

PURCELL'S *THE FAIRY QUEEN*: ADAPTATION AS RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ANXIETY

by

KATIE L. NORMAN

(Under the Direction of Christy Desmet)

ABSTRACT

Henry Purcell's opera *The Fairy Queen*, an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was first performed in 1692, at a pivotal moment in the history of English opera. England was new to opera at that time, and was operating in the shadow of the more established operatic traditions of Italy and France. This adaptation, particularly in its characterization of Robin Goodfellow, serves as a response to negative criticism, as well as to the critical anxiety felt by Purcell and the other creators of English opera. Instead of merely imitating Italian and French conventions, Purcell's opera intentionally follows another path and forges a new, English opera by emphasizing English talents in the areas of acting and stagecraft.

INDEX WORDS: English opera, Henry Purcell, *The Fairy Queen*, William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

PURCELL'S *THE FAIRY QUEEN*: ADAPTATION AS RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ANXIETY

by

KATIE L. NORMAN

B.A., Berry College, 2006

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2008

© 2008

Katie L. Norman

All Rights Reserved

PURCELL'S *THE FAIRY QUEEN*: ADAPTATION AS RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ANXIETY

by

KATIE L. NORMAN

Major Professor: Christy Desmet

Committee: Anne Williams  
Fran Teague

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2008

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, William Ronald and Patricia Ann Norman, without whose encouragement and support I would never have made it to graduate school at all. In dedicating this scholarly effort to them, I hope to show my appreciation for the numberless ways in which they stressed the importance of learning, and I also hope to reveal to them the fruits of their excellent efforts: in finishing this task, I will be the first person in our entire family to obtain a graduate degree. My parents have changed the direction of our family history by encouraging education and should feel confident that my siblings and I will carry on this new tradition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my major professor, Dr. Christy Desmet. Her encouraging attitude and challenging questions have sharpened me as a scholar over the last two years, and it is with no small measure of gratitude that I credit her with helping me become an acceptable candidate for the UGA doctoral program in English. I would also like to thank Dr. Anne Williams, for sparking my interest in opera as literature and thus changing my entire focus of scholarship. In addition, I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Coburn Freer and Dr. Fran Teague, both of whom have broadened my perspective on Renaissance literature.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the following instructors who supported my undergraduate academic career at Berry College and encouraged me in my path to graduate education: Dr. Mark Taylor, Dr. Jim Watkins, Dr. Zeynep Tenger, Dr. Julee Tate, and Dr. Dan Schiffman. These individuals were not only incredible teachers, but also incredible mentors for me as I contemplated a career in academia.

Finally, the road to finishing this work has been made smoother and less stressful through the assiduous efforts of one Mr. David Grubbs, whom I wish to thank for listening to my ideas, reading through my chapters, helping to proofread my prose, and loving me throughout the process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....   | v    |
| CHAPTER   |      |
| I INTRODUCTION.....   | 1    |
| II HENRY PURCELL'S <i>THE FAIRY QUEEN</i> .....                           | 5    |
| III BACKGROUND FOR CRITICAL ANXIETY IN PURCELL'S ARTISTIC<br>MILIEU.....  | 10   |
| IV ROBIN/PUCK: UNIQUELY ENGLISH SPIRIT(S).....                            | 14   |
| V ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS THEATER CRITIC.....                                 | 21   |
| Dramatic Criticism as Theme.....  | 24   |
| VI ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS ACTOR.....   | 27   |
| Robin as Actor.....   | 28   |
| Textual Differences in Relation to Robin's Traditional Role as Actor..... | 30   |
| The Role of Dramatic Tradition in Early English Opera.....                | 32   |
| VII ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS STAGE-HAND.....                                   | 36   |
| From Davenant's Beginning to Purcell's Stagecraft Innovations.....        | 42   |
| Weta in London: Special Effects in the Restoration theater.....           | 46   |
| Lighting Innovations.....   | 48   |
| VIII CONCLUSIONS.....   | 52   |
| WORKS CITED.....  | 55   |

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

For the average reader or audience member with little knowledge of either, both opera and Shakespearean drama can seem elitist and strange, forms that are rooted in a “high art” mentality, and that might appear, on the surface, to be unrelated to everyday life. These two areas of performance might also seem, on the surface, to be unrelated to each other. One is composed of purely spoken words and an occasional song, while the other includes words, but revolves around music. Opera often makes use of elaborate sets and costumes, while Shakespeare's plays are many times performed with minimal emphasis on spectacular sets, instead emphasizing words. These seeming disparities, however, disguise a wealth of similarities. Opera scholar Herbert Lindenberger remarks that the Shakespeare plays for which music are written “are generally what we would term 'operatic' in nature,” citing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an example, and some critics have even suggested that some of Shakespeare's larger-than-life characters are innately operatic (Lindenberger 33). These characters include Othello and Falstaff, both of whom inspired operas by Verdi himself.

Opera aficionado and librettist W. H. Auden provides some insight into the similarity between operatic and Shakespearean characters in his essay “Some Reflections on Music and Opera”:

[Opera] is an imitation of human willfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves. [. . .]  
The quality common to all great operatic roles, e.g., Don Giovanni, Lucia, Tristan,

Isolde, Brünnhilde, is that each of them is a passionate and willful state of being.  
(qtd. Schmidgall 5)

As Gary Schmidgall points out in *Shakespeare and Opera*, “Auden could have been describing Shakespeare's daring heroes and heroines” in this passage (5). Shakespearean and operatic characters definitely share a predilection for extreme emotions, jumping to conclusions, and generally passionate behavior. Characterization aside, there are other similarities between these two forms. Schmidgall makes an interesting and humorous point when he states that “unreal' [. . .] the favorite epithet of satirists and despisers of opera” is rarely “aimed at Shakespeare, however, though it is scarcely 'real' when a character speaks in ornate iambic pentameter” (10). Despite the mistaken assumptions of some beginning literature students, the Elizabethans did not in fact speak Shakespeare's iambic pentameter in everyday life, making his drama perhaps as “artificial” as opera.

These similarities would seem to make operatic adaptations of Shakespeare an inevitability, and there have been numerous examples of “Bardic” operas over the years. This method of adaptation, a movement from “showing to showing,” as Linda Hutcheon would term it, comes with its own unique set of problems. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon remarks that “it is opera [. . .] that has been singled out as particularly guilty on both the loss of quality and quantity counts, given its extremes of compression [. . .] it takes much longer to sing than to say a line of text, much less read one” (Hutcheon 38). In studying operatic adaptations of Shakespeare, it is easy to find scholarship on the most famous examples: Verdi's *Otello*, *Falstaff*, and *Macbeth*. Not much has been done, however, on one of the earliest operatic adaptations of Shakespeare: Henry Purcell's 1692 operatic adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Fairy Queen*.

*The Fairy Queen's* unique position as one of the earliest operatic adaptations makes it foundational for other adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, in particular Benjamin Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. More important, this work is also crucial to our understanding of the early years of English opera. Why, during a time in which opera was new in England, and France and Italy were setting the trends in this area, would Purcell choose to adapt an English play, rather than using a more continental narrative, as with his earlier (and more famous) opera, *Dido and Aeneas*? This work can provide insight into English feeling about what was at that time a new (to England) kind of performance. One clue can be provided by an excerpt from the Preface to *The Fairy Queen*:

I dare affirm if we had half the Encouragement in England, that they have in other Countries, you might in a short time have as good Dancers in England as they have in France, though I despair of ever having as good Voices among us, as they have in Italy. These are the two great things which Travellers say we are most deficient in. (*FQ in Full Score* x)

These words from the Preface hint that perhaps Purcell chose not to imitate continental traditions because a critical cosmopolitan audience might not feel that this English opera would measure up to continental standards. In a country that was apparently not encouraging to this new form of entertainment, it would also make sense to avoid foreign traditions and consciously attempt to make the end product more “English.” Perhaps if the English audience could feel more connected to the form, then they might give more encouragement to English opera.

This work will discuss the textual differences between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Fairy Queen*, first examining the movement of the play-within-a-play from Act V in the play to Act III in the opera, and the placement of Robin Goodfellow (as Purcell calls him) as the audience for and critic of this play. It will endeavor to prove that Robin's role as theater critic, in

connection with a larger theme of criticism throughout the opera and the historical primacy of Italy and France in the fields of singing and dancing in opera, reflects English critical anxiety about experimenting with this new form. It will also argue, however, that while this opera expresses English critical worries, it also reveals Purcell thumbing his nose at the continental operatic traditions and forging his own “English” way. After revealing how Robin's role as critic reveals English anxiety, it will discuss the two other theatrical roles he takes on in this opera: actor and stage-hand. Rather than continuing to portray anxiety, these two roles reveal the ways in which Purcell was responding to that anxiety. In response to negative criticism about English singing and dancing, he showcases the English operatic strengths of skillful acting and innovative stagecraft. Rather than trying to conform exactly to continental standards and remaining on the defensive about the weaknesses of the fledgling opera in England, in *The Fairy Queen* Purcell plays to the strengths of the English stage, creating a unique form of opera that is all England's own. This argument will also contribute to critical discussion of Shakespearean adaptation by revealing a way in which an adaptation of one of Shakespeare's plays may have changed the development of a new art form in England. Because most readers will not be familiar with this somewhat obscure opera, first some basic background information about its provenance, plot, and performance will be given.

