in love with the first person they lay eyes on, which further complicates the already complex relationships between the Athenians. In parallel, Oberon and Titania, the Fairy King and Queen argue over the custody of an Indian boy, and the King uses the mystical juice on his wife to make her succumb to an ass-headed amateur actor by the name of Bottom the Weaver. In the end, Oberon secures the boy and makes peace with Titania, Hermia marries Lysander and Helena weds Demetrius. The magical universe of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has fascinated generations of theatregoers around the globe for centuries. Uncountable have been the articles published discussing the comedy and its story has been adapted into numerous ballets, operas, musicals, books and movies.

Among these adaptations is the American independent movie *Were the World Mine* which was written by Tom Gustafson, who also directed the film, and Cory James Krueckeberg. Released in 2008, the movie is an extended version of Gustafson's short film *Fairies* and has the particularity of including homosexuality into the originally heterosexual plot of Shakespeare. The motion picture has been played in many film festivals in the United States and across the world and it has won various awards praising its narrative, direction and music.

This dissertation provides a comparison between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine* based on a number of topics. The aim of this essay will be to determine whether or not it makes sense to incorporate homosexuality into the narrative, to look at the consequences that it might have and to see if the general ideas and messages transmitted through the story remain unchanged.

As far as the methodology used in the writing of this thesis is concerned, the first step I took after reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and watching *Were the World Mine* was looking for as many articles as I could that tackled the question of homosexuality in MND and other plays by Shakespeare. After going through all of them, I summarized the relevant content, which is

presented in the first part of this dissertation. Subsequently, I went back to MND and WTWM for the actual comparison between the book and the movie, which constitutes the second part of the thesis. While re-reading and re-watching each work, I intended to look at certain topics and how they were featured in the literary and cinematographic counterparts, drawing parallels and highlighting differences. I gathered all the ideas that came to mind, organized them into key themes and articulated them logically into words, always making sure I was using concrete examples and referring directly to the original text. In the following sections are exposed the results of my analysis.

As readers make their way through this dissertation, I hope they keep those simple words in mind:

If I offend, it is with my good will  
That you should think I come not to offend;  
But with good will to show my simple skill.  
That is the true beginning of my end.  
Consider then I come – but in despite  
I do not come – as minding to content you.  
My true intent is all for your delight.  
I am not here that you should here repent you.  
The writer is at hand, and by his show  
You shall know all that you are like to know. (Adapted from MND 5.1.103-112)

## **Part 1: Homosexuality in Shakespeare**

### **A. His sonnets and personal life**

Before tackling the question of homosexuality in Shakespeare's plays, I reckon it is important to get into this aspect of his personal life. Though we may not know a lot about his life and while we do not have any certainties concerning his sexual orientation, a series of sonnets seem to indicate that the Bard might have expressed a certain inclination towards men. In his essay "The Scandals of Shakespeare's Sonnets", Robert Matz dives into this subject and offers an extensive analysis of who the sonnets most likely were addressed to and what effect those must have had on the readers throughout the ages. Out of 154 sonnets, only 28 seem to have been written for a woman, with the rest of them being dedicated to a man.

When the sonnets were first published, sexuality in general was sometimes looked upon in a negative way, yet homosexuality in particular was not necessarily condemned. Matz explains:

In the early modern period [...] same-sex love between men was ordinary and even celebrated. Nonetheless, it would be an exaggeration to claim that there was no policing of sexual desire in male same-sex friendships, including by those within them. One need not consider this policing an expression of animus against homosexuality per se, but against any sexuality during a time when even sex licit within marriage was still viewed with suspicion. (481)

The love of the soul, whether male or female, was not criticized as long as it was not physical. Chaste homosexuality was more widely accepted than lustful heterosexuality. The problems that could emerge from same-sex relationships had more to do with social matters rather than personal ones, that is to say if the relationship disrupted the social order in place and not for the sake of the relationship itself.

The author of the essay writes that "it is the sonnets to the woman, not the man, that are scandalously full of illicit sexuality - not to mention lying and betrayal" (483). The woman, who is from a different class and different race from Shakespeare, happens to be married and is correlated with sex "and all the disorder, lies and greedy self-interest that the sonnets associate with sexual desire" (484). Moreover, the way this woman is described has been qualified of misogynist. "She is unchaste, deceitful in her beauty, a dangerous source of physical and spiritual disease" (485).

In 1640, John Benson published a revised version of the sonnets. His edition only makes a few changes to the gendered pronouns, altering some male pronouns to female ones. The titles

he gives to the gender-neutral poems indicate that he thought those were addressed to a woman. Nonetheless, they do not necessarily reflect a need from Benson to erase any form of love between men. Robert Matz points out that:

these titles can just reflect Benson's assumptions about the proper gender of the beloved in a particular style of sonnet, not any active effort to conceal a male addressee in general. Changes from a male to female beloved might then have been prompted by Benson's sense of consistency in this section of courtly love poems as a whole. In this group a male beloved may have seemed out of place, especially if Benson initially intended to put all the poems clearly to a man earlier in the arrangement. [...] The facts surrounding the issue are in many ways unclear, including uncertainty about which changes Benson made intentionally, and which haphazardly. [...] If Benson's edition seems to treat the gender of the addressee of the sonnets with neither complete indifference nor complete attention, perhaps it is because Benson thought there were some differences in the way a man expressed love for a man or love for a woman. (488)

Between the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we can witness equally mixed reactions. Even though the expression of male-male love was culturally accepted, some authors such as Malone show some preoccupation about gender. We find more changes of pronouns and some erasure of homoeroticism, but this situation can only be applied to some scholars, while others seem not to attach importance to the male/female dilemma.

During the Victorian period, a dual approach is apparent. Whereas the sonnets to the woman are criticized or shown a lack of interest, the ones to the man are praised. The promotion of love between men is characteristic of this era. This trend went on during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "The theme of an older man's attraction to a younger one [is] a natural subject for poets sensitive to beauty and fearful of its decay", according to H.C. Beeching (Matz 493). "On the other hand, he labels the sonnets to the woman merely an 'appendix' to the young man sequence, and tells readers that they describe a woman 'without great beauty and without virtue'" (494).

We observe a real shift in reactions around 1930. This year marks what Katz calls the "invention of heterosexuality", when this sexual orientation became the norm, as opposed to homosexuality which was considered abnormal from that moment on. The invention of heterosexuality is described as "the point at which heterosexual desire, at least, is freed from the imperatives of lineage or procreation within marriage to become 'sexuality,' a value in and of itself, as an older (re)productive ethic gives way to a modern consumer one" (Matz 496). During that time, people thought that promoting heterosexuality was the only way to prevent homosexuality. Poems dedicated to the woman are used as evidence against the possibility of Shakespeare's attraction to men. This is the first time that we see this kind of argument being

developed. Before that, even the authors who felt some sort of “fear” towards the homoeroticism in the sonnets never used the sonnets to the woman as a counter-argument. As Matz puts it, “gone are earlier concerns about the adultery or salaciousness of the sonnets to the woman: what matters is that Shakespeare felt hetero-sexual desire” (498). After 1930 critics argue that Shakespeare *must* have been straight considering he married a woman, supposedly had several children and urged the man in his sonnets to marry. The sexual aspect of the woman’s sonnets is emphasized while the man’s sonnets are considered not to hold any sexual desire.

Nevertheless, there has been some debate on whether or not Shakespeare refers to himself with the pronominal subject in his poems. Some critics, notably Gerald Massey, argue that the sonnets (or at least some of them) were not autobiographical but written on somebody else’s behalf (Matz 493). Another theory is that the sonnets are purely fictional, without any correlations to real life people or events. An argument supporting this idea is that it is unlikely that Shakespeare would have wanted to expose in the open his affair with a married woman. If the sonnets are not autobiographical, can we say then that the Bard was gay? The doubt remains, and we most probably will never have a definitive answer to that question, even if it is a probability. “Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, in their recent Oxford Topics introduction to the sonnets, observe that even if the sonnets are not autobiographical, they show that Shakespeare could ‘enter the imaginations of men who felt deep love and desire for individual men and women’” (Matz 501-502).

All of this goes to show that it would make sense to include queer elements in Shakespeare, to fight the censorship that his poetry has endured through the years and rectify the attempted suppression of homoeroticism present in his poetry. Shakespeare may have been homosexual or bisexual, and even if this was not the case, his texts feature allusions to male-male love. The sonnets have received a lot of attention since their first publication and have gathered very opposite reactions from their readers. After a mixed reception between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the poems addressed to the man went from critically acclaimed to morally condemned. That is why it is important to keep this legacy alive and see how it can be perceived by a modern audience. In that spirit, it is not completely incoherent to portray same-sex love in a play such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, considering this particular sort of love was a part of the author’s life.

## **B. *Twelfth Night***

In addition to his poetry, homoeroticism is also to be found in the Bard's plays, with one of the most undisputable examples being *Twelfth Night*. In this play, which is one of Shakespeare's transvestite comedies, the main character Viola, after being separated from her twin brother Sebastian due to a shipwreck, disguises herself as a man named Cesario and becomes the page of Duke Orsino. Viola falls in love with the Duke, who is himself in love with a countess by the name of Olivia, and Olivia becomes infatuated with Cesario, who is none other than Viola. The cross-dressing of the character helps to create a love triangle full of queer subtext.

Firstly, the homoerotic bond between Viola/Cesario and Orsino is undeniably palpable. In the last scene of the play, it is revealed that Cesario is in actual fact a woman, and Orsino immediately decides to marry her. Joseph Pequigney notes in his essay "The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*" that Orsino

proposes marriage to someone he knows and has come to love only as a male servant, seen only in masculine clothes, whose feminine name he never once utters, and whom in the scene he twice addresses as "boy" (5.1.127, 264) – even at the proposal itself – and refers to as late as his final speech as being still a man. (207)

Indeed, the very last lines of Orsino are the following:

Cesario, come,  
For so you shall be, while you are a man.  
But when in other habits you are seen,  
Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen. (5.5.378-381)

By refusing to call his fiancé by her maiden name, the Duke seems to be eager to marry Cesario and not Viola. The reveal of Viola's true gender has made Orsino's attraction to his pageboy acceptable and their wedding possible. The suddenness of the Duke's proposal suggests that the desire he feels towards Viola/Cesario was already present in him long before the final scene of the play. In Act 1 Scene 4, Orsino tells his page "Thou know'st no less but all. I have unclasped | To thee the book even of my secret soul" (1.4.13-14). It is obvious that the two characters are extremely close to each other. In his article "In the Field of Dreams: Transvestism in *Twelfth Night* and *The Crying Game*", Jonathan Crewe states that, in this quote, "when Orsino speaks it is only to affirm Cesario's unprecedentedly intimate access to his bosom" (106). Later in that same scene, when the Duke asks his page to go and try to woo Olivia for him, Cesario is hesitant in his capacity to succeed and Orsino reassures him:

Dear lad, believe it.  
For they shall yet belie thy happy years

That say thou art a man. Diana's lip  
Is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe  
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,  
And all is semblative a woman's part. (1.4.29-34)

According to Crewe, this declaration most obviously “comprises Orsino's sudden, unwitting homoerotic infatuation with the beautiful girl-like boy. [...] At the narrative level, it is indeterminable whether Orsino is falling for a girl in the semblance of a boy or for a boy who resembles a girl” (108). What is certain is that Orsino admires Cesario/Viola's gender ambiguity and that the master and his servant are intimate from the beginning. Furthermore, Casey Charles adds in “Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*” that the conditions of this relationship further amplify the possibility of male-male affection, with the master/slave context being a common place for homoerotic interaction.

