The Great Mother Archetype: A Symbolic Interpretation of the Darker Elements of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

In his well-known work *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye writes that many of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies include what he calls the “drama of the green world” (182). Frye’s “green world” is a place of metamorphosis and rebirth (182). Frye also notes that “the earth that produces the rebirth is generally a female figure” (183). This description is true of the forest in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1594-1595). Prevalent within the forest are images that are typically associated with Carl Jung’s Great Mother archetype. The Great Mother has the potential to be good and terrible, creative and destructive, inspiring and maddening. Specific symbolic representations of the archetype in Shakespeare’s play include love juice, the moon, fairies, and the Fairy Queen Titania, all of which may be considered dual in nature. Even though *MND* is a comedy, these images reveal the darker side of the play and the illuminate the significant role that the Great Mother archetype has on the effect of setting, the relationships between the various sets of lovers, the dynamics of specific characters, and the play’s commentary on human nature.

In his monumental work *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, Carl Jung’s disciple Erich Neumann elaborates on his mentor’s description of the archetype. He sees the Great Mother as fluid with both positive and negative attributes. Positive

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1 In this paper, I will employ the idea of the Great Mother archetype as discussed by Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother Archetype: An Analysis of an Archetype*. Neumann utilizes Carl Jung’s idea of the archetype and charts its appearances in literature and art ranging from pre-history to specific works of art in the 20th century. He does not, however, discuss the archetype in relation to the plays or poetry of Shakespeare. For Jung’s discussion of the mother archetype, consult his work *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956).
attributes include birth and rebirth, inspiration and wisdom; negative attributes include madness, sickness, drunkenness, and destructiveness. These opposing characteristics embody a “wreath of symbolic images” (12) that includes goddesses and fairies, the moon, intoxicants, and a variety of plants and trees (12, 49, 55, 59). While his analysis of the archetype is thorough, Neumann is cautious and warns the reader that despite the existence of a “living reality” (83) that archetypes represent, it is not without “crests and troughs, progressions and regressions, irruptions and anticipations” (83). While there are definite characteristics of the archetype, those that dominate are always in flux. Yet Neumann asserts his belief that the Great Mother archetype is consistently a symbol of transformation. It has an effect that can bring either life or death. First and foremost, the mother is the bearer of life, a vessel that carries and nourishes the child. She is the moon, symbolic of not only rebirth, but also the dark underworld of the night. In the form of the earth, she brings forth plant life or she can be deadly, for it is within the earth that the dead rot. The nature of the Great Mother oscillates back and forth between positive and negative transformative experiences that can lead to life or death.

Historically, many Elizabethans viewed their monarch as a mother figure with such a dual nature. Louis Adrian Montrose notes that Elizabeth “was represented as a virgin-mother—part Madonna, part Ephesian Diana” (64). If we consider Neumann’s description of the Great Mother, the image of Elizabeth I comes to mind: “In her character of the Great Mother, the Feminine is a ‘virgin’: a creative principle independent of the personal man” (269). Montrose also writes, “Queen Elizabeth was a cultural anomaly; and this anomalousness—at once divine and monstrous—made her powerful

See “Schema III” between pages 82-83 in The Great Mother for a more extensive chart that illustrates the positive and negative attributes of the archetype.
and dangerous.” (78) Elizabeth, like the Great Mother, was both loved and feared. It is pertinent then, in discussing the nature of the archetype and the historical background of *MND*, that many critics have speculated that Elizabeth may have been present during the first performance of Shakespeare’s comedy. While this has not been proven, many members of her court certainly were in attendance.  

Whether Elizabeth was present or not, she is clearly alluded to during the play. She is the “imperial vot’ress” (2.1.163) in Oberon’s speech about the origin of the flower that produces the juice that will transform Demetrius, Lysander, and Titania.  

The line “At a fair vestal throned by the west” (2.1.158), as Marjorie Garber notes, may also be considered a compliment to Elizabeth (216). Elizabeth’s reign, along with the threatening idea that a woman ruled over men, was a “nightmare that haunted much of the writing in the period” (Garber 216). These anxieties about a woman’s power being both creative and destructive are key to understanding the play.