## CHAPTER II

HENRY PURCELL'S *THE FAIRY QUEEN*

One of the reasons that this “misunderstood, badly performed, and often ignored” opera receives little critical attention is its questionable status as a full-blooded opera, according to Michael Burden in *Henry Purcell's Operas: The Complete Texts* (3). Many scholars term *The Fairy Queen* a “semi-opera”; in fact, this is the official position of Grove Music Online.

According to Curtis Price and Louise Stein, writing for Grove, a semi-opera is defined as:

A play with four or more separate episodes or masques which include singing, dancing, instrumental music and spectacular scenic effects such as transformations and flying. The form, which flourished in England between 1673 and 1710, is further characterized by a clear demarcation between the main characters, who only speak, and minor characters—spirits, fairies, shepherds, gods and the like—who only sing or dance. (Price and Stein)

In his “Theater Architecture at the Time of Purcell and Its Influence on His 'Dramatick Operas,’” Mark Radice writes that “the disjunction of spoken dialogue and musical 'masques,' as well as digressions in the story line for the purpose of scenic display, are generally regarded as flaws in the typical semi-opera, or 'dramatick opera,' as the seventeenth-century writers called these entertainments” (Radice 98).

Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* certainly fits the standards outlined in this definition of semi-opera; however, some scholars have strong feelings about the connotations of that particular term. Burden writes that the terms “semi-opera” and “dramatick opera” “deny the zeitgeist which produced them” (3). Whether the term “semi-opera” is condescending and degrading or

simply correct, the important thing about this phrase is that it signals a certain hybridity of spoken words and sung music, which accurately describes Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*.

This opera, which was possibly composed in early (January) 1692 and was first performed on May 2, 1692 at Dorset Garden Theatre, is composed of adapted lines from Shakespeare's play intermingled with musical numbers, or “masques,” that come at the ends of Acts II, III, IV, and V (*The London Stage*). The basic storyline is the same as that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the exception of one major omission: Hippolyta. In *The Fairy Queen*, the character of Hippolyta is noticeably absent and therefore the amateur actors are rehearsing a play to be performed in the future “before the Duke, at the Marriage of Lysander and Hermia, or Demetrius and Hermia, no matter which” (*FQ, An Opera* 5).<sup>1</sup> The reason for this change of plot is unknown, though my personal theory is that perhaps Purcell and his anonymous collaborator wished to remove any competition that the Amazon queen Hippolyta might have given Titania, the Fairy Queen of the title, for the position of most regal woman in the opera. The opera combines most of the spoken words from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and four masques, creating a performance that must have been immensely long. As Schmidgall states, “it offered two and a half hours of Purcellian music (not a single Shakespearean line set to it, however) plus about 1,600 lines of spoken text. [. . .] Constant Lambert guessed it must have run seven hours, but surely it could not have been compassed in less than four” (227). *The Fairy Queen's* length is another reason that this opera is rarely performed.

Though the basic plot in *The Fairy Queen* is the same as in Shakespeare's play, the masques are new and unrelated to his text, and therefore require some explanation. In Arthur

---

1 In this essay all quotes from *The Fairy Queen* are taken from a facsimile edition of the libretto printed for Jacob Tonson, 1692, which was published by Cornmarket Press from the facsimile copy owned by the Birmingham Shakespeare Library, and *The Fairy Queen in Full Score*, published by Dover Publications. For purposes of citation simplicity, since the librettist is unknown, all quotes from the facsimile will be cited in text as “*FQ, An Opera*” and all those from the score will be cited as “*FQ in Full Score*.”

Graham's *Shakespeare in Opera, Ballet, Orchestral Music, and Song*, the scholar defines a masque (like the ones in *The Fairy Queen*) as “a seventeenth-century court entertainment combining poetry, music, dancing, costume, elaborate scenery, and pageantry” (170). *The Fairy Queen's* first masque occurs at the end of Act II, when Titania asks her fairies to “sing [her] now to Sleep” (*FQ, An Opera* 16). The First Masque contains A Fairy Dance and the Dance of the Followers of Night. “Night” also sings a solo. The second masque, in Act III, includes a Dance of Two Fairies, the Dance of the Four Savages, and the Dance of the Haymakers. The Third Masque, in Act IV, is the Dance of the Four Seasons, in which Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter all get a chance to sing. Finally, Act V comes to a close with the fabulous Fourth Masque, which has a solo dance, then a Dance of Six Monkeys, a Grand Dance of Twenty-Four “Chineses,” and a duet between a Chinese man and a Chinese woman (White 121-122).<sup>2</sup> These masques, while spectacular, seem unrelated to the text, and that is one of the main arguments used to support the “semi-opera” label.

Obviously, an opera like *The Fairy Queen*, in which none of the speaking actors sings and none of the singers acts, needed a massive cast. White estimates that “the number of performers involved in the production of *The Fairy Queen* cannot have been far short of a hundred, made up of about twenty actors and actresses, the same number of singers, at least twenty-four dancers, and a band of about twenty-four instrumentalists” (White 121-122). The massive cast that would have been used leads Schmidgall to compare the source play and the operatic adaptation to certain forms of marine life: “Within less than a century the minnow of 1604 had grown into a whale and swallowed Shakespeare whole” (227-228). The large cast also contributed to the £3,000 price tag as reported by Luttrell (Campbell 185). In *Henry Purcell: Glory of His Age*, Margaret Campbell reports that Downes, the prompter for the United Company at that time,

---

<sup>2</sup> All information about the Masques obtained from both the printed libretto and Eric Walter White's *A History of English Opera* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1983).

stated when *The Fairy Queen* opened it was "in Ornaments [...] Superior to the other Two" Purcell operas *King Arthur* and *The Prophetess*, "but the Expences in setting it out being so great, the Company got very little by it" (186). The expense of an opera of this kind is admitted in the Preface to *The Fairy Queen*: "[F]ew private Persons should venture on so expensive a Work as an Opera, when none but Princes, or States exhibit 'em abroad" (*FQ, An Opera*).

The cost was also increased by the extensive set machinery used in this opera, which has on stage at various points "a Prospect of Grottos, Arbors, and delightful Walks," "Two great Dragons" making a river bridge that later vanishes, two giant swimming swans, a "very large Fountain, where the Water rises about twelve Foot," and a full Chinese garden (*The Fairy Queen in Full Score* xii, xiv, xvi, and xix). These spectacular set pieces were impressive enough on their own, but they were also enhanced by innovative machinery. The machines especially came in handy in Act V, when "Six Pedastals of China-work rise from under the Stage; they support six large Vases of Porcelain, in which are six China-Orange-Trees" (*FQ in Full Score* xx).

I refer to this opera as solely Purcell's because his collaborator and librettist for the work is unknown. From the printing of the original libretto in 1692, this adapter of Shakespeare's text has been known simply as "Anonymous." Through the years there have been various suggestions regarding the identity of Purcell's librettist: candidates include Dryden, Settle, and Betterton. In Curtis Price's *Henry Purcell and the London Stage*, Curtis Price suggests that Dryden has not only been proposed as an option because of his other collaborations with Purcell, but because "the poet's works are advertised at the foot of the title-page of the first edition" (321).<sup>3</sup> However, Price goes on to say that Betterton might also be a "reasonable guess" because he had been involved in all of the Dorset Garden operas before *The Fairy Queen* (322).

---

3 The advertisement on the libretto title page reads: "Printed for Jacob Tonson, at the Judges-Head, in Chancery-Lane. 1692. Where you may have compleat Sets of Mr. Dryden's Works in four Volumes; the Plays in the order they were Written" (*FQ, An Opera*).

Campbell offers another fact in support of Betterton as the anonymous librettist, which is that Josias Priest, who choreographed all of the dances in *The Fairy Queen*, had worked with Betterton many times before on other productions (186). Unless some new letter or other evidence surfaces, we will never be sure who the *real* librettist was, but we do know exactly what this mystery man did to Shakespeare's text. According to Schmidgall, of the play's original lines, “750 were used, 950 were cut, 400 modified, 200 new lines added to be spoken, and 250 added to be sung” (227). Whatever the identity of the anonymous adapter, it is clear that his task was arduous.