In addition to the Orsino-Cesario relationship, homoeroticism is also to be found in the second side of the love triangle, namely Olivia and Viola. When the Duke sends his page to court the countess, Olivia falls in love Cesario, who she thinks is a man. Every time she talks about her vehement feelings towards Cesario, she is unknowingly declaring her flame to another woman. The same-sex female locutions do not solely come from Olivia but from Viola as well. During their first encounter, she utters:

**VIOLA**

If I did love you in my master's flame,  
With such a suffering, such a deadly life,  
In your denial I would find no sense;  
I would not understand it.

**OLIVIA**

Why, what would you?

**VIOLA**

Make me a willow cabin at your gate  
And call upon my soul within the house.  
Write loyal cantons of contemned love  
And sing them loud even in the dead of night.  
Halloo your name to the reverberate hills  
And make the babbling gossip of the air  
Cry out “Olivia!” Oh, you should not rest  
Between the elements of air and earth,  
But you should pity me. (1.5.238-250)

In this extract, Viola improvises her speech to the Countess instead of using Orsino's words, which means that this passionate declaration to a woman, whether simulated or not, must come from somewhere within herself. The limits between hetero- and homoeroticism become blurred, but it is undeniable that lesbian energy emanates from this scene.

One must not forget that when the play was first performed, the role of Viola, like all the others, would have been acted by a male actor. This means that this boy would have played the part of a girl who pretends to be a boy. According to Casey Charles, Viola "collapses the polarities upon which heterosexuality is based by becoming an object of desire whose ambiguity renders the distinction between homo- and hetero-erotic attraction difficult to decipher" (128).

Charles also notes that, if the homoerotic subtext from the love triangle mentioned here remains ambiguous due to Viola's cross-dressing, another relationship from *Twelfth Night* is glaringly gay. "Metaphors of adoration, devotion, and passionate oblation saturate the heated but highly stylized rhetorical interactions between Sebastian, the twin brother of Viola, and Antonio" (136). After the shipwreck, Sebastian survives and is taken in by Antonio, a pirate who helps him recover. The words that are used by Antonio to talk about Viola's brother are very evocative of his deep feelings and suggest that the two men might be more than friends. In their first scene together, Antonio tells his companion:

If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.  
.....  
I have many enemies in Orsino's court,  
Else would I very shortly see thee there.  
But, come what may, I do adore thee so  
That danger shall seem sport, and I will go. (2.1.31, 38-41)

Antonio is so crazy about Sebastian that he is willing to follow him to Orsino's court despite putting his own life and freedom in danger. Moreover, Joseph Pequigney adds that the word "servant" used in this quote could be used as a synonym for "lover" (203). A few scenes later, the pirate explains his reasons for following Sebastian:

My desire,  
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth.  
.....  
My willing love,  
The rather by these arguments of fear,  
Set forth in your pursuit. (3.3.4-5, 11-13)

Still following Pequigney's argument, when Antonio mentions his "desire", it is definitely sensual and evokes libido. The man consecutively proceeds to give Sebastian his purse containing money in order to help him find an inn for the night. In the next scene, the pirate mistakes Viola for her brother and when he asks her for the purse back, she declares that she does not know him, which erroneously leads Antonio to think that Sebastian has deceived him. He says:

This youth that you see here  
I snatched one half out of the jaws of death,  
Relieved him with such sanctity of love,  
And to his image, which methought did promise  
Most venerable worth, did I devotion.  
.....  
Thou hast, Sebastian, done good feature shame.  
In nature there's no blemish but the mind.  
None can be called deformed but the unkind.  
Virtue is beauty, but the beauteous evil  
Are empty trunks o'erflourished by the devil. (3.4.325-329, 332-336)

When he refers to Sebastian's "image", "good feature" and "nature", he is praising his physical appearance, saying that he is "beauteous". Even when he believes to have been betrayed, Antonio cannot refrain from adulating his presumable lover, proving that his affection is very intense. And in the last scene, he asserts "A witchcraft drew me hither", further confirming he is under a love spell and has been bewitched by Sebastian's looks and soul (5.1.70).

In conjunction with his numerous compliments of Sebastian, Antonio's occupation as a pirate also imparts associations with homosexuality and sodomy. Charles states that:

To put this notable pirate's passion in perspective, we need turn no further than the pages of Billy Budd to find a trace of the sodomitical practices that traditionally have been ascribed to men at sea. In the seventeenth century, according to B. R. Burg, English sea rovers and buccaneers were renowned for their sodomitical behavior. (136)

Sebastian, for his part, seems to reciprocate Antonio's affection. While he may not be as vocal about it as the sea captain, he nonetheless says in Act 5 Scene 1, after having been separated from his idolizer for a certain amount of time:

Antonio, O my dear Antonio!  
How have the hours racked and tortured me  
Since I have lost thee! (5.1.210-212)

In this scene, Sebastian is now married to Olivia who mistook him for his twin sister in disguise, a union that Sebastian has willingly accepted despite having just met the Countess and without knowing anything about her. Telling Antonio that being far from him was a torture is a declaration that is way more passionate than anything Sebastian ever tells his wife during their scenes together (Pequigney 206). Moreover, Nancy Lindheim observes in “Rethinking Sexuality and Class in *Twelfth Night*” that Viola’s twin addresses his dear companion using the informal “thou” whereas they only spoke to each other with the formal pronoun “you” in earlier scenes (693). This demonstrates the growing closeness of the two men.

In that same article, Lindheim also explores the androgynous side of Sebastian, arguing that Viola is not the only one to blur the lines between masculine and feminine. In his first scene, Sebastian delivers these words:

But I perceive in you so excellent a touch of modesty that you will not extort from me what I am willing to keep in. Therefore it charges me in manners the rather to express myself.

.....  
Fare you well at once. My bosom is full of kindness, and I am yet so near the manners of my mother, that upon the least occasion more mine eyes will tell tales of me.  
(2.1.11-14, 38-41)

Sebastian knows that Antonio would never insist for the former to tell him things he did not want, which is why Viola’s brother voluntarily decides to reveal more details about his life. “His exquisite sensitivity to the quality of his friend’s feelings and the obligation it lays upon him might well be seen as a woman’s trait” (Lindheim 683). And the fact that he is on the verge of shedding tears, caused by the supposed death of his sister and his upcoming separation from Antonio, unveils his feminine side. The man himself acknowledges the womanish nature of his manner, comparing himself to his mother.

On the other hand, this character is depicted as a manly person as well. The very first image we get of him, before he even appears on stage, is the one described by a captain who has seen Sebastian after the shipwreck. When Viola is worried that her brother might have drowned in the accident, the captain tries to put her mind to rest, telling her:

And, to comfort you with chance,  
Assure yourself, after our ship did split,  
When you and those poor number saved with you  
Hung on our driving boat, I saw your brother,  
Most provident in peril, bind himself,  
Courage and hope both teaching him the practice,

To a strong mast that lived upon the sea,  
Where, like Arion on the dolphin's back,  
I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves  
So long as I could see. (1.2.7-16)

This passage describes Sebastian as being brave and resourceful in a perilous situation, qualities that are often typically associated with masculinity and that depict him as someone heroic. Lindheim also draws the attention to the manliness that ensues from the sword-fight between Sebastian, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek during which Viola's twin hurts the two other men who are left bleeding (684).

Other authors, such as Pequigney, add that the male/female ambivalence of Sebastian is also blatant in his very last words (208). After Olivia realizes that the person she has married is not Cesario/Viola but Sebastian, he tells her:

So comes it, lady, you have been mistook.  
But nature to her bias drew in that.  
You would have been contracted to a maid;  
Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived.  
You are betrothed both to a maid and man. (5.1.252-256)

The character admits to being both "maid and man", alluding to the fact that he is still a virgin but is not a cross-dressed female like his sister.

In addition to presenting a homosexual relationship on stage, *Twelfth Night* goes further in the sense that the liaison portrayed does not fit the usual standards of homoeroticism. Casey Charles notes that the unusualness of the relationship lies in three factors. Firstly, Antonio is from a lower social class than Sebastian and yet he is the one who is more powerful and principled, which places their bond outside of the master/servant paradigm usually associated with homoeroticism at that time. Secondly, the age difference between both men seems to be too little. While critics sometimes believe Sebastian to be younger than his savior, the age gap is not made explicit enough throughout the play to place the relationship inside the scope of the man/boy matrices that vehiculate ideas of same-sex love. Thirdly, the pair does not match the gender binarism according to which one person is supposed to be more masculine and the other more feminine in a gay couple. Both of them are swordsmen, and though Sebastian possibly has a homoerotic name, he is the one getting married to a woman, thus proving to be partially heterosexual at the end of the play. "Even in its depiction of same-sex love, *Twelfth Night* departs from patterns that would subsume homoeroticism under entrenched gender stereotypes" (Charles 137-138).

All of these examples show that homosexual and bisexual narratives are an integral part of Shakespeare's stories, with *Twelfth Night* featuring no less than three relationships incorporating subtext of same-sex love or attraction. Not only does the comedy contain heavy hints pointing towards homoeroticism, it also questions the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, darkening the lines between male and female.

### **C. *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Even though references to homosexuality may be less obvious in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than in other Shakespearean plays such as *Twelfth Night*, they are nonetheless present. Many authors have highlighted those references and written articles offering queer readings of MND, as I will expose in the following paragraphs.

A possible interpretation of MND is that the relationship between Helena and Hermia may be more than a simply platonic friendship. As pointed out by David Marshall (558), Helena's declaration to Hermia during the first scene of the play is quite ambiguous:

Your eyes are lodestars, and your tongue's sweet air  
More tunable than lark to shepherd's ear  
When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.  
Sickness is catching. Oh, were favor so,  
Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go.  
My ear should catch your voice. My eye, your eye.  
My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody. (1.1.183-189)

The jealousy that we find in the extract could also be read as a love poem from Helena to her friend. According to Marshall, she is hoping to "catch Hermia's favor" (559). Another illustration of the two young girls' ambiguous relationship appears in Act 3, Scene 2 where Helena says:

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
Have with our needles created both one flower,  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds,  
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,  
Like to a double cherry—seeming parted  
But yet an union in partition—  
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;  
So, with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,

Due but to one and crownèd with one crest.  
And will you rent our ancient love asunder  
To join with men in scorning your poor friend?  
It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly.  
Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,  
Though I alone do feel the injury. (3.2.206-222)

In this recollection of childhood memories, Helena expresses her bitterness towards the fact that Hermia forgot about the vows they shared. Helena is deeply saddened that their former connection is now lost. The extract explicitly describes the union of the two women who share the same heart and draws on the imagery of amorous soulmates, two halves of a person that come together to create only one. The fusion that once existed between these characters is in some ways similar to a marriage. Marshall affirms that Helena's words are reminiscent of the Church of England's wedding ceremony. He explains:

Dwelling on the word "one," Helena declares herself to have been joined with Hermia as "one," "incorporate." (Her "We, Hermia . . ." sounds almost like a "royal we" rather than a first-person plural and direct address-as if the one name named them both.) She reproaches: "will you rent our ancient love asunder, / To join with men in scorning your poor friend?" (III, ii, 215-216). The wedding ceremony from the 1549 Book of Common Prayer states "that it should never be lawful to put asunder those whome [God] by matrimonie haddeste made one"; or, to quote its better known declaration: "Those whome God hath joyned together: let no man put asunder. " Helena's appeal reworks these terms; she "chides" (218) Hermia for having sundered their union by joining with men-just as formerly they "chid the hasty-footed time / For parting us." (200-201)

In her article "Use Me But as Your Spaniel": Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities", Melissa Sanchez adds that, in her speech, Helena mentions "sides". In Shakespearean times, this term was a synonym for "loins", that is to say the sexual organs where erotic desire originates. In this recollection of memories, we not only find allusions to sisters' vows and childhood innocence but also to sexuality. Friendship and passion are not necessarily self-excluding but can coexist and complement each other. Sanchez refers as well to another passage that enlightens us about the relationship between Helena and Hermia. In Act 3, Scene 2, Helena utters:

I pray you, though you mock me, gentlemen,  
Let her not hurt me. I was never cursed.  
I have no gift at all in shrewishness.  
I am a right maid for my cowardice.  
Let her not strike me.  
.....  
Oh, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd!