The green world of *MND* is a forest outside of Athens that is haunted by the presence of the Great Mother archetype. Trees and the forests that they populate, as mentioned by Neumann, are symbols of the archetype and, as “bearers of fruit”, are “not only evaluated positively as a place of birth… [they are] an abode of death” (50). This setting manifests the dual nature of the Great Mother and can be considered even darker when one considers the labyrinthine nature of the forest. For, as Alex Aronson notes, “the path that leads across the forest to the temple takes man out of the dark labyrinth of his unconscious toward the light of consciousness” (204). Over the course of the play, the

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3 For a discussion about the specific dates of the first performance of *MND* and those who were thought to be in attendance, see Calderwood xv-xvii.
seemingly benign green world becomes a chaotic world filled with disorder. Just as the outside world has become “mazèd” (2.1.113) and succumbed to the destructive elements of nature because of Titania and Oberon’s feud over the changeling boy, so will the fairy world. It too will become a place where one “knows not which is which” (2.1.114). Puck will mistake Lysander for Demetrius, Helena will not trust Hermia, and the Fairy Queen Titania will fall in love with an ass. Confusion will prevail and the Athenian wood will prove to be a dark labyrinth that leads to transformation.

A labyrinth is symbolic of death and rebirth and is presided over by the Great Mother (Neumann 176). In addition, this image can be considered a nod to the myth of Theseus, for it is known that one of Shakespeare’s sources for MND was Plutarch’s The Life of Theseus. In the Theseus myth, Theseus enters the labyrinth to slay the Minotaur. It is only with the help of Ariadne and the thread that links him to her that he will be able to escape and move forward to become the successful creator and ruler of Athens. M.E. Lamb also recognizes the connection between MND and the Cretan labyrinth. She notes that “the play itself demonstrates that paradoxically within this irrational world, which turns relatively sane Athenians into madmen and asses, lies the very source of civilization” (487). Like the labyrinth in the myth, Shakespeare’s forest is a place of irrationality and chaos that leads to transformation and potential creation. André Gide, who considered Shakespeare a major influence on his literary work, composed a modern re-telling of the Theseus myth that includes an illuminating description of the labyrinth.

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5 A complete summary of sources can be found in Bevington’s The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Appendix A-25.
that could easily pertain to MND’s Athenian wood. Gide’s Daedalus has not only
constructed the labyrinth to contain the Minotaur, he has created an environment inside it
that will wear down the will power of the youths who are being sacrificed to the monster:

Another and indeed prime necessity was to fine down the
visitor’s will-power to the point of extinction… I had
noticed that when certain plants, when thrown into the fire,
gave off, as they burned, semi-narcotic vapors. The heavy
gases thus distributed not only act upon the will and put it
to sleep, they induce a delicious intoxication, rich in
flattering delusions, and provide the mind, filled as this is
with voluptuous mirages, to a certain pointless activity;
‘pointless’, I say, because it has merely an imaginary
outcome, in vision and speculations without order, logic,
and substance. (85)

Shakespeare’s forest is also a place of “delusions” and “mirages” that results in a loss of
will. This is evident when Lysander makes specific reference to will and reason. He is
obviously delusional after being transformed by the love juice and he mistakenly thinks
his desire for Helena is reasonable and willful. Lysander’s desire may be justifiable, for,
as Marjorie Garber notes, Hermia and Helena are both considered to be indistinguishable
from one another (225). However, Lysander’s desire is not willful: “The will of man is by
reason swayed, / And reason says you are the worthier maid” (2.2.121-122). Whether
Helena is “worthier” than Hermia is not the issue. It is that passion is irrational and
potentially destructive. Lysander’s statement conveys in ironic terms the true nature of
the forest and personifies the effects of the love juice. As an agent of the Great Mother,
the juice clearly has an adverse effect on those who are given it.