## CHAPTER III

## BACKGROUND FOR CRITICAL ANXIETY IN PURCELL'S ARTISTIC MILIEU

Before I explore the indications in Purcell's text of English anxiety about presenting operas, it is necessary to discuss why such an atmosphere of worry would exist. In Purcell's time, opera was brand new in England, having recently migrated from the Continent (namely, from France and Italy). In the Preface to *The Fairy Queen*, the anonymous librettist states that "Sir William Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes* was the first Opera we ever had in England, no Man can deny" (*FQ in Full Score* ix). *The Siege of Rhodes* was first performed in 1661, and even at that time opera composers were already concerned about possible reactions to the new English opera. In the Prologue to *The Siege of Rhodes*, the speaker informed the audience that:

But many Trav'lers here as Judges came;  
From Paris, Florence, Venice, and from Rome:  
Who will describe, when any Scene we draw,  
By each of ours, all that they ever saw. (White 49)

It is certainly clear that Davenant, that pioneer of opera, was "conscious that whatever type of representation with vocal and instrumental music he mounted on the Restoration stage would be judged by connoisseurs against the highest operatic standards that Italy and France could offer" (White 49). The scrutiny of Italy, in particular, was to be expected, based on its status as the birthplace of opera.

Opera was created in the sixteenth-century by a group of intellectuals in Florence, Italy called the Camerata, who wanted to make their own version of Greek theater, but "believed words and music to be equally important to this revered dramatic form of antiquity" (Hutcheon

and Hutcheon 1366). Henry Purcell, in particular, would have been exposed to French and Italian influences early in his career because of his position at the Chapel Royal, where he “probably also studied composition under Pelham Humfrey, who would have instructed [Purcell] in the style and techniques he had learned during his years in France and Italy” (Campbell 39). Humfrey was not the only predecessor of Purcell's to travel abroad and return with new ideas about music and theater. Inigo Jones, stager of court masques from 1605 to 1613, was the first to make use of Italian scenic devices in Britain, using the knowledge he had gained in his own travels (Radice 117). Much later, and in fact less than ten years before *The Fairy Queen*, Thomas Betterton (a contemporary of Purcell) was sent by Charles II to study French opera and the possibilities of importing it to England (Muller and Muller 674; Campbell 86).

The desire on the part of the monarch to experience French opera was part of a larger “French craze” sweeping the court at that time; in fact, “the Gallic influence predominated so that a continuous stream of French ideas, fashions, and manners flowed across the Channel” (Campbell 21). Some of the imported trends included silver toothbrushes, sedan chairs, and French cuisine, which could be gotten for the first time in Covent Garden at Chatelin's (Campbell 21). Perhaps under the influence of his instructor Humfrey, Purcell started his opera career with *Dido and Aeneas*, “Purcell's only work that resembles European opera,” according to opera critic Fred Plotkin (14).

There are also contemporary sources from the late seventeenth century that discuss Purcell's imitation of continental types of music. In one of Roger North's notebooks from that time, North wrote that Purcell “was a match for all sorts of designes in musick. Nothing came amiss to him. He imitated the Italian sonnata and [. . .] outdid them” (White 128). It is clear that in the time period preceding Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, Italian and French ideas and fashions in both clothing and the arts were steadily streaming into England. Purcell was trained by a

composer who had studied on the Continent, and it is documented that he was familiar with Italian and French conventions. All of these conditions could not help but add to the state of critical scrutiny under which English opera had been already been operating since its beginning. Hence, it is not surprising that the Preface to *The Fairy Queen* openly admits these conditions: “the *Siege of Rhodes* wanted the Ornament of Machines, which they value themselves so much upon in Italy. And the Dancing which they have in such perfection in France” (*FQ, an Opera*). After remarking on these “shortcomings” of the first English opera, the anonymous librettist then quotes the very words I previously included from the Prologue to *The Siege of Rhodes*, about the opera being measured against continental standards. Clearly, even over thirty years later, the same concerns about criticism were still hanging over the creators of English opera.

As Davenant, Purcell, and others began to develop opera in England under the pressure of comparisons to continental opera, they had one other major cause for anxiety. In its infancy, English opera resembled nothing so much as a play with masques at the end of each act, and *The Fairy Queen* is a perfect example of this practice. This combining of two different English forms of art, rather than copying continental traditions, carried its own set of risks. Masques were performed not for profit, but “in a private hall full of invited guests,” and both celebrated and featured royalty and the nobility (White 41). Elizabeth I and James I had both enjoyed masques as spectators, but James's son Prince Henry, his queen Anne of Denmark, and his son Charles I (after his own coronation) participated in them (White). These masques were exquisite spectacles performed on beautiful stages, and were very expensive to produce. Furthermore, as Stephen Orgel reminds us in *The Jonsonian Masque*, “the masque world was one of ideal abstractions and eternal verities” (73). This sort of subject matter also reinforced what the monarchy viewed as the “eternal verity” of rule by divine right. The opulence of both the masques and their noble audiences makes a stark contrast with the lower tone of the dramatic

tradition in London. Before the closing of the theater companies, the Renaissance theaters, being open to the air, clearly had not provided the level of comfort experienced by masque audiences. Furthermore, the proprietors of theaters like the Rose and the Globe charged money to view performances. The audience members who paid to see these plays were surely not garbed in ermine and pearls. When the theaters were reopened, they were still laboring under the weight of a low reputation. While the Restoration theater was centered more indoors and definitely not a simple copy of its Elizabethan elder brother, it is still true that the theater in London began as a rowdy place, and presented stories that featured bawdy humor, bloody battles, seductions, incest, and witchcraft, to name a few disreputable themes.

It must have been with great anxiety that Purcell and his contemporaries tried to combine these two traditional forms, one the height of high culture and the other the epitome of popular culture, into one new form, opera. Even though music was present in many straight plays by Shakespeare's later career (*The Tempest*, etc.), audiences would still not have been accustomed to seeing a production that revolved around the music, and gave it as much importance as the spoken text. Purcell and company must have wondered how the lower-class audiences would react to the elevation of song and dance to the same level of importance as the spoken story. Likewise, it is possible that the higher classes might have resented the opera composers refitting their favored entertainment for the paying audiences. This unlikely combination of dramatic action and masque-like singing and dancing could have definitely been another source of anxiety for Purcell when creating *The Fairy Queen*.

I will now explore the differences between the libretto text and Shakespeare's play text, which reveal Robin Goodfellow's status in this opera as a personification of the criticism the English feared. It is first necessary, however, to explore a more basic question: why would Robin Goodfellow be an appropriate reflection of English opera in the first place?

## CHAPTER IV

## ROBIN/PUCK: UNIQUELY ENGLISH SPIRIT(S)

The raw material for *The Fairy Queen*, born from Shakespeare and Chaucer, would give this opera an English bent even without Robin Goodfellow. This thesis argues, however, that in Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* Robin Goodfellow embodies the qualities of the fledgling English opera. Therefore, it is important to define here just why Robin specifically functions well as such a reflection. What qualifies this rough spirit to present a picture of early English opera is his innate Englishness: his origins are firmly rooted in England, a distinction that cannot be claimed by any of the other characters except for the rude mechanicals.

It is obvious that none of the courtly human characters could function in this capacity, as they all reside in Athens; their distinctly Greek names (Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius, Egeus, Philostrate) attest to this fact. Theseus and Hippolyta are even more impossible to identify as English, because they belong to the Greek mythological sphere (also, Hippolyta has been deleted from the story in this opera). If we accept that these characters will not do, then we are left with the “rude mechanicals,” led by Bottom, and the Fairies. Peter Quince, Nick Bottom, Francis Flute, Tom Snout, Robin Starveling, and Snug the Joiner do bear English names, but they also seem unfit to reflect English opera because such a representation would undoubtedly be unflattering to the producers of these new operas. It is possible that Purcell is here presenting these rustics as a picture of what some people might *think* about the new English way of opera (clumsy, amateurish, etc.), and this supposition would also clearly eliminate these men as possible avatars of this new art form. With possible reflective figures dropping right and left, we are finally left with the Fairies, characters who seem to be without national identity: their country

is Fairyland, their rulers Oberon and Titania. And while it is true that in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* these characters are not overtly given a nationality, it is also true that historically the three main fairy characters *are* affiliated with certain geographical areas.

In her *Anatomy of Puck*, Katharine Briggs remarks on the connection between Titania, Queen of the Fairies, and the goddess Diana: “Titania inherits the rites of Diana, by the late classical tradition of the gods descended into fairies” (44). Briggs also remarks on the fact that in Shakespeare's play, while the rustics are rehearsing in the wood, “a league away at Athens Diana's votaresses are chanting hymns to the moon;” in this connection with Diana, Titania joins Hippolyta in the ranks of Greek mythology, placing her far distant from the English countryside (AP 44)<sup>4</sup>. In Vol. I of *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Geoffrey Bullough affirms the connection between Titania and Diana: “Titania comes directly from Ovid, *Met.* iii. 173, which refers to Diana ('dumque ibi perluitur solita Titania lympha')” (371). Titania also has a distinctly Oriental flavor, however, accompanied by her Indian foster child. From Shakespeare's text we also learn that the child did not simply appear to her in her own woodland domain; the Fairy Queen spent much time with his mother, “a vot'ress of [her] order,” in the “spicéd Indian air by night [. . .] on Neptune's yellow sands” (2.1.123-124,126). Titania's exotic Indian votaresses and mythological connections disqualify her also as a possible reflection of English opera.