She was a vixen when she went to school.  
And though she be but little, she is fierce. (3.2.308-312,333-335)

The extract suggests that Hermia has a violent temperament and that Helena has been the victim of that violence before but does not exclude the possibility of homoeroticism between the girls. On the contrary, harmony and hostility can be found in the vast majority of intimate relationships. This relationship is also discussed in Douglas Green's essay "Preposterous Pleasures: Queer Theories and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". Green explains that the problem with the two maidens' romantic friendship is that it is set in the past. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "the idea of two women living together and forming a household in the economic, social, and political senses, if not in the sexual as we understand it, seems to have been virtually unthinkable" (379). That is why Helena and Hermia are maturing, growing away from their "romance" and entering compulsory heterosexuality. Nevertheless, this transition does not necessarily go smoothly. Green points out that Hermia deliberately chooses not to sleep next to Lysander and that during the night, she has a nightmare involving a snake. This could be interpreted as "a fear of (hetero-)sexual intercourse, [...] a sexual disinclination to what we would call the heterosexual imperative" (Green 380). Moreover, the fact that Hermia confesses to Helena about eloping with Lysander could be an indicator that she wants her friend to stop her and prove her love. Yet no matter how we interpret the words and actions of the characters, the author insists that these are only suggestions.

The point is not that the text *encourages* these views but that the gaps in characterological motivation the text leaves for completion need not be filled as dominant ideologies then or now would fill them—with, in varying degrees and somewhat different senses, Hermia's naive reliance on female friendship and solidarity in the face of (heterosexual) love. (Green 381)

Green also says that Helena could be going after Demetrius, a man who does not love her, as a way to prove that she is straight without actually having to wed someone from the opposite sex. The author reckons that:

we might see in Helena's masochistic pursuit of a man who does not love or want her (sexually or maritally) an attempt simultaneously to comply with pervasive social expectations for adult women (their procreative function in the dominant ideology) and to thwart her role in a homosocial system of marital exchange. (381)

Helena, who seems frustrated by Demetrius's rejection, might be very pleased by the situation. An openly rebellious attitude against the social laws would lead her to her death, which is why chasing a boy who does not reciprocate her feelings may seem like her only viable option if she does not want to give in to heterosexual coitus and procreation.

Finally, a last queer element coming from Helena and Hermia's interactions concerns the homoerotic energy that emanates from their catfight in the second scene of Act 3. In the aforementioned article, Douglas Green argues that the effect generated by this scene is similar to what we find in female mud-wrestling and lesbian pornography aimed at straight men. We still find this homoeroticism if we consider the way this scene was enacted originally, by two boys "who probably disheveled or defaced their costumes and make-up—teasing audiences by foregrounding the tension between the theatrical illusion of female presence and the male bodies that produce the illusion" (Green 382). The sexual tension is present whether the fight occurs between two male or two female actors, even though the audience taking pleasure in watching it happen might be different.

The relationship between Helena and Hermia is not the only hint towards lesbian love that we can find in MND. As developed in her essay "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* 'Jack Shall Have Jill; /Nought Shall Go Ill'", Shirley Nelson Garner argues that the connection between Titania and the changeling boy's mother could be interpreted as involving a romantic aspect. The Fairy Queen says about the boy in Act 2, Scene 1:

His mother was a vot'ress of my order,  
And in the spicèd Indian air by night  
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,  
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,  
Marking th' embarkèd 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. (2.1.108-122)

Garner suggests that this extract gives us an insight of what the relationship between Titania and the Indian Queen was like. It is probable that their love for one another was more than a mere friendship, which would explain why Titania cares so much for the changeling boy, him being the only thing left that links her to her votaress. The author even asserts that by excluding men, the connection between the Fairy Queen and the boy's mother "threatens patriarchal and heterosexual values" (129).

In that same article, Garner also claims that, in addition to the love relationship mentioned above, the affinity between Oberon and the changeling boy can be ambiguous. Though many critics argue that the reason behind the Fairy King wanting the boy for himself is to inculcate the values of manhood in him, Garner thinks that his motivations could be different, namely his jealousy towards the boy's relation with Titania and his own (sexual) desire for the boy. The author states that:

Puck describes Oberon as "jealous," and his emphasis on the "lovely boy," the "sweet" changeling, and the "loved boy" (ILii.20-7) suggests that Oberon, like Titania, is attracted to the child. There is no suggestion that Oberon wants to groom the child for manhood; he wants him rather "to trace the forests wild" (1.25) with his fairy band. Those critics who attribute moral intentions to Oberon, arguing for his benevolent motives in taking the boy from Titania, overlook that Oberon has no intention of returning him to his father, with whom he, as a human child, might be most properly reared. (Garner 129)

Further adding to the relationship between the King and the Indian boy, Douglas Green even goes as far as to say that Oberon has "sodomitical intentions toward the changeling boy" (375).

From one homoerotic relation to another, the case of Egeus and Demetrius turns out to be just as ambiguous. In the play, Egeus is desperate for his daughter to marry the man that he has chosen for her, namely Demetrius. Garner supports the idea that Egeus choosing Demetrius over Lysander does not make sense. In the very first scene, Lysander compares his attributes with Demetrius's saying:

I am, my lord, as well derived as he,  
As well possessed. My love is more than his.  
My fortunes every way as fairly ranked,  
(If not with vantage) as Demetrius'.  
And—which is more than all these boasts can be—  
I am beloved of beauteous Hermia.  
Why should not I then prosecute my right?  
Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head,  
Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,  
And won her soul. And she, sweet lady, dotes,  
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry  
Upon this spotted and inconstant man. (1.1.99-110)

If Lysander seems like a better contender for Hermia's hand, why then is Egeus giving his preference to Demetrius, despite the fact that he has been unfaithful? A possible answer is that by forcing his daughter to marry a man whom she does not love, he can ensure that Hermia will

remain close to her father, that she will not devote her love and affection solely to her husband. Another possibility to justify Egeus's irrational choice is that he might have special feelings towards his future son-in-law. And that is made explicit in this exchange between Lysander and Egeus:

**LYSANDER**

You have her father's love, Demetrius.  
Let me have Hermia's. Do you marry him.

**EGEUS**

Scornful Lysander, true, he hath my love,  
And what is mine my love shall render him.  
And she is mine, and all my right of her  
I do estate unto Demetrius. (1.1.93-98)

The love that Egeus feels for Demetrius is very clear in this extract. The suggestion could then be that by keeping his daughter's suitor close to him he can satisfy his homoerotic desires. That is why at the end of the play, when he discovers the four lovers in the woods, Egeus tells Demetrius that Hermia has "defeated *you and me*" [emphasis added] (4.4.144). He considers the young Athenian and him as one unit, almost like a couple.

In addition to the case of Egeus and Demetrius, Shirley Nelson Garner also analyses the character of Theseus. According to her, it is interesting to note that the woman he is supposed to marry is not typically feminine. Hippolyta was indeed an Amazon, a warrior and a hunter before being engaged to the Athenian Duke. Garner brings this extract to light, in which Hippolyta recalls this episode from her former life:

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,  
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear  
With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear  
Such gallant chiding. For, besides the groves,  
The skies, the fountains, every region near  
Seemed all one mutual cry. I never heard  
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder. (4.1.97-103)

The author of the essay notes that Theseus has experienced a rather complicated love life, constantly abandoning women who were in love with him. Nevertheless, by marrying an androgynous woman, the Duke finds a way to accommodate his homoerotic urges. Moreover, one should not forget the fact that the role of Hippolyta would have been played by a man a few centuries ago. Garner points out that with a male actor playing the role of a masculine woman,

Theseus and his fiancée would have probably looked more like a homosexual couple than a heterosexual one.

In addition to all those references set out above, I found one other allusion to homosexuality in MND that I did not encounter in any article. In Act 4 Scene 2, the mechanicals start to worry about Bottom the Weaver not showing up for the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The men all agree on the fact that Bottom is the only person who could play the role of Pyramus and they begin to list all the reasons why he is perfectly fit for the role. Quince says he is “the best person too. And he is a very paramour for a sweet voice” to which Flute answers “You must say ‘paragon.’ A ‘paramour’ is, God bless us, a thing of naught” (4.2.6-7). The Cambridge Dictionary defines a paramour as “the person you are having a romantic or sexual relationship with, but are not married to.” Quince probably made an honest mistake and genuinely did not want to call Bottom his lover, given that mistaking a word for another is not an isolated case for the mechanicals. Nevertheless, this error suggests the possibility of a relationship between the two amateur actors. While this affair is only hypothetical, at least the *idea* of it is put forward, even if only as a joke.

All of these theories prove that queer readings of Shakespearean plays are possible, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is no exception. While these interpretations are not always explicit, they remain plausible if we care to fill the gaps where the text is silent and read between its lines. We can thus confirm that including homosexuality in an adaptation of MND does make sense. Turning the straight narrative in the play into a gay one is not a preposterous idea.

## **Part 2: Comparison between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine***

### **A. *Were the World Mine* summary**

Now that it has been established that it does make sense to include queer elements in an adaptation of the Shakespearean play, an actual comparison between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine* becomes possible. Because the movie is a free adaptation and is therefore very different from the original book, I reckon it is necessary to start with a summary of WTWM. In the following chapters, I will be referring to specific scenes and characters from the film, which is why it is preferable to be acquainted with the events depicted in the movie.