6 Several critics other than Lamb have written on the relationship between the Theseus myth and MND.
However, there is no scholarship that discusses the relationship between MND and Gide’s Theseus. For
more on the Theseus myth, see Ormerod and Freake.
Neumann, in describing the juice of plants and flowers as being agents of the Great Mother and of transformation, writes:

The character of spiritual transformation is most evident in connection with intoxicants, poison, and medicine… Sickness and poisoning, drunkenness and cure, are psychic processes that all mankind relates to an invisible spiritual principle, by whose action the personality is changed. (60)

The juice of the flower that Puck uses can be considered such an intoxicant. The flower from which the juice is extracted, or “love-in-idleness” (2.1.168), has an ambiguous connotation. Love potentially leads to creation and birth, but idleness is baseless and without meaning. Much like the activities in Daedalus’s labyrinth, the actions it may result in could be considered “pointless”. Oberon knows that the juice of the flower will inspire madness and doting (2.1.171). “Doting” not only means “excessive affection”, but it also means a “decline of mental faculties”. These two definitions can clearly be applied to the transformative effect of the love juice, for it initiates both love and hate. As in other works of Shakespeare, we find yet another double meaning.

Montrose also notices the duality in the symbolism of the flower. Unfortunately, he relegates his discussion of the symbolism to a footnote in his article ‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture:

The change suffered by the flower—from the whiteness of milk to the purple wound of love—juxtaposes maternal nurturance and erotic violence. To an Elizabethan audience, the metamorphosis may have suggested not only the blood of defloration, but also the blood of menstruation—and, perhaps, the menarche, which manifests the sexual maturity of the female, the advent of womanhood and potential motherhood. (n. 44)
He is correct in noting the oppositional nurturing and destructive aspects of the flower, but limits his analysis to its relationship to women. It is true that by the end of the play Hermia and Helena will go on to marry and potentially bear children. But Lysander and Demetrius have also been directly affected by the love juice. In fact, it is because of his transformation (and because he has not been given the remedy for the love juice) that Demetrius ends up with Helena. We may therefore say that a positive effect of the love juice is that men and women may go on to produce children. This is apparent in Oberon’s blessing to the three couples (Helena and Demetrius, Hermia and Lysander, Hippolyta and Theseus) at the end of the play:

To the best bride-bed will we,
Which by us shall blessed be;
And issue there create
Ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all couples three
Ever true in loving be;
And the blot’s of Nature’s hand
Shall not in their issue stand;
Never mole, harelip, nor scar,
Nor mark prodigious, such as are
Despised in nativity,
Shall upon their children be. (5.1.398-409)

In contrast to his actions in the wood, Oberon’s words now promote fertility, constancy, and life untouched by marks or blemishes. But James L. Calderwood notes that this “erasure is not as easily accomplished as it seems, since like all negations it must foreground what negates that therefore to some extent defeats its own extent” (142). Even after they have united and moved on to marriage, the image of their injuries remains even if they are seemingly nullified by Oberon’s words. His blessing unintentionally recalls the
lovers’ nightmarish experience in the Athenian wood and the negative powers of the love juice that were so prevalent.

In the forest, Demetrius is transformed and now loves Helena. Lysander may also love Helena, but, more importantly, he spurns Hermia, his true love. Love turns to hate and results in the possible destruction of the relationship that initiated all four lovers to venture in to the forest. Lysander’s negative transformation manifests itself in his sudden disgust for Hermia and the language he uses when speaking to her:

Lysander: Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing, let loose, Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!

Hermia: Why are you grown so rude? What change is this, Sweet love?