Should any comparisons between Titania and Gloriana, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, be made in the effort to establish Titania as a more English figure, these speculations must also be deflated: there is abundant evidence to suggest that these two fairy queens are not the same

---

4 In this section I will be referencing Katharine Briggs's books *Anatomy of Puck* and *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, as well as her article “The English Fairies.” To reduce confusion, parenthetical citations will be shown as (AP), (FETL), and (EF) respectively, rather than as (Briggs).

woman. Gloriana was admittedly written by Spenser to be a representation of Queen Elizabeth I, a beautiful and untouchable virgin, awe-inspiring but also benevolent. Titania clearly does not fit this description, mainly because she is already married, a state in which Queen Elizabeth never found herself. The play's (and opera's) beginning finds her in the midst of a roaring row with her husband, a fight which is serious enough and venomous enough to make negative changes in the weather. Despite her connection to Diana, she also does not seem to be very virginal: Oberon accuses her of dallying with Theseus, she apparently has had a pregnant votaress (unusual for a woman connected to Diana, that most militant of virgins), and her behavior with Bottom (though driven by a spell) is less than maidenly and coy. Though Titania might be more similar to Diana of Ephesus, the Ephesian Diana, sacred to fertility, would not have been enough of a presence in the minds of the audience to supersede the more common ideas about Diana's chastity. In *Why Shakespeare?*, Catherine Belsey concurs, stating that Shakespeare's Fairy Queen "does not represent Elizabeth. Instead, Spenser's royal allusion is transferred to another part of the play, where, according to a tale told in the manner of Ovid, Cupid's arrow misses the 'fair vestal, throned by the west', and falls instead on a little flower" (89). A close examination of these two supernaturally beautiful queens easily dispels any notions of a mutual identity, or even of a very strong similarity, confirming the idea that Titania has no English antecedents. However, she is not the only fairy import to Shakespeare and Purcell's homeland; Oberon also immigrated, from the Continent.

Oberon, King of the Fairies, while not mythological in his relations, also did not spring from English folklore. Though this character was featured as the heir to "Arthur's crowns and chair" in Ben Jonson's *Oberon, The Fairy Prince*,<sup>5</sup> a masque performed in 1611 to celebrate the

---

5 The differences between Jonson's Oberon (played and danced by Prince Henry himself), a dweller of the idealized and abstracted world of masque, and Shakespeare's Oberon, who would be much more comfortable in the rowdy world of Jonson's antimasques, will be explored fully in my forthcoming paper on the subject.

investiture of King James's son Prince Henry as the Prince of Wales, Oberon did not originally come from England (Jonson 170). He is continental in origin, having first been introduced in *Huon of Bordeaux* in the fifteenth century, a text which was later translated into English by Lord Berners (*The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* 9) (Bullough 371). In this text King Oberon is friendly to Huon, a hermit, and Huon later assumes a position of importance in fairyland (Briggs). Bullough interestingly links Oberon not only with the French Huon, but also to a more exotic Indian realm, similar to the “spiced Indian air” Titania describes. He states that “in Shakespeare, as in *Huon*, Oberon is an Eastern fairy from the farthest steep of India (II. i.124 etc.); he has power over nature and haunts a wood where he works enchantments” (371). In addition to his provenance in this French text and a possible Indian heritage, both Briggs and Bullough also identify Oberon with the German dwarf Alberich. While Oberon has an eclectic and varying background, depending on which scholar is recounting his heritage, it is clear that he first entered English literature by way of France, and as such proves himself as unsuitable a candidate as his queen is for the role of a reflection of early English opera.

Finally, we come to Robin Goodfellow (Purcell's preferred name for this character), or Puck, as Shakespeare identifies him primarily. Robin/Puck distinguishes himself from all of the other fairies in both the play and the opera as the only English “sprite.” Briggs remarks that the “Celtic Pouk shares a character with the English Robin Goodfellow,” with “pouk” as another name for Puck (*AP* 44). Those in Robin's native England were writing about him long before Purcell's opera: in W. Warner's *Albion's England*, 1602, the author remarks on Robin's inciting housewives to do extra work at night so that he can gain the credit (*FETL* 11), and he is also featured in *The Pranks of Puck*, a pamphlet from the seventeenth century (EF). In her article “Imaginative Sources For Shakespeare's Puck,” Winifried Schleiner highlights Robin/Puck's Englishness by drawing a distinction between him and his “Continental cousin the delightful

Harlequin,” though she does remark that they *are* alike in the way in which they both get their “power for mischief” from “the dark communal recesses of magic and witchcraft” (68).

“Communal” is an especially poignant descriptive word for this character, given that his existence was kept alive for many years in the stories and ballads circulated about him in small communities. It is clear that he was very popular, or at least widely known, in rural England (and later, urban England, after the mass movement to London).

In Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard's *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts*, the editors agree that Shakespeare looked to popular traditions to create Robin/Puck, but add that “before the quarto publication of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1600, Robin Goodfellow and Puck were distinct figures. Robin was larger, more sexual, and usually less demonic than Puck” (310). Bullough also makes this distinction: “Puck, the Old Norse 'puki,' Cornish 'pukka' or 'pixy,' was originally an earth demon [ . . . ] Shakespeare identifies him with Robin Goodfellow, who seems to have been a different sort of fairy, a house-fairy” (371). Bullough's differentiation between Puck the demon and Robin the fairy finds support in “The Moon and the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,” where Schanzer states that “[Puck] was not considered [a fairy] in popular superstition, but was thought of as a spirit of another sort, whose merry pranks made him the most popular of all the sprites that haunted the English countryside” (234). In “Bottom and the Boys,” Jan Kott takes this idea one step further, identifying Robin with a satyr tradition and Puck with the fays, remarking:

Puck's oldest woodcut shows his resemblance to the images of Robin Goodfellow from English folklore, which suggest unexpected affinities to the ancient satyrs and to Pan [ . . . ] But the Puck of Shakespeare is also a prankster, like the Third Fay in *The Maid's Metamorphosis* "That frights the maidens of the villagery / Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern." (Kott 314)

Mary Ellen Lamb elaborates on these differences in *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, calling Shakespeare's Puck “courtly and Cupid-like,” a stark contrast with the “crude and hairy Robin Goodfellow [. . .] a rough and hairy satyr-figure with cloven hoofs, erect penis, horns and animal ears dancing in the midst of a circle” (105-106).

While this conflation of identities is interesting and has significance for any studies of fairy lore in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the purposes of this argument it is only important to note that even in their disparate forms, Robin Goodfellow and Puck were both English fairies/spirits. Therefore, Shakespeare's conflation of them into the character we see in his play and encounter later in Purcell's opera merely created a kind of “superfairy” of English origin, combining all of the notable traits (both positive and negative) of both sprites. Perhaps Wendy Wall states it best in “Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle,” when she writes of “Puck [assuming] the part of the very English Robin Goodfellow” and of the way in which a combination of classical myth and country superstition mellowed some of the more demonic entities: “cultivated by a growing national consciousness, this transformation foregrounded precisely those figures, such as Robin Goodfellow, who were hailed as 'native English' stock” (74). Wall also draws attention to the “staying power” of Robin's new “alias,” Puck, recording that after the 1600 quarto and 1623 folio, the names “were used interchangeably in subsequent texts” (82). It is therefore clear that when Purcell refers to Robin Goodfellow *and* Puck in his opera, he is not only referring to one spirit rather than two, but also one that is uniquely and doubly English.

It is easy to see why Robin Goodfellow may be chosen as a symbol of early English opera, contrasting as he did in Purcell's opera with the continental and mythological nobility and fairies surrounding him. His unique skills of observation, acting and misrepresentation, and scene-setting equip him perfectly to function in three capacities throughout this work: theater

critic, actor, and stage-hand/set constructor. These roles will be shown to represent various areas of anxiety in English opera and to highlight the ways in which Purcell and his contemporaries responded to critical anxiety by playing up England's strengths in this area.

## CHAPTER V

## ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS THEATER CRITIC

The fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* occupy a liminal space between the real world and the supernatural. They can clearly interfere with and interact with real people in the real world, but they also have the ability to shape-shift, vary their sizes, and even control the weather. In Shakespeare's play, the mischievous Puck, who as Briggs reminds us is related to the Celtic Pouk and “shows the traits of the Bogy Beast, the Brag and the Grant,” is the agent that Oberon, King of the Fairies, uses to accomplish this interference (AP 44). Puck clearly enjoys the mayhem he causes and relishes his role. In Purcell's opera the composer and his librettist do Shakespeare one better, however, and add another role to this character's list, besides being Oberon's errand boy. In *The Fairy Queen*, Purcell and company change the character's name to Robin Goodfellow, going back to an earlier idea of this character's identity and personality. (Though Puck is also called Robin Goodfellow several times in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that name does not function as his primary one). In the opera, Robin Goodfellow serves as both errand boy *and* theater critic.