The opening scene takes place in Morgan Hill, an American high school in Kingston Town, with a game of dodgeball about to start. Among the players, we are presented with Timothy, an openly gay student and the protagonist of the movie. In this scene we learn about what the boy's daily life looks like, being bullied not only by his classmates but also by his sports teacher, Coach Driskill. The scene breaks off and lets us have a sight of Timothy's fantasy in which he imagines the other players in a choreographed dance number. Back to reality, after the game the students head to their literature class where they learn about Shakespeare. Thanks to a second daydream sequence, we find out that Timothy is secretly in love with Jonathon, one of his fellow classmates. Following the dream sequence, Ms. Tebbit announces that the school will put on a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and that all the seniors are required to participate. After class, some boys go play rugby, including Jonathon who, we learned to know, happens to have a girlfriend, Becky. For his part, Timothy hangs out with his two best friends, Frankie and Max, who are dating each other. The next day, auditions are held for the spring senior play. Timothy ends up getting the part of Puck, while Jonathon is cast as Lysander. In parallel, we see Donna, Tim's mother, receiving a training from Nora Bellinger, in the hope of working for her company Nora Fay Cosmetics. Nora happens to be the wife of Lawrence Bellinger, the headmaster of Timothy's school. When Tim announces to his mother that he got the role of Robin Goodfellow, she isn't too thrilled by the fact that her son will be playing a fairy. And she is not the only character having a hard time with the play. With the movie occurring in an all-boys school, all the parts are played by male actors, as it would have been the case in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is not well perceived by the headmaster and the sports coach who feel rugby players shouldn't have to portray women on stage.

Back to Timothy's mother, we find her struggling with her son's homosexuality because of the repercussions it has on her life. As we later see, some of her customers refuse to buy products from her once they learn that her son is queer. But though she wonders what she has done to cause her child to be gay, she does not reject him for it. Rehearsals are underway for the play and as Timothy goes over the text in his room, the words from the book magically metamorphose into the recipe for "Cupid's Love Juice". Comparable to the "love-in-idleness" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the pansy juice has the power to make people fall in love with the first person they lay eyes on. After concocting the potion, Timothy accidentally sprays it on Max, causing his friend to develop feelings for him. The following day Tim purposely uses the flower containing the love juice on Jonathon to make him reciprocate his own feelings. But our protagonist does not stop there. He goes on spraying the magical liquid on all of his classmates who start kissing each other under the amused gaze of Ms. Tebbit who seem to understand what is going on. Coach Driskill becomes one of the victims as well, setting his sight on principal Bellinger. Now that the rugby team has developed a certain inclination towards boys, their sports practice is replaced by ballet dancing. Timothy and Jonathon leave the school and bump into Tim's mom with her new boss. When Nora sees the lovers together, she is shocked by the fact that they are homosexuals and starts criticizing them. As a revenge, Timothy bewitches her with the magical pansy and she becomes devoted to Donna.

Chaos then ensues at the spring festival. Max and Jonathon start fighting for Timothy's affection, as Frankie and Becky show their discontent about the loss of their respective boyfriend. Ms. Tebbit suggests it might be time to stop this madness, but Timothy chooses not to listen and continues to spread the juice on as many people as he can. Among the people affected by the potion is the mayor of the town who then decides to allow same-sex couples to get married in his municipality. A group of angry parents comes raging on at the school, blaming the spring senior play for their children's sudden homosexuality. The principal feels obliged to cancel *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but Ms. T. assures them that their "concerns will fade like a nightmare" if the play goes on and if they come to the performance. The literature teacher goes to find Timothy to make him see reason and the student finally realizes that the situation has gone out of control. The performance takes place as planned and when Puck uses the antidote on Lysander's eyelids, a miraculous rain falls on the actors and audience members, dissolving the love juice that had originated their burning passion for one another. The play ends with *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which has been rewritten as a pop rock song. The audience gives Timothy a standing ovation and everyone seems to have forgotten the hectic

events of the past few days, as if all of it had been but a dream. Once the show is over, Nora officially hires Donna and praises her son. In the dressing room, Jonathon, no more under the influence of Cupid's juice, kisses Timothy, thus revealing his feelings for him. One of the homophobic boys who used to make fun of Timothy a few days earlier invites the newly formed couple to a party. There is no more bullying, and everyone seems to have become friends, without any rejection of homosexuality. The last shot of the movie shows Ms. Tebbit playfully looking at the camera, pointing at us with the magical pansy as she utters "Who's next?".

We thus see that *Were the World Mine* is a very open adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Many elements from the original story, such as the escape of the four lovers to the woods, the feud between the Fairy King and Queen and the whole plot around Bottom the Weaver, are not part of the movie. This should be kept in mind as we go through the comparison of both works.

### **B. The course of true love never did run smooth**

Though the adaptation might be very different from the original play, the main theme remains the same, namely the difficulty of love. Both works feature someone who is in love and has to fight for their right to love because some characters feel as though this love is not valid. In MND, Hermia forms a couple with Lysander, but her father Egeus, as well as the Duke Theseus want to forbid their relationship and force Hermia to marry Demetrius. In WTWM, Timothy is attracted to boys and many people in his town think this attraction is not natural, which is why they believe Timothy should date girls exclusively. In both cases there is a conflict between the person they love and the person they are supposed to love.

Many lines depicting Hermia's struggle could be applied directly to Timothy's case. The young girl laments the fact that she is not allowed to wed the person she set her heart on when she says "O hell, to choose love by another's eyes! (1.1.140)". It is unfair that she is not given the possibility to spend her life with the boy she elected, in the same way as Timothy being unable to choose love by his own eyes. Because she cannot accept this unfairness, she expresses her wish of Egeus changing his perspective when she utters "I would my father looked but with my eyes. (1.1.56)". Similarly, the *Were the World Mine* hero feels the same way when he deliberately bewitches the whole town in order for them to walk a mile in his shoes and to see the world through his eyes.

Howbeit, perhaps the problem of the whole situation comes from the fact that people look at it with their eyes when they really should not. Helena argues in the introductory scene that:

Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind.  
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.  
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgment taste—  
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.  
And therefore is Love said to be a child,  
Because in choice he is so oft beguiled. (1.1.234-239)

If love does not look with the eyes, fathers, dukes and townspeople should not judge love with their sight. This passage could be pertinent to the gay characters of WTWM, for once you stop relying on your sight, the gendered difference between a man and a woman ceases to exist. If you look with your mind, you can see a person's soul, and it does not matter what he or she looks like on the outside. A person's worth is not measured by their appearance but by the personality and values that lie inside of them. That is the reason why choosing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* turns out to be the perfect choice for the *Were the World Mine* writers to diffuse their message.

In the end, the lovers from both MND and WTWM manage to overcome the obstacles that were standing in their way and they end up with the person they desired. Hermia marries Lysander, despite the objection of her father, and Timothy can date Jonathon, without having to face the disapproval of his community.

There are nevertheless a couple of difference between the love story of the Athenians and that of the Americans, in regard to the overcoming of love's obstacles. The first difference concerns the predictability of the plot's resolution. Seeing that the play by Shakespeare features four young lovers, two males and two females, it is pretty evident that at the term of the story, the lovers will be paired in two perfect couples. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* being a comedy with a lighthearted tone, it is pretty obvious for the audience that the play will have a happy ending, even if this is the first time they are seeing it. They can relax and enjoy the performance without worrying about the outcome of the plot. While *Were the World Mine* is also a comedy, the conclusion of the story is not as obvious. For starters, there are not four clear protagonists, which means the love conflict cannot be easily resolved with two couples, and someone is bound to end up heartbroken. Secondly, the sexual orientation of the characters comes in the way of figuring out the final result. Jonathon seemingly is straight, which renders his relationship with Timothy uncertain once Cupid's potion wears off. Ultimately, the said

relationship survives in the aftermath of the supernatural events, and Becky, Jonathon's former girlfriend, is the one finding herself alone.

A second difference appertains to the relatability of the struggle. In the introduction of the Oxford Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, some information is given detailing the courtship practices of Elizabethan England. Peter Holland notes that young people of the time "were subject to the advice and consent of parents and kin, their 'friends', but the consent was rarely withheld, provided there was no financial or class impediment" (61-62). As brought up by Lysander in the first scene, he is just as worthy as Demetrius in terms of wealth and class, which implies that the original audiences of MND probably would have found the vehemence of Egeus's reaction too severe and unreasonable, and young girls may not have been able to relate to Hermia's situation completely. Contrarily to the Elizabethan play, the 2008 movie deals with a very topical issue. The difficulties encountered by Timothy and the discrimination he must face are a reality for many teenagers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals watching the film may find it relatable and identify with its protagonist.

In any case, the message of MND and WTWM is pretty clear: love should not be a battle. Humans have no power over who they develop feelings for, and they should not have to fight for the permission to be with the person they are captivated by. The person you love should not be anybody's business but your own. In the end, both works deliver a message of hope. Affection prevails over others' judgement and love conquers all. We must not despair, even though "the course of true love never did run smooth" (1.1.134).

### **C. Sincerity of love**

Besides the difficulty of affirming your love to the world and the ability to pursue it freely, there is another important factor that needs to be taken into account in any relationship, namely the sincerity of your feelings. This theme of sincerity is approached in two opposite ways in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine*.

At the end of MND, the characters that were affected by the love-in-idleness are freed from the influence of the magic flower, with the significant exception of Demetrius. The Fairy King explains, as he gives the antidote to Puck:

*(gives ROBIN another flower)*  
Then crush this herb into Lysander's eye,  
Whose liquor hath this virtuous property

To take from thence all error with his might  
And make his eyeballs roll with wonted sight.  
When they next wake, all this derision  
Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision.  
And back to Athens shall the lovers wend,  
With league whose date till death shall never end.  
Whiles I in this affair do thee employ,  
I'll to my queen and beg her Indian boy.  
And then I will her charmèd eye release  
From monster's view, and all things shall be peace. (3.2.377-389)

Oberon tells Robin to use the second flower on Lysander and he explains that he will do the same with Titania once he has asked her to give up the changeling boy, but he makes no mention of Demetrius. Later in that scene, the stage directions indicate that Puck squeezes the flower juice into Lysander's eyes but not his rival's. In the following act, we read in the stage directions that the juice of the second flower is sprayed into Titania's eyes by Oberon, making Demetrius the only living being still poisoned. This does not seem to bother the Fairy King. On the contrary, according to him, this situation apparently is ideal and all that matters is that "all things shall be peace". He reckons he is performing an act of kindness by bewitching Helena's beloved. Yet is this act really doing the young maiden a favor? When she awakens after the eventful night, she explains:

**HELENA**

And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,  
Mine own, and not mine own.

**DEMETRIUS**

Are you sure  
That we are awake? It seems to me  
That yet we sleep, we dream. (4.1.176-180)

Helena is glad that she now has the affection of Demetrius, but she admits that she feels he is hers and not hers at the same time. She seems to realize that his devotion might not be genuine and though the lovers do not understand the events from the previous night, Helena senses that something is off. She suspects that Demetrius could surely become crazy about another woman given that his adulation is so sudden and consequently seems fake. Her suspicion is confirmed by Demetrius in the following lines. If he still feels like being asleep, it is because in a sense he still is. He is still under the spell of the juice and would need the remedy to be fully awake. The situation really is unfair for him because it is not really his choice. If he was "conscious" he probably would not agree to this, he was manipulated without his consent. With MND being a

comedy, the audience is supposed to rejoice at the happy outcome to events and celebrate the triple wedding taking place at the end of the play. It is nonetheless controversial to glorify false sentiments and forced marriage.