Lysander: Thy love? Out, tawny Tartar, out! Out, loathed med’cine! O hated poison, hence! (3.2.260-264)

His words are mean spirited and hateful. Lysander no longer sees her as “beauteous” (1.1.104), but as “vile”. She is now considered beastly and unattractive, as is evident in Lysander’s use of animal metaphors. Christy Desmet notes the destructive nature of his language and how it “disfigures” Hermia (314). This language also disfigures Hermia’s amorous feelings as a “loathed med’cine” and a “hated poison”. This allusion to Hermia’s love as medicine and potion is a veiled reference to the love juice and reveals the maddening effect it has had on the young lovers. It is something that one wishes to reject from one’s body. The juice may cause one to love, but it also causes one to hate, resulting in a downward spiral and contributing to a journey into a dark underworld where vision is blurred and, at times, completely changed.
As with the forest and the effects of the love juice, presiding over the entire play is the symbol of the moon. M. Esther Harding notes that the Moon Goddess is “a giver of life and all that promotes fertility, and at the same time she [is] the wielder of the destructive power of nature” (111). Throughout the play, the moon projects both sides of her nature. She radiates beauty and is known for “Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass” (1.1.211). In the play-within-the play she is personified by Moonshine and is recognized for her “sunny beams” (5.1.268) and her “gracious, golden glittering gleams” (5.1.268). In contrast, the darker aspects of the lovers’ experience can be attributed to the waxing and waning of the moon. Michiru Sasaki writes, “The phases of the moon exert an influence not only on the growth of things, but also on the fortunes of human life.” (60) This is evident in Athens when Egeus requests the help of Theseus. The old moon is described by Theseus as “cold” and “fruitless” (1.1.73). It is a symbol of sterility. She represents the potential barrenness that Hermia will experience if she disobeys Theseus’ order to marry Demetrius. Sasaki also notes that the moon also has the potential to exert a “withering influence on a young man’s life” (66), for Theseus refers to her as “Long withering out a young man’s revenue.” (1.1.6) The moon has an effect on both men and women alike. Her destructive nature does not discriminate.

The destructive moon also illuminates Titania and Oberon’s quarrel. It is appropriate then that Titania’s name is an epithet for Diana, Goddess of the Moon. Titania’s initial appearance is surrounded by images of chaos and illness. She notes the moon as being the “governess of floods” (2.1.102) and “Pale in her anger, washes all the

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7 Caroline F. E Spurgeon’s *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) is a systematic study of the symbolism in all of Shakespeare’s plays. For specific references to the moon, see 259-260.

8 See the introduction to MND in Bevington’s *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* 147-150.
air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound.” (2.1.103-104) The land is consumed by “Contagious fog” (2.1.90) and vegetation “Hath rotted” (2.1.95). Sasaki attributes this death and disorder to the interlunar period when the moon is dying and creates a hellish world (70). This symbolic death of the moon and the resulting chaos is a primary example of the popular Elizabethan belief in the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. In Sasaki’s words:

The macrocosmic chaos which is described by Titania is reflected in the topsy-turvydom of the Athenian wood. This is an application of the idea of the correspondence of the microcosm and macrocosm. The Athenian wood is the microcosm which corresponds to the chaotic world. And again, allegorically, the world is also an emblem of the psychological chaos of the four Athenian lovers. (73)

Microcosm reflects macrocosm and vice versa. In turn, the relationships of the four lovers, Titania and Oberon, and Hippolyta and Theseus seem to exist on parallel planes and reflect one another. The similarities between the two link the mortal world to the world of the fairies.

Erich Neumann views sprites, pixies and fairies as “figures of fatal enchantment” (80-81) that lead to doom. Similarly, Jan Kott considers the fairies of MND to be devilish and frightening in nature (213). As agents of the Great Mother, the fairies and sprites of the Athenian wood are connected to transformative experiences, but with a seemingly darker purpose. This is definitely true of Puck. As Puck himself notes:

And we fairies, that do run
By the triple Hecate’s team.
From the presence of the sun,
Following darkness like a dream,