This addition of a new role is effected through the movement of Shakespeare's play-within-a-play, “The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe,” from Act V in the play to Act III in the opera. This difference goes along with a change in plot; due to the deletion of Hippolyta, Duke Theseus is not in fact married in Act V, and the masque shown in that act of “Chineses” is introduced by Oberon to entertain all of the human characters (or at least all of the noble human characters). The short play that the “comedians,” as Purcell terms them, have practiced is supposedly for the wedding of Hermia, but it never gets performed for

the gentry. Instead, the comedians perform the entire play while they are rehearsing out in the forest in Act III, and their only audience is Robin Goodfellow. Interestingly, there is even an added line in the opera that signals this rehearsal as a “dress rehearsal”: when Bottom asks “Are we all met?” Quince replies, “All, all, and drest in the same Habits we intend to act in before the Duke” (*FQ, an Opera* 21). Here Purcell's librettist takes pains to let the audience know that Robin is seeing virtually the same play that the nobility saw in Shakespeare's version; even the clothes are the same.

We know that Robin is getting the full experience of the mechanicals' play here, instead of overhearing only a few lines, as in Shakespeare's play; however, Robin's/Puck's initial reaction is the same in both texts: “What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor<sup>6</sup>” (3.1.74). Though the initial words in Purcell are the same as in Shakespeare, Robin's behavior soon begins to differ drastically from Puck's. While Puck listens to a few lines and then scares away the actors, Robin hides in the bushes and watches the entire play, making critical comments as he watches. We should be familiar with most of the comments he utters, because we have heard them before, in Act V of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lines originally spoken by the Duke, Hippolyta, Demetrius, and Lysander in the play are now inserted into Robin Goodfellow's mouth. Critical observations such as “Who wou'd desire Lime and Hair to speak better? / 'Tis the wittiest Partition I ever saw,” and “Well roar'd Lion, and well run Thisbe too” come tumbling out of Robin's mouth (*FQ, an Opera* 23-24). It is also important to note that just as Bottom and the other actors in the play speak directly to and interact with the crowd, so do the Bottom and Moon in the opera speak back to Robin after a few of his critical lines. This interaction is a somewhat difficult concept, and we are still not exactly sure how it was presented; how is Robin “hidden” in the foliage and yet still able to speak with the actors, who do not seem to think it odd that a

---

6 The only difference between the lines in the two texts is that in the opera, two extra words are capitalized: “What, a Play toward? I'll be an Auditor” (*FQ, an Opera* 21).

strange voice would suddenly talk to them from within a bush? One possibility is that this interlude was performed with the suggestion that the tricky, shape-shifting Robin is imitating the voices of the other performers when he speaks with Bottom and Moon, and so therefore the comedians' suspicions are not aroused.

Perhaps the most important piece of evidence establishing Robin as a theater critic is the line he speaks that is not repeated from Shakespeare's play and did not originally come out of the mouth of the Duke or one of the others. Upon discovering Thisbe dead, Bottom/Pyramus performs the "O dainty duck!" speech, and then Robin remarks, "If this wont move the Ladies, poor Pyramus will take pains to little purpose" (*FQ, an Opera* 24). This line solidifies Robin's role as theater critic because it reveals that he is not only capable of speaking the criticisms of Shakespeare's high-class "theater patrons," but also fully capable of inventing his own ideas and criticisms about the performance. It is also worth noting that this critical line is the last one he speaks in this scene before he frightens and disperses the actors. Purcell began this idea of Robin as theater critic with Shakespeare's words, but ended the scene and clinched Robin's role with a new line.

While Robin himself does not seem to feel the anxiety expressed in the Preface, he is functioning in the very role that the English opera creators feared. By standing by and effectively snickering at these "hempen homespuns," he is presenting a picture of the situation that Purcell and his contemporaries would most fear: being seen as a group of bumbling buffoons attempting to execute a form of art that is far above their skill level. By placing a scene of criticism at the very center of his opera, in Act III, Purcell gives a more covert symbolic representation of the concerns expressed in the Preface. Both the scene with Robin and the comedians and the openly stated worries in the Preface fit into a larger theme of criticism that encompasses the entire opera.

### Dramatic Criticism as Theme

Purcell uses three separate instances of criticism at the beginning, middle, and end of his opera, which work together to extend this idea of critical anxiety throughout the performance. I have already explored most of the discussion of criticism in the Preface, mentioning the quotation of William Davenant's Prologue to *The Siege of Rhodes*. There is another important quote, from the Preface to *The Fairy Queen*, however, that is perhaps the most negative with regard to the fledgling English opera scene. I have already cited this quote in my introduction, but I feel that it is so important to establishing the emotional climate surrounding the new English opera that it bears repeating. Near the end of the Preface, the anonymous speaker states:

I dare affirm if we had half the Encouragement in England, that they have in other Countries, you might in a short time have as good Dancers in England as they have in France, though I despair of ever having as good Voices among us, as they have in Italy. These are the two great things which Travellers say we are most deficient in. (*FQ in Full Score* x)

Here the writer gives the bleakest statement yet on the state of opera in England and reveals how inflated was the esteem that even the English were giving to continental opera. At the point when *The Fairy Queen* was first performed, opera had been developing in England for over thirty years, and still the task of measuring up to Italy and France was seemingly insurmountable in the minds of the creators and performers of English opera.

After beginning with the theme of criticism, Purcell showcases it again in Act III, in the Robin- Goodfellow-as-theater-critic scene very just discussed in this paper. How then does he end it? Where does he bring this theme full circle? In answering these questions we come to one of the strangest features of this opera, which is the dialogue between Titania and Oberon at the

end of Act V. In Act V Lysander, Hermia, Helena, and Demetrius are discovered on the ground by Theseus and Egeus and express amazement at the strange events of the night before (with Egeus speaking what were formerly Hippolyta's lines). Oberon appears and testifies to the truth of the lovers' tale and then presents the last masque, the Dance of the Chineses. In this act, both Juno and Hymen, goddess of marriage, also appear. While this masque is something of a mixed bag in terms of personnel, a grand set piece of this kind would seem to be the perfect way to end the opera, literally on a high note, with dancers all around. Purcell chooses, however, to end things differently. After finishing the masque and stating that they will bless the lovers' beds with dewdrops and keep "Noxious Spirits" out of the bride-beds, Titania and her kingly husband begin a little dialogue about none other than dramatic criticism! This fascinating ending to the opera begins with Oberon's expressing a fear:

Ob. Stay; let us not, like very foolish Elves,

Take care of others, and neglect our selves.

If these should be offended, we are lost;

And all our Hopes, and future Fortunes cross'd.

Tit. It is below the Fairy Queen to fear.

Look there: Can there be any Danger near,

When Conquering Beauty fills that Heavenly Sphear.

Ob. But here are Wits, and Criticks! And 'tis said,

Their Adders Tongues can sting, or hit us dead. (*FQ, an Opera* 52)

Purcell uses Titania and Oberon to put the final emphasis on his theme of fear of criticism, in a way that is less like the covert statement made in the Robin Goodfellow scene, and more like the blatant statements in the Preface. The fact that Purcell and his librettist chose Titania and Oberon to perform an epilogue demonstrates just how important this theme was to the opera. These

comments also introduce the figure of the “wit,” a fearsome critical foe indeed, according to Leanore Lieblein in “Green Plots and Hawthorn Brakes: Towards a Definition of Performance Space in the Renaissance,” who terms them “conspicuously distracting gallants seated on the [. . .] stage” (124). Just when the critical worries seem most bleak, however, another undercurrent in this opera surfaces, one that is independent and uniquely English, rather than anxious and despairing.

## CHAPTER VI

## ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS ACTOR

It would have been easy for Purcell and his contemporaries to fall victim to the fears and worries expressed through this opera and simply give up on ever creating operas as good as those from the Continent. In *The Fairy Queen*, however, we see a indication that Purcell, at least, had a different response. Instead of once again trying to imitate continental traditions and falling short simply because opera was so new in England, Purcell boldly faces the critics by introducing the theme of critical anxiety, and then dispelling those fears.