In WTWM, on the contrary, not one character remains under the influence of the juice by the time the end credits roll. During the senior performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck/Timothy uses the remedy flower on Lysander/Jonathon, before raising the prop in the air, causing a magical rain to come falling on everyone, audience and actors alike. In the dressing room, while Timothy takes his makeup off, he is kissed by Jonathon who tells him he was unbelievable on stage. Tim is apparently very surprised by the kiss and his first reaction is to push Jon back. Timothy asks his classmate how he feels and the latter answers that he feels like himself. Once he knows that the attraction is genuine, Tim gives him another kiss. Notwithstanding the fact that he was the one who enchanted Jonathon in the first place, by the end of the movie he does not want to take advantage of his beloved against his will anymore. Earlier in the film, before going to the spring festival, Jonathon tells Timothy that he is perfection, to which he replies "that's the pansy talking" (*Were the World Mine*). Tim cannot appreciate the compliment when he knows it is not coming from the heart. Though he enjoys the sudden marks of attention, he does not find this new relationship completely satisfactory.

The sincerity of feelings in the movie can be contrasted with the deceitful appearance in Shakespeare's play. Timothy knows that the desire uniting his lover to him is real and can therefore appreciate his relationship's true worth. Helena, on the other hand, may never enjoy her marriage to the fullest because she feels the strangeness of Demetrius's passion. And though she feels it, she will probably never be able to be sure and is condemned to keep those mixed feelings indefinitely. It raises the question of whether love can be satisfying if it merely is an illusion. But the situation is even worse for Demetrius who had no say in the matter. This raises the more important question of whether it is acceptable to force people into relationships without their consent. By altering this specific element, WTWM answers these questions and highlights the importance of sincerity and consent in an amorous relationship.

#### **D. Oh Timothy**

Moving on to a deeper analysis of characters, it could be argued that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not feature one manifest protagonist. The story follows a series of subplots and the four lovers, Robin or Bottom could all be seen as the true hero of the play. As a consequence,

the audience members are less likely to identify with one particular character but will detach themselves and watch the action from certain distance as the point of view shifts from one subgroup of characters to another.

In *Were the World Mine*, the protagonist is unequivocally Timothy. His character is the one appearing in most scenes, meaning that viewers presumably will be more inclined to identify with him. Seeing that WTWM is not a direct adaptation of MND, I shall first try to determine who Timothy could be similar to in the original play before looking at the implications it might have. First and foremost, it is pretty undisputable that Tim is a modern representation of Robin Goodfellow. Apart from the obvious fact that he is cast as this part in his senior play, he is also the person running around town and using Cupid's juice on citizens, in the same way as Puck predominantly is the one operating the magical flower in MND. Furthermore, both characters can be called fairies. As a magical creature of the woods, Puck is a fairy in the literal sense while Timothy is a "fairy", as the word also is a slang term meaning "gay".

We can also say that Timothy is comparable to Helena. In the beginning of the movie, the teenage boy is in love with someone who does not return his feelings. Later in the film, thanks to the potion, two characters fall head over heels for Tim. Likewise, Helena is in love with Demetrius at the start of the play, but the latter does not share her sentiments. Subsequently, after being struck by the love-in-idleness, two boys start putting Helena on a pedestal.

The fact that Timothy represents both Puck and Helena at the same time has one major implication for his character. By using the mystical juice to make his crush fall in love with him, the protagonist of WTWM simultaneously is the person operating the magic and the person benefitting from it. His action thus serves selfish purposes. This is a flaw that was absent from Puck's character in MND. When we first meet him in Act 2 Scene 1, we learn a lot about his personality:

### **FAIRY**

Either I mistake your shape and making quite,  
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite  
Called Robin Goodfellow. Are not you he  
That frights the maidens of the villagery,  
Skim milk, and sometimes labor in the quern  
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,  
And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,  
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?  
Those that "Hobgoblin" call you, and "sweet Puck,"

You do their work, and they shall have good luck.  
Are not you he?

**ROBIN**

Thou speak'st aright.  
I am that merry wanderer of the night.  
I jest to Oberon and make him smile  
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,  
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal.  
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl  
In very likeness of a roasted crab,  
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob  
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.  
The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale  
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me.  
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,  
And "Tailor!" cries, and falls into a cough,  
And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh,  
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear  
A merrier hour was never wasted there. (2.1.18-43)

Many words can be used to describe Puck but "selfish" certainly would not be the most obvious one. The fairy likes to do childish things such as scaring people, stealing milk and playing various tricks on humans and animals. He executes these actions to please Oberon and make him laugh. Some of them are probably for his own pleasure, but he does not get any personal gains from them. Robin acts as the Fairy King's pawn and fulfills his every command, the most notable example being enchanting the teenagers in the woods with Cupid's flower. Whether bewitching Demetrius actually is in Hermia's favor is debatable, as explained in the previous chapter, but what is for certain is that it was born from a good intention. Oberon is not happy when the Hermia-Lysander couple is altered because he never wants to stand in the way of true love.

**OBERON**

(to ROBIN) This is thy negligence. Still thou mistakest,  
Or else committ'st thy knaveries willfully.

**ROBIN**

Believe me, King of Shadows, I mistook.  
Did not you tell me I should know the man  
By the Athenian garment he had on?  
And so far blameless proves my enterprise,  
That I have 'nointed an Athenian's eyes.

And so far am I glad it so did sort,  
As this their jangling I esteem a sport. (3.2.356-364)

Even though Puck recognizes that the messy situation with the Athenians is very entertaining, he admits that it was only a mistake. Lysander and Demetrius being dressed in a similar fashion, Robin mistook one for the other once he saw their “Athenian garment” which is why he argues that he cannot be blamed for this error. He may be mischievous, but the confusion between the two boys is not the result of an intrinsically mischievous action. Moreover, when his king tells him to rectify the problem, Robin immediately complies without questioning the orders.

The main character from WTWM, unlike Puck, makes use of Cupid’s liquid to satisfy his own desires. The first person on whom he willfully applies the juice is Jonathon, about whom he had been dreaming for quite some time. Timothy is not just a pawn following orders, he is the mastermind behind his whole operation of turning the town gay.

When his literature teacher, Ms. Tebbit, asks him if he has had his fun yet, suggesting it might be time to stop this madness, Timothy flees and uses the enchanting concoction on many more people. We are far from Puck obeying his master’s wishes. The following day Ms. T. goes to the forest to find Timothy and his first reaction is to run away. The teacher tries to make him see reason and tells him to think of his friends and family. The boy initially refuses but eventually accepts to rectify the situation. Yet even once he finally realizes that he needs to make amends and restore the peace, he still seems reluctant to disenchant his crush. During the school performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, at the moment when he needs to squeeze the correcting flower into Lysander/Jon’s eyes, he looks hesitantly at his teacher in the wings, as if he still was unsure about doing it, and she has to tell him to “go on”.

The writers of *Were the World Mine* offer a critique of human behavior. The movie illustrates how when people are given power, it can get to their head. Timothy is not portrayed as someone who is malicious by nature, but he does come off as being selfish. As opposed to Puck’s blameless enterprise, the chaotic situation created by Tim is intentional. And the fact that Timothy is a relatable character to whom people can identify makes the audience question themselves. If they had the power to make someone love them, would they?

## **E. Parent-child relationships**

One noteworthy theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the tumultuous relationship that unites parents to their children. The only parent-child bond that is truly developed in the play is the one between Egeus and Hermia and it is a complicated one to say the least. Egeus wants to force his daughter to marry Demetrius, as he exposes to the Duke in the first scene of the play:

And, my gracious duke,  
Be it so she will not here before your grace  
Consent to marry with Demetrius,  
I beg the ancient privilege of Athens.  
As she is mine, I may dispose of her—  
Which shall be either to this gentleman  
Or to her death—according to our law  
Immediately provided in that case. (1.1.38-45)

Hermia's father makes her face a terrible dilemma, either wed a man she does not love or be killed. It is interesting to note that whereas Egeus does not give her any other alternative, Theseus tells Hermia that she also has the possibility to "abjure forever the society of men" and "endure the livery of a nun" (1.1.65-66,70). The fact that Egeus does not even consider this option but only death is very extreme. His daughter is only like a private property to him. Theseus explains:

To you your father should be as a god,  
One that composed your beauties, yea, and one  
To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted and within his power  
To leave the figure or disfigure it. (1.1.47-51)

Egeus "owns" his daughter and thinks he can have her at his disposal as he pleases. As David Marshall discusses in his essay "Exchanging Visions: Reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", "*Her* impression is seen as rightfully *his*, which is why Hermia's claim to think and speak for herself is also a crime against her father" (551).

Moreover, we can add that Egeus's opinion is irrational. As explained in the first part of this dissertation, Lysander is just as qualified as Demetrius to pretend to Hermia's hand. Allowing his daughter to marry the man she set her heart on would not affect Egeus negatively. Having a noble, rich and honest son-in-law would not bring any dishonor on him or his family.

In *Were the World Mine*, one parent-child relationship is developed as well, namely between Timothy and his mother. We understand in the movie that his relationship with his dad was

complicated. It is unclear whether his father threw him out at some point or if Timothy walked out, but what is certain is that he is not a part of Tim's life anymore, which is why I shall focus on his mom Donna. It is noticeable that she cares for her son very dearly. She feels responsible for his son's homosexuality, but does not seem to have a real problem with it per se. There are good and bad days but her love for him is undeniable. It is also worth noticing that unlike Egeus who does not have any valid reason to despise Lysander's union to his daughter considering it has no impact on his life, Donna could justify having a hard time with his son's sexuality with the fact that it does have negative consequences for her, as illustrated by the following dialogue in which she tries to sell beauty products to a potential customer:

Customer: I would love to have you stay for Bible study.

Donna: I have wings to make.

C: It's a potluck.

D: No, for my son. He's a fairy.

C: A fairy?

D: In a play. Well, in real life too. He's gay. My son is gay... Or queer. But the wings are for the play.

C: A man shall not lie with man...

D: Do you want the damn eye cream or not? (*Were the World Mine*)

The customer who was very enthusiastic a few seconds before, suddenly has a judgmental look on her face and gives the eye cream back to Donna. This scene highlights how being gay does not only have repercussions on yourself but also on your family in this largely religious town. Nevertheless, Timothy's mom does not hold his son accountable for the difficulty she encounters while trying to do her job. And when her boss Nora Bellinger learns that Timmy is gay and she starts telling his mother that it is unnatural for a man not to love a woman, Donna quite simply quits, because she does not want to be the employee of a person with such a limited mind. Unlike the majority of people living in Kingston Town, Tim's mom does not need the pansy juice to become open-minded. She may not be too thrilled about his son playing a fairy in the play at first, but she quickly comes around and sews wings using her dismantled wedding dress for him, which just goes to show that she deeply cherishes her son.

The conclusion is that the parent-child relationships in MND and WTWM are very different. It would have made sense though to transpose the toxic link between Egeus and Hermia into the 2008 movie, to make the parallel between both works stronger. While seeing yourself as God and considering your child to be your private belonging probably would not resonate with today's audience, portraying a father or mother trying to control the romantic life of their son or daughter would have been relatable to many modern viewers, especially members of the

LGBTQ+ community. Too many young gays and lesbians are told by their family that they should not date someone from the same gender and sometimes even that they should go to hell or die, just like Hermia with Egeus. Why then was the nature of the familial bond changed in the adaptation? I suppose it could be because the writers wanted to remain positive and send a message of hope. Though the ending of MND is joyous, Egeus never changes his mind concerning who his daughter should wed and his relationship with Hermia is not restored at the end of the play, which is pretty depressing when you think about it. After Theseus gives his blessing to the lovebirds, the lack of Egeus's approval prevents the denouement from being a true happily ever after. By depicting an affectionate mother-son bond that survives until the end credits, Gustafson and Krueckeberg offer an optimistic resolution to the story that leaves the viewers filled with hopefulness.