9 For a basic discussion of the macrocosm/microcosm relationship, see Tillyard 91-94.
He associates himself with the triple Hecate, the goddess of night and witchcraft who rules in three capacities: as Luna or Cynthia in heaven, as Diana on earth, and as Prosperina in hell. Even other fairies know him for being “being that shrewd and knavish sprite” (2.1.33) that frightens maids, skims milk, and misleads night wanderers (2.1.35-39). By fostering this connection to Hecate, Puck relishes an unruly and destructive side that is associated with darkness and trickery. David Bevington notes, “Puck constantly brings before our eyes a more threatening vision of fairydom than is apparent in Oberon’s more regal pronouncements” (26). Puck’s mischievous activities will serve as one of the main instigators of the lovers’ fighting in the labyrinthine forest:

Up and down, up and down,
I will lead them up and down.
I am feared in field and town.
Goblin, lead them up and down. (3.2.396-399)

Again, we are given another image of the labyrinth, much like the mazèd world to which Titania refers. Puck promotes chaos and confusion, showing complete disregard for the consequences and laughing at the lovers’ disdain for one another. His much-quoted line “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (3.2.115) not only shows the frailty of human rationality, but also exemplifies the delight that Puck gains from the lovers’ treacherous journey through the night world of the forest.

While Puck serves mainly as a trickster, the fairies associated with Titania’s train act as protectors of the Fairy Queen. Like Puck, they too are aware of the darker aspects of the Athenian wood. The forest’s dark side is illuminated by the song they sing as
Titania falls asleep: “You spotted snakes with double tongue, / Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen; Newts and blindworms, do no wrong; / Come not near the Fairy Queen” (2.2.9-12).

The fairies also mention spiders, beetles and snails (2.2.20-23). Kott notes the nightmarish quality of this “bestiary” (225) and its connection to witchcraft (225-226). His reading might be alluding to Puck’s association with Hecate as the goddess of witchcraft. In a more recent study, Theresa Krier suggests “Titania gives herself to the maternal wood when her attendants lullaby her to sleep” (123). Both of these critics are only half right. The lullaby does signal Titania’s entrance into the unstable dream world of the wood, but it also predicts the “dream” she will have when she falls in love with an ass. The fairies warn the animals and insects to “be not seen” (2.2.10). Their words imply their knowledge of the power of the love juice, for they seem to know that its application will result in a person’s desire for “the next live creature it sees” (2.1.172). As members of Titania’s train, it is their duty to serve their queen and keep her out of harm’s way.

In her discussion of gender roles, fairies and their importance in MND, Regina Buccola writes:

A Midsummer Night’s Dream relies on the topos of inversion, particularly in respect to gender roles, if one focuses on the women characters as the axes on which inversions turn, alternatives to the play’s surface texts of patriarchal rule emerge. (62)

Buccola is suggesting that a clearer understanding of the centrality and power of female characters in MND will reveal new insight into the various dimensions of the play. This idea is embodied most fully in Titania. Even before she is seen on stage and makes her memorable speech about her Indian votress, we are aware of her maternal nature and her
personal and supernatural power. A fairy notes how Titania adores the changeling boy and “Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her / joy” (2.1.27-28). She seems to be fulfilling a kind of maternal instinct just as a mother would dote on her child. She is also protective and she “perforce withholds the loved boy” (2.1.25) from Oberon who wants to use the changeling boy as one of his henchmen. Titania is willful and steadfast in exhibiting her strength against Oberon. The Fairy King cannot control the Fairy Queen. This makes sense if we consider that, as Buccola notes, in fairyland “the queen is dominant”. Other critics agree with this assessment of Titania’s character. Irene Dash writes, “Titania has a sure sense of self-worth and an independence of spirit” (89) and that she is the “strongest and seemingly freest woman character in A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (83). She has rejected Oberon’s sexual advances in favor of possession of the changeling boy. Titania states: “I have forsworn his bed and company” (2.1.62). Her desire to protect and care for the boy supersedes her desire for Oberon. Titania’s motivation for caring for him becomes apparent when we learn about her friendship with the changeling boy’s mother.

Clearly one of the most powerful passages in the play, Titania’s speech about the Indian votress is a tribute to both friendship and motherhood. As Marjorie Garber notes, this passage contains “images of rich fertility” (219). It is through this imagery that we not only understand Titania’s determination to retain possession of the changeling boy, but we gain a sense of the power of motherhood and female friendship.