One way in which Purcell responds boldly to fear and criticism occurs in the opera's final scene. After Oberon states that “criticks” are like snakes and can sting or kill the performers, Titania responds: “Away; Let not the Name of Wits alarm us; / There are so very few, they cannot harm us” (*FQ, an Opera* 52). After exchanging some more words, she and Oberon conclude at the end of the opera that “We'll try a Thousand charming Ways to win ye. / If all this will not do, the Devil's in ye” (52). Purcell is stating that the composers and librettists have tried their hardest to put on a good show, and if critics in the audience think that they still do not measure up, then the problem is with those being critical, not with the performance. The performers are admitting that those who have created the opera and those who have performed it cannot control the reception of the audience. This is a bold statement, and it does not go unsupported. However, Purcell has been responding to potential critics long before the opera's final scene. Very shortly after he uses Robin Goodfellow to introduce the idea of critical anxiety, Purcell uses Robin to respond to the very same anxiety by transforming him from a critic into an actor, in order to showcase England's strengths. Rather than dwelling on the weaknesses of

English opera, Purcell uses Robin as an actor to remind the audience of England's great dramatic prowess. He accomplishes this task in Act III of *The Fairy Queen*, during the play-within-a-play scene.

#### Robin as Actor

As previously discussed, to combat the anxiety over deficient singing and dancing in English opera and subsequent criticism, Henry Purcell uses his opera *The Fairy Queen* to call attention to England's strengths, one of which is its rich dramatic heritage. Purcell reveals the excellence of English acting by separating his performers: none of the actors sing, and none of the singers act. The librettist uses this strength as an antidote to negative criticism by transforming the previously identified “theater critic” Robin Goodfellow, the symbol of English anxiety, into an actor within the same scene.

When Purcell's librettist shifted the “play within a play” from Act V in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Act III in the opera and gave Robin Goodfellow the lines of criticism previously spoken by Theseus and his friends, he also made another crucial change. In both the play and the opera, when Robin/Puck begins to watch the play rehearsal, he remarks that he might join the performers. In the play Shakespeare places these words in his mouth: “What, a play toward? I'll be an auditor; / An actor, too, perhaps, if I see cause” (3. 1. 62-63). In the opera the lines differ only slightly: “What, a Play toward? I'll be an Auditor; / An Actor too, perhaps, as I see cause” (*FQ, An Opera* 21). Though these lines seem on the surface to be nearly identical, there is one important difference, the distinction between Puck's “if” and Robin's “as.” Though a subtle difference, the choice of the word “as” in the opera gives more weight to Robin's claim that he might join in the acting. Puck's “if” sounds less definite, as if there will probably be no need for him to join the actors, but Robin's “as” suggests that perhaps he

anticipates a reason to join in. This subtle textual difference is proved correct when Robin eventually does join in on the rehearsal, and Puck does not.

While Shakespeare's Puck does interrupt the rustics' rehearsal by changing Bottom's head to an ass's head, he does not directly take part in the acting. Purcell's Robin Goodfellow, however, gleefully acts along with the others near the end of the scene. It is important to note again that while Shakespeare's Act III contains only a small excerpt of "The most lamentable tragedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe," Act III of the opera contains the performance in its entirety, complete with Robin's critical comments. As the play nears its end, however, Robin abandons the role of theater critic in favor of acting. After the death of Pyramus, Snout states, "Come, get up Pyramus and Thisbe, and let me speak the Epilogue," and Robin replies, "No, no; I'll be the Epilogue," and "runs in amongst them," according to the stage directions (*FQ, An Opera* 25). Here Robin very definitely places himself in the cast of this little drama by claiming an actual role; in some of Shakespeare's plays the Prologues (such as the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, for example) would be spoken by actors, thereby functioning as characters. When Robin volunteers to be the Epilogue, he is verbally assuming a role, and when he jumps into the thicket where they are practicing and changes the scene, he gives action to his words. He also accomplishes his role most admirably; it is the job of the Epilogue to end the scene, and Robin's intrusion very effectively halts this performance. Finally, it is vital to note that it *is* actually Robin's appearance that ends the scene, not the appearance of Bottom with an ass's head, as it is in Shakespeare's play. This distinction confirms his participation because it reveals that the rustic actors have noticed and reacted to him.

Textual Differences in Relation to Robin's Traditional Role as Actor

Robin's assumption of the role of Epilogue in Act III of the opera reveals him willingly assuming the role of actor, though in both the play and the opera he also “acts” under Oberon's orders. When the King of the Fairies instructs him to keep apart the angry and murderous Lysander and Demetrius, Robin/Puck runs through the misty forest and mimics their voices, leading them astray and preventing them from injuring each other with shouts of “Here, villain, drawn and ready. Where art thou?” in Shakespeare's play (III.ii.402), and “Speak Coward, answer me; why com'st thou not?” in Purcell's opera (*FQ, An Opera* 38). In fact, the idea of Oberon directing and producing a drama (with Puck's aid) within Shakespeare's play is well established: in James Calderwood's foundational *Shakespearean Metadrama*, the scholar speaks of the “interchangeability of dream and drama” in this work and of the “metaphoric play in which the young lovers figure as unwitting actors in a drama produced, directed, and acted in by Oberon and Puck” (130). In “A Kingdom of Shadows” Louis Montrose agrees, stating that “[w]hen Puck addresses his master as 'King of Shadows' (3.2.347) the appellation recognises Oberon as the principal player in the action, whose powers of awareness and manipulation also mark him as the play's internal dramatist” (235). As a dramatist, Oberon cannot produce his play without the aid of his star actor, who seems to have set a dramatic precedent before he ever began the action of this play.

The play and opera both give hints of occasions not encompassed within this story when Robin has used his acting skills. We learn that to “make [Oberon] smile,” sometimes Puck/Robin spills ale on gossips by imitating a roasted crab, or trips an aunt by impersonating a stool (2.1.44) (*FQ, An Opera* 10). Robin's propensity for acting is even confirmed in a source independent of Shakespeare's play and Purcell's subsequent opera, the ballad “The Mad Merry Pranks of Robin Good-fellow,” written around 1600 and published by Coles, Vere, and Wright in



### The Role of Dramatic Tradition in Early English Opera

It is natural that in his opera Purcell would use the strengths of the long English dramatic tradition as a way to excuse deficient song and dance, because early English opera found its birth in the theater. Sir William Davenant, producer of the first English opera, *The Siege of Rhodes*, was one of only two men given permission by Charles II to open a theater when the London theaters reopened. According to Edward Langhans's "The theater" in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theater*, the document giving Davenant this power contained:

a Grant unto our trusty and well beloved Thomas Killigrew Esquire, one of the Groomes of our Bed-chamber and Sir William Davenant Knight, to give them full power and authoritie to erect Two Companys of Players [. . .] and to purchase or build and erect at their charge as they shall thinke fitt Two Houses or Theaters.

(Langhans 1)

*The Siege of Rhodes* was first performed in 1656 and was put on in various venues, such as the Cockpit and Drury Lane, then later combined with its sequel and performed in Davenant's new theater (at Lincoln's Inn Fields) after the acting companies were given permission to reopen (White 69). Davenant's position as both one of the founders of opera in England and one of the founders of the post-Restoration London theater companies reveals how inextricably early English opera was tied to the dramatic stage.

Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* reflects not only the connection between all of early English opera and the dramatic stage, but also its own composer's connection to the drama. Henry Purcell did not begin his career composing and staging operas, but actually spent much of it writing incidental music for spoken dramas. His first acknowledged music for the stage was written for Nathaniel Lee's *Theodosius, or the Force of Love* (Campbell 61). Later, he composed

for many other playwrights, including Thomas D'Urfey, George Ruggles<sup>7</sup>, Thomas Southerne, Thomas Betterton, and most notably, John Dryden (Campbell 71, 87, 151, 156, 165). Dryden and Purcell collaborated on several projects, beginning with *Amphitryon* and continuing with *King Arthur; or, The British Worthy*. In fact, the close working relationship between Dryden and Purcell (as well as the advertisement for a volume of Dryden's works on the libretto's title page) has led to speculation that perhaps it was Dryden who adapted Shakespeare for *The Fairy Queen*. It has also been recorded that after Purcell began composing successful operas like *King Arthur*, he did not leave behind the writing of songs for spoken plays. In 1692, the year that *The Fairy Queen* was first performed, he wrote a duet, "As soon as the chaos was made into form" for D'Urfey's new comedy *The Marriage-Hater Match'd* (Campbell 184). Purcell's close relationship with the dramatic stage informed and influenced his work with opera, so much so that the two cannot be separated. Robin's role of actor therefore refers not only to English dramatic theater as a whole, but also to the dramatic career of the opera's composer.

One might wonder why Purcell chose to adapt a play by Shakespeare to make his opera, rather than charging the librettist with creating a new story. The answer to this question further reveals the deep connection between early English opera and spoken dramatic plays. When the theaters reopened, there had been no professional playwrights at work for almost twenty years, and so the owners of the new companies were working in a virtual story vacuum. (Though there had been plays done in private theaters during the Interregnum, these were not enough to provide a base of stories from which to work later). As a result, there arose a positive mania for adapting

---

7 Purcell contributed a "catch" for Ruggles' revival of Ravenscroft's *The English Lawyer* that was entitled "On a Scolding Wife," and included these less-than-flattering lyrics, which are reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* as well as Renaissance pamphlets on shrewish women: "My wife has a Tongue as e'er twang'd at every word she bids me be hang'd / She's ugly she's old and a cursed scold with a dam-nable Nunquam fatis for her Tongue and her Tail if ever they fail the Dee'l shall have her Gratis" (Campbell 87-88).