## **F. Sex**

When tackling the question of sexuality in a literary or cinematographic work, one is bound to talk about sex. We find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* several allusions to sex. In fact, the first one occurs in the very first lines of the play, when Theseus complains about the old moon:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour  
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in  
Another moon. But oh, methinks how slow  
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,  
Like to a stepdame or a dowager  
Long withering out a young man's revenue. (1.1.1-6)

The Duke laments the fact that time goes by too slowly and lingers his desires. He wishes the days would pass by more rapidly because he cannot wait to exert his marital right and sleep with Hippolyta. Another instance of sexual insinuation takes place in the woods, after Lysander has gotten him and Hermia lost:

One turf shall serve as pillow for us both.  
One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.  
.....  
Love takes the meaning in love's conference.  
I mean that my heart unto yours is knit  
So that but one heart we can make of it.  
Two bosoms interchainèd with an oath—  
So then two bosoms and a single troth.  
Then by your side no bed room me deny. (2.2.30-31,35-40)

Lysander wants to sleep next to his beloved, with their bodies close to each other. As stated by Peter Holland in his introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

Tired and lost though he may be, Lysander sees the opportunity of being alone with Hermia in the woods as too good to pass up. For all the elegant virtuosity of his reasoning [...] it is clear he has sex al fresco in mind and Hermia has to be fairly insistent in giving him the verbal equivalent of a goodnight peck on the cheek. (12-13)

Depending on the production, the sexual inuendo can be more or less emphasized, but these are the only allusions we find in the original text. Moreover, they remain allusions solely, and are not very explicit.

*Were the World Mine*, for its part, only has one reference to sex. In a scene during which Max helps Timothy rehearse for the senior play, the latter recites "Follow my voice: We'll try no manhood here" to which Max answers "You'll need that manhood for that jock boy" while making suggestive gestures, thrusting his crotch against the book of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The word "manhood" that was originally used with the meaning of "courage" in the context of a possible fight between Lysander and Demetrius is here employed in the sense of phallus for a joke about a hypothetical sexual intercourse between Timmy and Jonathon. Apart from this scene, references to sex are notably absent from the movie and shots depicting actual sexual acts are never shown on screen.

In the audio commentary of the film, the producers reveal that one particular scene was even voluntarily removed before the release of WTWM. After receiving Cupid's love potion in his eyes and falling in love with Timothy, Max starts kissing him. Gustafson and Krueckeberg explain that a PG-13 version of the shot was originally included, in which we saw Max disappear at the bottom of the frame, suggesting he was performing oral sex on Timothy, but they ultimately decided it was not the direction they wanted the movie to go in.

WTWM does feature a bit of nudity, with shirtless boys in tiny shorts but it always stays decent and the images are more sensual than inherently sexual. It is worth noting that including nudity in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not uncommon and has been adopted on stage and on screen for decades. Peter Holland cites two examples in his intro to MND. For instance, in the 1969 film version directed by Peter Hall, Judi Dench in the role of Titania appears "naked with her modesty covered by a long wig" and in a 1992 production at the Royal National Theatre, fairies were half-naked during the show (Holland 25).

The decision of deliberately censoring WTWM sets the movie apart from a recurrent trend in motion pictures and series aimed at a gay male audience, namely including numerous graphic

sex scenes. A common misconception about gay men is that they have a very active sexuality and that all they seek are the carnal pleasures of casual sex. By limiting the sexual allusions and keeping the visuals appropriate, *Were the World Mine* steps away from this belief and proves that some homosexuals value love over coitus. It is interesting to highlight the fact that the only reference to sex, that was developed above, is uttered by a heterosexual character.

### **G. Setting**

One significant difference between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Were the World Mine* concerns the setting. In MND, the action starts in the court, before moving to the woods when the lovers flee from Athens. In his essay "*Midsummer Night's Dream*", D.J. Snider makes a distinction between the "Real World", which is the world of "Reason" that is governed by laws, and the "Fairy World", which is the world of "Imagination" where supernatural creatures belong (167). When the four youngsters escape, they are running away from this world of reason and from the authority of the state. Humans and fairies are separated, and Hermia, Lysander, Helena and Demetrius leave their designated domain to enter a sphere that is not their own.

The Fairy World is a place that represents both freedom and chaos. It is the location where Hermia and Lysander can love each other without restriction or judgement, and without fear of the law. Likewise, it is the area where the mechanicals hope they can rehearse freely without disturbance. Nonetheless, this forest is also the place where the plot thickens around the four lovers and where tensions arise between them because of the love madness caused by the magical flower. Additionally, it is in the forest that Bottom's head is morphed into that of an ass and that hysteria ensues among the amateur actors.

In *Were the World Mine* on the other hand, all the action takes place in the Real World. Timothy and the other characters do not flee from Kingston Town. Some scenes do take place in the woods, but those woods still belong to the town, it is not a separate area away from laws. Furthermore, most of the madness caused by the love pansy does not occur there.

This suggests that people should not have to escape in order to gain freedom, they should be free in their daily life in the Real World. They should not flee from the law but try to change it instead. Contrary to Hermia who runs away when the head of state refuses to recognize the validity of her emotions, Timothy decides to stay and use Cupid's juice on the mayor to help the legalization of same-sex marriage. People need to fight for their rights and take action

instead of leaving and avoiding the problem. Another consequence is that unlike MND which separates humans from fairies, WTWM does not make a distinction between humans and “fairies” in the sense of homosexuals in this case, showing that queer people are still human beings like any other people. In addition to all of that, by placing the action within the Real World, it situates all the events in the world of reason. The movie could possibly be implying that, though the events caused by the enchanting pansy may seem irrational, having a different sexual orientation is not something unreasonable, it is not something insane or absurd that would go against the sense of reason.

## **H. Violence**

One aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that has been inconsistent through its adaptations concerns physical violence. In Act 3 Scene 2, when Lysander and Demetrius are under the influence of Cupid's juice and become infatuated with Helena, the young maiden and her former friend Hermia start insulting each other. While some productions and movies have decided to have both girls come to blows, others simply portray Hermia as trying to get to her peer but being stopped by Lysander and Demetrius. It is interesting to see that when going back to the original text, the stage directions never mention the girls actually fighting:

### **HELENA**

Have you no modesty, no maiden shame,  
No touch of bashfulness? What, will you tear  
Impatient answers from my gentle tongue?  
Fie, fie! You counterfeit, you puppet, you!

### **HERMIA**

“Puppet”? Why so?—Ay, that way goes the game.  
Now I perceive that she hath made compare  
Between our statures. She hath urged her height,  
And with her personage, her tall personage,  
Her height, forsooth, she hath prevailed with him.—  
And are you grown so high in his esteem  
Because I am so dwarfish and so low?  
How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak.  
How low am I? I am not yet so low  
But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes.

### **HELENA**

(to LYSANDER and DEMETRIUS)  
I pray you, though you mock me, gentlemen,

Let her not hurt me. I was never cursed.  
I have no gift at all in shrewishness.  
I am a right maid for my cowardice.  
Let her not strike me. You perhaps may think,  
Because she is something lower than myself,  
That I can match her.

.....  
Oh, when she's angry, she is keen and shrewd!  
She was a vixen when she went to school.  
And though she be but little, she is fierce.

**HERMIA**

“Little” again? Nothing but “low” and “little”!—  
Why will you suffer her to flout me thus?  
Let me come to her. (3.2.293-314,333-338)

Beyond the childish insults, the girls keep alluding to a hypothetical fight. While Helena recalls that her rival can be shrewd and fierce and dreads an attack from her, Hermia expresses her wish to come to her “friend” and stick her nails in her eyes. But nowhere does it say that they indeed assault each other. Their violence remains verbal not physical. The decision of including corporal confrontation in the production is a choice left to the director to take some liberties or not, depending on their interpretation of the scene. As pointed up by Douglas Green, even when productions do choose to include a physical altercation between the two female characters, it tends not to be taken very seriously by the audience. The author notes that:

“The implied shallowness of women's friendships, the suggestion that female bodies lack the power to do more than parody masculine combat (which, to be sure, is itself mocked later in the futility of the Lysander-Demetrius chase orchestrated by Puck), and the way in which the women depend on and/or are restrained by the men in the very moment of their confrontation—certainly such misogynistic effects constitute the conventional ‘joke’ implicit in this scene.” (Green 382)

Violence between women is – when it is not erotic – considered funny by a large portion of the population. For some inexplicable reason, two girls battling each other will make the spectators laugh rather than scared that they might hurt each other. The misconception that females are not as strong as their male counterparts lives on in people’s mind which unfortunately renders their clashes ridiculous.

The Green citation featured above also mentions the duel between Lysander and Demetrius. The two boys quarrel over Helena’s affection and keep teasing each other on how they want to

battle it out, but once again, the stage directions never mention physical violence. On the contrary, Puck leads both of them astray, imitating their voice to lure them in different parts of the woods and ensure that they don't use their fists or sword on each other.

All of this shows that physical violence is *not* part and parcel of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is however a part of *Were the World Mine*. The first scene featuring violence takes place before the elaboration of the pansy juice and the ensuing turmoil. Timothy goes up to his locker and finds the word "faggot" written on it. He then moves to the field where students are playing ball, including the homophobic jocks whom he thinks are responsible for the insult on his locker. Obviously irritated, Tim starts asking them who did it, and in the absence of an answer, proceeds to attack one of the boys. He pushes him, before the boy in question reacts and pins Timothy to the ground. The other students intervene and separate the two lads.

The second instance of corporal violence occurs after the spring festival. Jonathon and Max each swear to Timothy that they love him more than the other ever could. They challenge each other to a fight, in the same way as Lysander and Demetrius do in MND. The difference is that in the movie, nobody tries to keep them apart like Robin Goodfellow does in the play. The two boys leave the festival and start punching each other. In the following scene we see Max telling Timothy that he fought with everything he had. He has blood stains on his shirt, which demonstrates that the confrontation between the two suitors was not gentle but that they truly went for it.

Why did Gustafson and Krueckeberg decide to include violence in WTWM even though it was not an integral part of MND? My guess is that they wanted to show that homosexuals are not all cowards. People sometimes only see gay men as effeminate faint of heart who would be more credible in the role of victim than in the role of aggressor. This is not the case in *Were the World Mine* in which during the first fight scene, Timothy is the one initiating violence, not his homophobic classmates. And in the second scene showing brutality, male characters are fighting over the love of their same-sex potential lover. The film illustrates that homosexuals can be "masculine" in the typically conventional sense of the term.

### **I. *Pyramus and Thisbe***

*Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play within the play in the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, has been at the heart of many discussions and has sparked debate among scholars. Sometimes considered superfluous to the action, since the main plot comes to a conclusion at the end of

Act 4, it is legitimate to wonder why Shakespeare included the mechanicals' production in MND.