The fairyland buys not the child of me.  
His mother was a vot’ress of my order,  
And, in the spiced Indian air by night,
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th' embârked traders on the flood,
When we have laughed to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind,
Which she with pretty and with swimming gait
Following, her womb then rich with my young squire,
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifles, and return again
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;
And for her sake I will not part with him. (2.1.123-137)

Titania’s initial statement is that no one can buy this child from her. She is stating her right to maintain custody of the boy and bases this right on the fact that his mother was not only her servant, but also her closest friend. Titania also magically describes her friend’s pregnancy. Despite that she is not a biological mother, when Titania notes that they “laughed to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind” she is describing the joy that many mothers would feel when a child is growing inside of them. As Maurice Hunt writes, “In Titania’s recreation of her friendship with the votaress, the two women, gossiping side by side, almost seem to merge into a single being” (2). It is as if Titania is his mother and it is obvious that she has felt a close bond with the child even before his birth. She even refers to him as “my young squire”. This clearly implies a sense of possessiveness that has only strengthened upon the death of the boy’s mother.

Titania’s possessiveness, along with her willfulness and stubbornness, will result in her losing custody of the changeling boy and ultimately initiate her own humiliation. As mentioned earlier, her feud with Oberon has caused chaos in nature, so the Fairy King
must now find a tactic other than self-motivated desire to gain possession of the changeling boy. He therefore decides to give her the love juice. The juice is a means of control over his rebellious queen. As Irene Dash writes, “Although some critics consider Oberon’s potion a symbol of love, as it applies to Titania it appears to be more a symbol of power or at least revenge for her failure to release the child” (96). By intoxicating Titania, Oberon is able to distract her and steal the boy. His action also demonstrates that Titania, like the mortals, is susceptible to the darker elements of the forest.

Titania’s relationship with Bottom puts the once powerful Fairy Queen in that same irrational state experience by the young lovers. She “with a monster is in love” (3.2.6) and madly dotes on the ass-headed Bottom. Their relationship has been considered both sexual and maternal and is the subject of much debate between literary critics. Kott, for example, views the relationship as primarily erotic and as an example of “animal love” (228). Sexual relations with Bottom are definitely implied for Titania directs her fairy servants to “lead him to my bower” (3.1.192). David Bevington feels that Titania’s time with Bottom is not only “exotic and bizarre” (34), but also “touchingly innocent and tender” (34). Maurice Hunt agrees and considers Titania’s dotage to be “circling about the primitive instincts of food a sleep” (8). This comment links Bottom to the changeling boy, Titania’s surrogate son. Whether Titania’s feelings are sexual or maternal in nature, her irrationality is demonstrative of the negative and controlling power of the elements in the forest world. Her downward spiral will be remembered, for she no longer has possession of the changeling boy. Even the fairy world’s most powerful woman, the spirit that embodies the dual nature of the Great Mother herself, is subject to its darker purposes.
The images and symbols of the Great Mother archetype that exist within \textit{MND} can easily be considered a “tangled chain: nothing / impaired but all disordered” (5.1.124-125). Some of these images represent positive attributes of the archetype while others represent those that are negative. More often than not, it is the darker side that is more apparent and contributes to the symbolic transformations in the play. This is evident with the forest, the juice, the moon, and the fairies. They incite hatred, fighting, destruction and misplaced affections. Montrose notes, “The festive conclusion of \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} depends upon the success of a process by which the female pride and power manifested in misanthropic warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wives, and willful daughters are brought under control of lords and husbands.” (83) But it is not the power manifested in actual women that must necessarily be usurped, it is the power of the Great Mother that controls the action of the play. Only by understanding it can the reader can a stronger sense of the irrational Athenian wood that is dominated by the Great Mother and all that she represents.

\footnote{For similar conclusions, see Buccola 78 and Dash 97.}
Works Cited