Renaissance plays, particularly Shakespeare's plays, into new creations. In “Adaptations and revivals” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration theater*, Michael Dobson notes:

[t]wo years into the new era, in the 1661-62 theatrical season, records show only 4 new plays being performed, as opposed to 54 written before the Interregnum, and though the proportion of new plays had greatly increased by 1667-68 – when there were 12 recorded premières alongside revivals of 20 plays written since 1660 and 33 written before 1640 – there was little significant change thereafter. (41)

Though many scholars lament the sometimes outrageous Shakespearean adaptations that were birthed from this trend<sup>8</sup>, these adaptations played a vital part in the rebirth of theater in England. By choosing to adapt a Shakespeare play, Purcell and his librettist were deliberately acknowledging opera's birth from the womb of English spoken drama by “revert[ing] to the earlier custom of adapting one of Shakespeare's plays” (White 121). Purcell was also keeping in mind the tastes of his audience, most of whom had never seen opera before Davenant's first efforts; in “Some Notes on Purcell's Dramatic Music: With Especial Reference to The Fairy Queen” E.D. Rendall notes that Purcell “agreed with a writer in the *Gentleman's Journal* that 'our English genius will not relish that perpetual singing,’” giving another reason for Purcell's choice to adapt an earlier play and simply add music to create his opera, rather than composing an opera meant to be entirely sung (Rendall 139).

Perhaps Purcell's *Robin Goodfellow*, the inhabitant of both plays and ballad, is then the very best symbol of the role that England's dramatic heritage played in the beginnings of English opera. He represents what Roger Savage terms

---

8 Some examples are Nahum Tate's notorious *The History of King Lear* from 1681, which ended happily, Dryden and Davenant's *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island* (1667), and Davenant's *Macbeth* (1663), “with its rhyming couplets and singing, flying witches” (Dobson 41). Though these adaptations affront some scholars, there is no doubt that audience members who remembered viewing the original Shakespeare plays must have been fascinated by these quite interesting new versions of older stories.

the essence of *Fairy Queen* [. . .] a summa of English theater arts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century [. . .] since it marries in a unique way the two great traditions of that century's stage: the popular tradition of speech, rapid action, psychology and bare boards, and the courtly tradition of elaborate song and dance. (205)

In his article “The Shakespeare-Purcell *Fairy Queen*: A Defence and Recommendation,” Savage also remarks that these two traditions were “handled brilliantly by the ambidextrous Ben Jonson,” (205) whose talent perhaps inspired Purcell to a certain extent. Robin, in his role of actor, functions as a way to remind a critical audience that while the English might be new at operatic song and dance, they have plenty of experience when it comes to acting out emotion on-stage. If, as Linda Hutcheon states, adaptations are “haunted at all times by their adapted texts,” then Purcell's opera appears to be inhabited by *two* ghosts: the more overt ghoul of the largely unchanged Shakespearean text, and the more subtle ghost of English theatrical and adaptation tradition hiding in the background (6).

Purcell begins addressing negative criticism and resulting English critical anxiety by casting Robin Goodfellow as a theater critic, and then responds to it by transforming Robin first into an actor to showcase English dramatic skill, and then into a stage-hand to reveal another great strength of the London stage: extravagantly skillful stagecraft.

## CHAPTER VII

## ROBIN GOODFELLOW AS STAGE-HAND

The final theatrical role that Robin Goodfellow assumes in Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* is that of a stage-hand. In both Shakespeare's play and Purcell's opera, Puck/Robin helps "set the stage" for Oberon, his "director." Within this role, he performs various tasks, including fetching props, helping to dress the characters, setting the stage for action, and using special effects to create certain auras and visions on stage. As part of this last task, Purcell and his librettist take this idea one step farther than Shakespeare ever takes it in his play: in both plays Oberon asks Puck/Robin to "overcast the night" and create a fog to separate Lysander and Demetrius, but in the opera Oberon asks Robin Goodfellow to "over-cast the **Day**, [emphasis mine] / Let thick Darkness all around [. . .] so the gloomy Shades of Night / May usher in a glorious Light" (*FQ, An Opera* 48). Here Oberon is asking Robin to set the stage for the final masque, the Dance of Chineses. By asking Robin to change the light, Oberon is requiring the use of the "machines" and lighting innovations used in the Restoration theater to create special effects. As Robin performs this task, he is calling attention to the English skill at theatrical machinery, yet another tool Purcell and company use to combat negative criticism and comparisons. In this section I will be exploring the way Shakespeare and Purcell both portray Puck/Robin as a stage-hand from the beginning, and also Purcell's addition of Robin's use of special effects, all of which establish Robin/Puck in this role and thus provide a lens through which to view the English development of stagecraft and its use in this innovative opera. By calling attention to this innovative skill, Robin once again functions as Purcell's response to negative criticism.

In both the play and the opera, we first observe Puck/Robin acting as a stage-hand when he is required to fetch certain “props” for Oberon, King of the Fairies. Oberon describes to Robin a certain white flower he once encountered which he calls “love-in-idleness,” that became “purple with love's wound” when one of Cupid's arrows accidentally fell upon it (2.1.167-168). In both Shakespeare's play and the Purcell opera, King Oberon commands Puck to “fetch me this herb,” so that he may beguile the minds of the young people lost in the forest (II.i.173) (*FQ, An Opera* 12). Oberon needs this prop to help set the stage for the lovers to straighten themselves out. The flower will anoint the eyes of the Athenian lovers so that when they wake up, the following “scene” will be different than it would have been otherwise. Without Robin's bringing this necessary prop, the plot cannot progress.

Shortly after obtaining props for Oberon, Robin is called upon for another backstage task: he is asked to help change the “costume” of one of the characters, not unlike dressers in the theater. Dressers are needed backstage during productions to help with quick changes, which are times when an actor needs to reappear in a different guise so quickly that he cannot change costumes by himself. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Fairy Queen*, Robin/Puck puts on and takes off the ass's head that Bottom wears for part of the story. The fairy dresser puts on the head in Act 3 of both works; in the play, Puck tells Oberon that “[a]n ass's noll I fixéd on his head. / And forth my mimic comes” (3.1.17,19). Here in the play Puck is mischievously observing his handiwork, and he expresses himself in a similar manner in the opera. In Purcell's work, however, Robin Goodfellow describes this transformation in a different way: “I led sweet Pyramus through the Fairy Pass, / [. . .] She wak'd, and saw him, and straight lov'd the Ass” (*FQ, An Opera* 28).

The passage through Robin's “fairy pass” has transformed Bottom the actor from one character role (Pyramus) to another (the Ass). We know that this visual transformation has taken

place because Bottom's companions tell us so: “thou are changed” and “thou art translated,” they cry. Bottom has been dressed to take his part in the action Oberon has planned to aid in absconding with Titania's Indian boy. Bottom plays his part to the hilt, never realizing that his new mistress is beguiled by a spell, and eventually this rustic's purpose has been fulfilled. It is time for another costume change, and time for him to re-assume his first role. Shakespeare's Oberon commands his minion thus: “Robin, take off this head,” and Purcell's Oberon adds “[a]nd gentle Puck, take thou the Asses Head” (IV.i.75) (*FQ, An Opera* 39). Robin removes the ass's head, and Bottom is free to rejoin his friends and take his former role of Pyramus. This second “quick-change” showcases Puck deftly fulfilling the commands given to him by his director.

Aside from fetching props and dressing actors, Robin/Puck the stage-hand also performs more general tasks that can be described as “setting the stage” for action. On his director's orders, he applies the love potion to the eyes of the characters, to set the stage for the action of the next scene. In Shakespeare's play, he explains that “I took him sleeping—that is finished too — / [ . . . ] That, when he waked, of force she must be eyed” (III.ii.38,40). In the opera, Robin describes his actions thus: “I streak'd his eyes, he sees her when he wakes” (*FQ, An Opera* 28). In both cases it is clear that the task he has performed is meant to have immediate results within the action of the scene; his anointing of the lovers with the potion does not change their immediate circumstances (they continue to sleep on, unsuspectingly), but it does set the stage for a chain reaction of events that will immediately follow.