If the similarities between the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and the one of *Romeo and Juliet* are undeniable, I strongly believe that PAT also acts as a mirror for MND. There are indeed several elements that allow us to draw a parallel between both plays. First of all, the basic plot revolves around lovers being kept apart because of their parents. Egeus does not want to allow Hermia to marry Lysander, in the same way as Pyramus and Thisbe's parents do not want their children to be in a relationship due to the ongoing feud between their rival families. In both plays, the lovers thus decide to flee from their kin in order to pursue their heart's desire. Hermia and Lysander plan to escape to the woods before heading to Lysander's dowager aunt while Pyramus and Thisbe agree to meet in a cemetery. We can also note that both couples decide to meet secretly under the moonshine. And finally, some of the references in the craftsmen's play allude to the characters of MND. During the performance, Bottom as Pyramus and Flute as Thisbe say, in character:

**PYRAMUS**

Think what thou wilt, I am thy lover's grace.  
And like Limander am I trusty still.

**THISBE**

And I like Helen, till the Fates me kill. (5.5.189-191)

As indicated in the footnotes of The Oxford Shakespeare edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the names Limander and Helen most probably are references to Leander and either Hero or Helen of Troy from the Greek mythology. In addition to that, those names also echo those of Lysander and Helena, reinforcing the parallel between PAT and MND. This mirroring is also underlined by Douglas H. Parker in his essay "'Limander' and 'Helen' In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*".

*Pyramus and Thisbe* then serves as a commentary on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But what can it tell us? Whereas MND is a comedy, PAT is supposed to be a tragedy. Nonetheless, the way the latter is acted takes away all its seriousness. The actors mispronounce names, they use improper words, disregard punctuation and break character. In the aforementioned example of Limander and Helen, the references are quite ill-advised. Pyramus and Thisbe swear each other fidelity, comparing themselves to Ovidian characters (Parker 99-100). The problem is that Leander (mispronounced "Limander") did not have an amorous relationship with Helen but

with Hero. The “Helen” mentioned by Thisbe could rather be a reference to Helen of Troy, who was known to be an unfaithful person. The fact that Thisbe seeks to prove her loyalty using a woman notoriously characterized by her infidelities is utterly ironic. The same consequence arises if we consider Limander and Helen to be allusions to Lysander and Helena. If the latter can be regarded as a faithful maiden, devoted to Demetrius exclusively during the entirety of the play, the same cannot be said about Lysander. After being affected by the love-in-idleness, he completely switches his adoration from Hermia to Helena, before committing to his initial love once again. The fact that Pyramus and Thisbe wish to show their commitment and fidelity through inconstant and untrustworthy characters make them lose all credibility. Other elements such as Pyramus claiming that the lion has “deflowered” Thisbe instead of “devoured” her, Quince’s prologue stating that the actors’ goal is to offend the audience and Bottom interrupting the performance to address Theseus make the whole show ridiculous. The incompetence of the actors renders the performance laughable and the tragedy becomes a comedy. The members of the audience cannot refrain from making fun of the whole production. In its absurdity, *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes a critique of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It tells us that what we just witnessed on stage should not be taken too seriously. In the same vein as the tragic love and death of Pyramus and Thisbe, the trials and tribulations of the four Athenians are of little importance. All the action that took place on stage is not real, and a play is just a play.

Bearing that in mind, the role of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is very different in *Were the World Mine*. As mentioned in the summary of the movie, what was a play within in the play in the original Shakespearean work is here adapted as a song that is played at the end of the senior play of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The lyrics of the song, with some of the lines taken directly from Shakespeare and others completely invented, are the following:

Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show  
But wonder on, till truth makes all things plain  
This man is Pyramus, if you would know  
This beauteous lady Thisby is certain

By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn  
Met at a tomb to woo by pale moonlight  
This grisly beast, which Lion hight by name  
The trusty Thisby, coming first by night  
Did scare away, or rather did affright

If we offend, we've got good will  
If we are crude, our measure's plain  
Our true intent is your delight

It's merry, tragical and brief  
Oh Pyramus... Pyramus... loved Thisby

And as she fled, her mantle she did fall  
Which Lion vile with bloody mouth did stain  
Anon comes Pyramus, sweet youth and tall  
And finds his trusty Thisby's mantle slain  
Da da da da da da da da da

Whereat with blade, with bloody blameful blade  
He bravely broach'd his boiling bloody breast  
Thus he died  
He died, he died  
His soul in the sky

Now Thisby's passion ends the play in tears  
Asleep, my love?  
What, dead, my dove? Arise  
Tongue, not a word  
Come, blade, my breast imbrue

Thus Thisby ends, adieu, adieu  
Adieu, adieu, adieu, adieu, adieu, adieu, adieu (*Were the World Mine*)

It is here clear that the song does not act as a mirror. The lyrics do not mention characters from WTWM (or from MND) and it seems difficult to establish a link between the events described in the song and those from the movie we just watched. The parallel that existed between both plays in MND is here lost. Moreover, the song is not ridiculous in the way that the *mise en abyme* was in Shakespeare. There are here no mispronunciations or misused terms and no breaking of character is possible. This means that the song is not a critique of WTWM. It is included for the sake of it, as a nod to the original play but not really as a commentary on the movie in itself. It implies that the events that the viewers witnessed on their screen are not necessarily to be taken lightly. Though *Were the World Mine* is a comedy, not a tragedy, the struggles of the LGBT community for equality and freedom should not be undermined. Unlike what one might have deduced from the original *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, matters of the heart are not nonsensical.

## **J. Progressive messages or regressive ideas?**

The ideas and messages in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been studied and analyzed intensively over the centuries. One of the most debated themes is the message it spreads

regarding the role of women in society. Many authors have argued that the play silences female voices and serves as a glorification of patriarchal society. This is notably the case of Shirley Nelson Garner in her essay “*A Midsummer Night's Dream: ‘Jack Shall Have Jill; / Nought Shall Go Ill’*”. She claims that Helena and Hermia suffer abuse from the men in the woods, Helena from Demetrius who tells her she makes him sick when she follows him despite his rejection, and Hermia from Lysander when he falls under the influence of the juice, abandons her and subsequently insults her. The author also declares that if the two young women remain silent during the rude mechanicals’ play in Act 5, it is because they are now married and have to be obedient wives under the dominance of their husband (137-138).

Nevertheless, I have to disagree with Garner. To me, Hermia is the epitome of the independent woman who goes against the patriarchal order in place. She disobeys her father and defies the law when she refuses to marry Demetrius. She does not accept to be a “form in wax” imprinted by her father and to let him “leave the figure or disfigure it”. Furthermore, during her first night in the woods, Hermia shows female empowerment. When Lysander suggests they sleep next to each other, she unapologetically turns him down, thus claiming the right to be the master of her own body and sexuality. To respond to Garner’s argument, we can note that Lysander is not in his right mind when he disrespects Hermia. As for Helena, if she suffers abuse from Demetrius, it is because she chooses to keep on throwing herself onto him, despite the fact that he told her repeatedly he was not interested in her. One should not forget that at the end of the play, the two girls wed the person they were in love with from the beginning. They marry the boy that *they* opt for, which means that both of them, but especially Hermia, defeat the patriarchal hierarchy and attempted control from the male-dominated society. It is true that they do not utter a word during the last act of the play, however, it is possible that Helena and Hermia simply wanted to enjoy the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and be respectful to the actors even if they were terrible. As seen throughout the whole book, the relationship between Lysander and Hermia is based on nothing but respect – when he is not bewitched by the fairies –, so it would be very strange that the boy would completely change his attitude towards his sweetheart after their marriage. And even if Helena and Hermia do not say anything in the last scene, Hippolyta does. Therefore, the theory according to which Shakespeare wanted to silence women does not hold up.

Speaking of Hippolyta, her character has also been analyzed as spreading an anti-feminist message. As Peter Holland explains in his edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Amazons typically represent rebellious self-governed females who reject any form of male dominance.

This is not the picture that we have in MND. People may see the upcoming wedding of Hippolyta as a sign of her enslavement to her future husband. Yet Holland writes that “Theseus is well aware that his courtship has been entirely military but his language leaves unclear whether she has simply agreed through defeat or whether she is now in love with him” (51). Indeed, when he says “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword | And won thy love doing thee injuries” we do not know how his beloved truly feels (1.1.16-17). In the absence of an answer from Hippolyta, we can neither deny nor confirm the anti-feminist motivations of the character who is bound to remain ambiguous.

Finally, the last representant of women in the play is Titania. In this case, I have to agree with the authors criticizing the message that she sends. It is true that her relationship with Oberon is problematic. The Fairy King and Queen feud over the custody of the changeling boy which causes the natural world to be in turmoil. Oberon goes through such lengths to get the boy even though he has no right over this child whatsoever, compared to Titania who legitimately wants to take care of the boy because she was close to his late mother. The King humiliates his wife, making her fall in love with an ass and he ultimately obtains what he desires. As Shirley Nelson Garner observes, “the renewal at the end of the play affirms patriarchal order and hierarchy, insisting that the power of women must be circumscribed” (127). Nevertheless, even though this particular example proves to show the control of a man over a woman, I do not think we can use it to make a generality if the entirety of the book is taken into consideration. With only one woman under male oppression against two in charge of their actions – and one undeterminable case – it cannot be said that the play predominantly advocates the submission of women.

The reason for developing this argument is that I want to show that it does make sense to use *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a movie that seeks to diffuse broad-minded ideas. The oppression of women in the original play becomes the oppression of homosexuals in the film. *Were the World Mine* portrays a gay teenager who rises above the bullying and conservative ideas of his community, similarly to the young Athenian girl who went against the traditionalistic views of her father and escaped a possible death. Shakespeare already used his texts to denounce the injustices of his time.

But even progressive art can hold unfounded oversimplifications. Notwithstanding the forward-looking messages in MND and WTWM, both the play and the movie also contain some clichés about men and women. A first instance of gendered stereotype in MND comes from the mechanicals. While preparing for the show they are about to put on, the craftsmen make

numerous allusions to the belief that women are scared of everything. In the second scene, when Bottom says that he will roar so well if he gets to play the lion, Quince tells him “you should do it too terribly, you would fright the duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek” (1.2.32). Later in the play we hear that peculiar group add:

**BOTTOM**

There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself, which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?

.....

**SNOUT**

Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?

**STARVELING**

I fear it, I promise you.

**BOTTOM**

Masters, you ought to consider with yourselves. To bring in—God shield us!—a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing. For there is not a more fearful wildfowl than your lion living. And we ought to look to ’t. (3.1.5,11-13)

They reckon women are unable to stand the sight of violence and are convinced that seeing a lion would frighten them. They are not in the least worried that men in the audience may find their performance so realistic that they might be scared, their only concern is the women, probably because they consider these to be easily intimidated, as opposed to the fearless and unafraid men. That is why during the *Pyramus and Thisbe* performance, Snug, dressed as a lion delivers this speech:

You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear  
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,  
May now perchance both quake and tremble here,  
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.  
Then know that I, as Snug the joiner, am  
A lion fell, nor else no lion’s dam.  
For if I should as lion come in strife  
Into this place, ’twere pity on my life. (5.1.209-216)

Again, Snug only addresses the ladies, because it is unconceivable that lords would panic, be it for a mouse or a lion. This does not mean we should hold these assumptions to be true. After all, the mechanicals are completely delusional characters so what comes out of their

mouth should not be taken too seriously. Their primary purpose is being made fun of, and the gendered stereotypes, like everything else they say, are probably there for comical intent.

A second example of received idea is the one that boys tell many more lies than girls. In the introductory scene, Lysander and Hermia decide to run away together, and to promise that she will be present at the meeting point, the young lady declares:

I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest bow,  
By his best arrow with the golden head,  
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,  
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,  
And by that fire which burned the Carthage queen  
When the false Trojan under sail was seen,  
By all the vows that ever men have broke—  
In number more than ever women spoke—  
In that same place thou hast appointed me,  
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee. (1.1.169-178)

Hermia claims that boys are a lot more likely to tell lies than girls are. Moreover, this claim feels unnecessary. At this point of the story, everything seems to indicate that her relationship with Lysander has been ideal and her beau does not seem to be a liar type of person. Why does she feel the need to attack his sex like so? Her promise would have been just as effective without mentioning the vows that men have broken, or even without insisting in the following line on the fact that women did not break as many vows in number. What intensifies this assertion is Helena making a similar allegation a few lines later. Saddened that her love for Demetrius is a one-way street, she complains about Cupid making bad decisions and says “As waggish boys in game themselves forswear, | So the boy Love is perjured everywhere” (1.1.240-241). Once again, the implied message is that boys are the only ones to perjure. The fact that the same assumption is uttered by two different characters in a matter of a few lines means that it is not a trivial comment. And unlike the previous example of the mechanicals, there is here no apparent comical effect.

Is the situation similar in *Were the World Mine*? When the students of Morgan Hill are affected by the magical juice, what is surprising is that it also affects their behavior. Coach Driskill, once under the influence of the flower, tells his students that they will “focus on balance and coordination [...] essential skills to hone for rugby won” (*Were the World Mine*). The whole rugby team then proceeds to start a choreographed ballet routine, which pleases the teacher. When asked about that scene, Tom Gustafson reveals that he has had people come up to him, wondering why he ventured into this field and relied on the stereotype that gay people

dance. His answer is that you have to play with those stereotypes in order for the comedy to work. His intent is thus not necessarily to reinforce these preconceived ideas but to acknowledge that they exist and have fun with them. A little later in the movie, Coach Driskill who fell head over heels in love with Principal Bellinger, goes to his boss's office with flowers, trying to win over his affection. Following Bellinger's rejection, Driskill spends the whole night crying in front of the office door. This man, who was a homophobic, bullying person opposed to the theatre because it is embarrassing is now a sensitive guy encouraging dance. This suggests that being gay is not only about sexuality but also some typical manner of conducting oneself. The producers of the movie have explained that they needed the character to be a "monster" in the beginning for his change of personality to be comedic.

To sum up, MND and WTWM both spread progressive messages about a discriminated group of society while still making use of stereotypes, albeit in varying degrees. The 2008 movie advocates the recognition of gay rights whereas the Shakespearean play encourages female empowerment, but the latter contains a more questionable example of a mistreated woman as well. As far as stereotypes are concerned, if MND and WTWM make use of them for humorous purposes, the former also uses them for more unclear reasons. All in all, the purpose of the film mirrors the one of the play, and we can affirm that the spirit of the adaptation is faithful to the original. The inherent nature of the initial piece of work remains undistorted whilst becoming less ambivalent at the same time.

## **K. Marriage**

The theme of marriage is at the very heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a matter of fact, the opening line already refers to Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding when the Duke says "Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour | Draws on apace" (1.1.1-2). Moreover, the pivotal conflict of the plot, the one that sets the story in motion, centers around Hermia's marriage and her right to choose her husband. Not to mention that the play's resolution, like most of Shakespeare's comedies, lies in the triple wedding taking place in Athens between the fourth and fifth acts.

Besides the presence of several weddings in the plot, the theme of marriage was also significant for the context in which MND was written. Many sources point out that the comedy might be epithalamic and was probably created to celebrate an aristocratic wedding, during which the play would have been performed for the first time. Though it remains unproven, the

most popular theory is that the wedding in question was the one that united Sir Thomas Berkeley and Elizabeth Carey (Holland 112). In the same way as Theseus watches *Pyramus and Thisbe* between the wedding supper and the moment he goes to sleep, Berkeley and his guests would have watched *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This hypothesis would give a deeper meaning to this scene in which Oberon and Titania give their blessing to the newlyweds:

Now until the break of day,  
Through this house each fairy stray.  
To the best bride bed will we,  
Which by us shall blessed be.  
.....  
With this field dew consecrate,  
Every fairy take his gait.  
And each several chamber bless  
Through this palace with sweet peace.  
And the owner of it blessed  
Ever shall in safety rest.  
Trip away. Make no stay.  
Meet me all by break of day. (5.1.361-364, 375-382)

After all the weddings and the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, when the Duke and his court go to bed, the Fairy King and Queen go through all the rooms and use their magic to offer benediction to the characters. Not only are the fairies blessing the houses and unions of Theseus, Hippolyta, Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, they are also blessing Sir Berkeley and his wife, or whomever this play was intended for.

Marriage is also to be found in WTWM yet in a different fashion. The main characters of the film being high school students, it would not make sense nowadays to end the movie by having them get married while still being teenagers. Nevertheless, the day after Timothy goes on a magic juice spree and spreads it to the whole town, Ms. Tebbit is seen holding a newspaper announcing the legalization of same-sex marriage. The paper reads “Tri-state gays flock to town [...] Kingston Town mayor James Robbins arrived at his office early Saturday morning to change the course of Kingston history”, suggesting that the mayor was one of Timothy’s victims during the night (*Were the World Mine*). Donna also appears watching the news on television, in which a reporter declares:

Moments ago, the mayor [...] said Kingston will start issuing marriage licenses to any couple in love. The mayor issued this statement: ‘The Constitution prohibits the making of laws based on religion. Therefore, excluding legions of citizens from this sanctified institution because of religious belief is immoral, unconstitutional and silly.’ [...] There are dozens of local couples who are ready to take the plunge We’d only be guessing at

how many couples have driven long distances today to take advantage of this landmark turn of events. (*Were the World Mine*)

The theme of marriage is thus still present in WTWM, but it here serves as a political message, to promote the idea that couples should be allowed get married regardless of their gender and that opposing this idea does not make sense. In that same news report, the television reporter asks a lesbian couple “What about family values?” to which one of the women answers laughing “What about ’em? We have families. We have values.” This answer implies that family values have nothing to do with sexual orientation and that it is ridiculous to think gay couples could not be qualified as a family.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Were the World Mine* both hold the same purpose in the sense that they “promote” non-fictional weddings, with the nuptials of two specific individuals in the case of MND and a more general concept of accessibility to matrimony for a certain part of the population in the case of WTWM. In the same way as Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding mirrors the real-life wedding for which the play was created, Gustafson and Krueckeberg were probably hoping that the ability for same-sex couple to get married in WTWM would be mirrored by marriage equality in the real world. The movie was released in 2008, which means seven years before the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015, but its message remains important in this day and age. Marriage equality may be effective in the US but there are unfortunately many countries where it still is not the case.

## Conclusion

“Shakespeare had an uncanny ability to look deeply inside people of every gender, size, color, age and yes, even sexuality” (Cory James Krueckeberg). This quote from the writer and producer of *Were the World Mine* perfectly describes the genius of the texts written by the Bard. Through their adaptations, his stories continue to be relevant nowadays. In that sense, *Were the World Mine* succeeds in capturing the essence that makes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* so special and in making it relatable to a modern audience.

Based on previous research lead by scholars, I have shown that homosexuality/bisexuality was a part of Shakespeare’s life, poetry and plays, and that queer elements were already present in MND, thus proving that presenting a queer adaptation of the comedy is not a preposterous enterprise. Like the original play, WTWM explores universal themes including the hardships that ensue from love and having to justify the validity of your emotions to the rest of the world. WTWM reshapes the ideas about female empowerment from MND into a narrative giving a voice to the LGBTQ community while at the same time still making use of some gendered stereotypes for comedic purposes. Nevertheless, the director also gives the impression of wanting to rectify some preconceived ideas about gay men by presenting them as individuals who are not obsessed with having emotionless sexual intercourse and who can show masculinity by resorting to violence. Like its predecessor, the motion picture gives a significant place to marriage in its storyline and proves that love is stronger than anything.

Yet in many ways, the film also differs from its model as regards certain aspects. It accentuates the importance of sincerity and consent in a relationship, while also using the setting to promote the idea that taking flight is not the best solution when faced with obstacles. The plot turns out to be slightly less predictable but to some extent more relatable than the one it draws inspiration from. The character of Timothy reminds us that humans can be especially selfish when trying to satisfy their desires and his relationship with his mother brings about hope and positivity for the spectator. Finally, the way *Pyramus and Thisbe* is approached prevents the inference that the movie and its messages are of little importance.

In any case, *Were the World Mine* yearns for more tolerance in the world. Despite the progress that has been made, the LGBTQ+ community continues to be stigmatized. During the casting process of WTWM, the producers reveal that many actors refused to be involved in the project once they learned it was a gay movie. A decade later, the struggle still goes on. As Ms.

Tebbit reminds us, “Shakespeare was meant for the masses” (*Were the World Mine*). And people keep adapting his legacy to reach the masses and try to have an impact on society. When discussing the reception of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Robert Matz points out that the current situation was not always like so. “A shift of perspective from 1780 to 1930 reminds us that ‘heterosexuality’ has not reigned that long. Nor do we know how much longer that reign will last” (479). In the past, homosexuality was not always considered “abnormal” and put in opposition to “normal” sex between a man and a woman. It was not always a source of hate and rejection so there is hope that maybe one day opinions will evolve again. Spreading art with progressive message, in the way that WTWM does, certainly does not hurt when trying to reach more open-mindedness.

Other adaptations have since followed in the footsteps of WTWM. In 2015, the Maryland Shakespeare Players put on a gender-bent production of MND at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, with a male actor cast in the role of Hermia (as would have been the case on the Elizabethan stage) and female actresses in the roles of Puck and Demetrius (as a new kind of gender-bending). Less than a year later, another gender-bent version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was held at the world-renowned Shakespeare’s Globe in London, under the artistic direction of Emma Rice. In addition to having the majority of the mechanicals being women, this production goes further than having male or female performers playing other genders on stage and rewrites the role of Helena as Helenus. This rendition of the comedy was praised by critics and garnered excellent reviews. Another London production, currently playing at the Bridge Theatre, inverts the roles of Oberon and Titania, portraying the Fairy Queen as the one using the love-in-idleness and the Fairy King as the one falling in love with Bottom the Weaver, reimagining the worshipping of the ass-headed character with gay subtext. It is undoubtable that many more adaptations in the future will continue to put their own twist on this timeless story. After all, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a new experience as each director responds consciously or unconsciously to the cultural demands of his time. [...] Contradictory interpretations are not only possible and defensible but inevitable. The elusiveness of the script permits each age to have *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* on its own terms” (Lewis 258).

It is now time to bring down the curtain on this dissertation. Should the readers of this thesis be displeased with ideas that are here presented, I wish for them to remember Robin Goodfellow’s wise words.

If I shadow have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended—

That you have but slumbered here  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream,  
Gentles, do not reprehend.  
If you pardon, I will mend. (Adapted from MND 5.1.383-390)



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