While Robin/Puck frequently follows orders to set the stage for action that Oberon wants to occur in the next stage, he also uses his skills as a stage-hand to *stop* action from happening. When Oberon sees that “[Demetrius and Lysander] seek a place to fight,” he tells his stage-hand:

Hie therefore, Robin, overcast the night;

The starry welkin cover thou anon

With drooping fog as black as Acheron,  
 And lead these testy rivals so astray  
 As one come not within another's way. (3.2.354-359)

This request will require Puck to use lighting effects, and, were he a member of a modern backstage crew, maybe even a smoke machine or some dry ice. The production of “drooping fog” is a difficult task indeed, and yet Director Oberon has every confidence in his right-hand man (or fairy, in this case). *The Fairy Queen* libretto contains a similar command from King Oberon to Robin Goodfellow:

Thou see'st these Lovers seek a place to fight;  
 Haste, Robin, haste; and overcast the Night.  
 These furious Rivals you must lead astray,  
 Be sure they come not in each other's way. (*FQ, An Opera* 36)

Purcell's King Oberon is obviously less detailed in his description of exactly how Robin should complete this task, again demonstrating confidence in his stage-hand. This occurrence in both texts raises a topic that will receive fuller treatment in Act V of *The Fairy Queen*: the impressive English skill with stagecraft and machines.

One wonderful moment demonstrating Puck's stage-hand capabilities is present in Shakespeare's play but absent in Purcell's opera: Puck's cleaning up after the action of the play. Near the end of the play, Puck enters (the stage directions state “Enter Puck [carrying a broom],” but this prop suggestion is merely that, a suggestion, and so cannot be taken as a fact of the performance) and states that

[. . .] Not a mouse  
 Shall disturb this hallowed house.  
 I am sent with broom before,

To sweep the dust behind the door. (V.i.363-366)

This text can be read two ways: either Puck is sweeping the dust before the newlyweds arrive in their bridal chambers (in an action possibly related to the tradition of putting the bride and groom “to bed”), and so is still setting the scene as always, or he is cleaning up after everyone has gone home and the “show” is over. In either case, here he is participating in that most menial task of stage-hands, and while the “carrying a broom” direction is not absolutely required, his words (“sent with broom before”) seem to require it. If he is holding a broom when he appears in the play, the audience receives a perfect picture of his stage-hand status. And while Purcell and his librettist chose not to include this moment in the opera, the idea of Robin Goodfellow cleaning up would not have been alien to the opera's audience. After all, Robin was traditionally identified as a household spirit, whose “primary role appears to have been the performance of particularly onerous household tasks,” such as grinding, sweeping, and spinning hemp, according to Lamb in “Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*” (295).

In “Completing the picture: the importance of reconstructing early opera,” Frans and Julie Muller record that “Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, is a hobgoblin; traditionally a rough, hairy spirit often pictured with a broom or torch” (675). His association with a broom in the minds of the audience would make his role as a liminal household spirit (existing and acting in both the natural and supernatural realms) seem infinitely rational and natural, and would have been so strong and ingrained it would have “[reminded] the audience of his status as an English spirit, embodying a native and homespun strand of fairylore [. . .] In refiguring popular knowledge, *Dream* shows household work, country living, and true Englishness to thrive amid a world of foreigners' traditions” (Wall 88-89). The traditional and national association was perhaps strong enough to cause the librettist of *The Fairy Queen* to feel that this moment in the

story was not needed, and that audiences would make the connection between Robin and cleaning up without needing to see it happening. At any rate, this may be one explanation for its omission in the opera.

Though Purcell and his collaborator left out the scene in which Robin is cleaning, they definitely still ended the opera with him portrayed as a stage-hand or special-effects technician. In one of the more significant departures from Shakespeare's story, in Act V Oberon commands Robin Goodfellow:

Now my gentle Puck, away,  
 Haste, and over-cast the Day.  
 Let thick Darkness all around,  
 Cover that Spot of Fairy Ground;  
 That so the gloomy Shades of Night  
 May usher in a glorious Light. (*FQ, An Opera* 48)

As discussed in the introduction to this section, here “Director” Oberon is asking Robin to set the stage for the final masque, the Dance of Chineses, by darkening the day. This command is a reversal of his request in both the play and the opera that Puck/Robin “overcast the night.” Oberon is giving Robin a much more difficult task this time, one which will require the use of all of the groundbreaking stage machinery and lighting innovations that the English had been developing at the time of the opera's opening. In the opera's ending, the focus is removed from Robin's cleaning capabilities (as in the play) so that it can remain on his special effects and scene-setting abilities. This shift in focus reminds the audience one more time of the English talent for stage machinery and illuminates the magnificent machines and sets employed in the opera. A true exploration of the development of stagecraft skills in England, however, requires one more look back at William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes*.

### From Davenant's Beginning to Purcell's Stagecraft Innovations

Sir William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* probably opened in September 1656, based on the date of its libretto's "Address to the Reader" (August 17, 1656) and the fact that on September 3, 1656 Davenant sent a copy to Bulstrode Whitelocke, a friend of his and also Lord Commissioner of the Treasury (White 68). This first English opera was remarkable for many reasons: "[i]t was the first English opera with recitative as well as vocal and instrumental music; it was the first public representation with stage scenery in the new Italian manner; and it broke the male monopoly of acting by introducing an English actress for the first time on the London stage" (White 74). This groundbreaking operatic actress was Mrs. Edward Coleman, who played the part of Ianthe while her husband Mr. Edward Coleman took the part of Alphonso, Ianthe's husband; White suggests that these casting choices were made in order to stave off, preemptively, any accusations of inappropriate behavior on the part of the cast (White 73-74).

*The Siege of Rhodes* also boasted movable scenery designed by John Webb, a "pupil, executor, and a relative, both by birth and marriage, of Inigo Jones" (White 73). Jones was, of course, the most famous of the early English set and costume designers, and a collaborator of Ben Jonson's. Jonson and Jones created masques together but also endured a love/hate relationship, with Jonson going so far as to create a character in one of his works specifically to mock and parody Jones. These movable scenes were made with "shutters" that could open onto different tableaux (White 73). This was a fairly primitive method of showcasing different backgrounds, and yet it was impressive for its time. It appears that thirty-six years later, however, the new creators of English opera were beginning to see a need for innovation in this area.

Even though the librettist of *The Fairy Queen* writes in the Preface that "Sir William Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes* was the first Opera we ever had in England, no Man can deny; and is

indeed a perfect Opera,” clearly Davenant had not quite achieved perfection with his first effort, because *The Fairy Queen* demonstrates the great strides in stagecraft that had been made in the intervening years. In fact, the librettist himself admits later in the same Preface that “[t]is true, the *Siege of Rhodes* wanted the Ornament of Machines” (*FQ, An Opera*). The writer admits that the first English opera was not perfect, a move which might seem counterproductive to a response to negative criticism; however, he also uses this moment to introduce the idea of machinery and draw attention to the fact that this opera contains so much of it. If indeed *The Siege of Rhodes* lacked “the Ornament of Machines,” then *The Fairy Queen* surely made up for that lack within the English opera scene; Purcell's opera is anything but short on mechanized wonders.

Within this opera, the audience encountered a dazzling array of theatrical machinery: at one point in Act II, the set changes to “a Prospect of Grotto's, Arbors, and delightful Walks” (*FQ, An Opera* 14) in the middle of a scene. In the 1693 version a scene was added that included the Indian Boy falling asleep and being hidden *inside* the earth by Titania, who has caused it to split open. Near the end of Act III, the besotted Titania asks her “Elves” to “prepare a Fairy Mask / To entertain my Love; and change this place / To my Enchanted Lake,” so that Bottom might enjoy himself (*FQ, An Opera* 29). Immediately, the scene changes to “a great Wood; a long row of large Trees on each side: A River in the middle” (29). This river is no ordinary river, but one bridged by “Two great Dragons [. . .] their Bodies form two Arches, through which two Swans are seen in the River at a great distance.” Clearly, these sets and machines were fairly sophisticated, if they could in an instant make a dragon-bridged river appear, with perspective-accurate swans in the distance. The elaborate machinery of this scene has yet to run its full course, however:

While a Symphony's playing, the two Swans come Swimming on through the Arches to the bank of the River, as if they would Land; there turn themselves into Fairies, and Dance; at the same time the Bridge vanishes, and the Trees that were Arch'd, raise themselves upright. (*FQ, An Opera* 30)

At this point within the scene, there can be no doubt that this beautiful spectacle is not merely a two-dimensional tableaux or backdrop. The shifting of the scenery and the interaction between the dancers and the set seem impossible even by today's standards. How much more difficult would this masque set have been for technicians of the seventeenth century, even with previous experience in the area in the form of the Stuart masques?

It is amazing to discover not only how much the creators of *The Fairy Queen's* stage set achieved in this scene, but also how their genius continued and improved until the last scene of this opera. In Act IV, Oberon bids Robin cover up the light of the moon and stars, and then later Titania calls for music after being released from her bestial love affair: "Let us have all Variety of Musick, / All that should welcome up the rising rising Sun" (39). Her call triggers another scene change, which readies the audience for the masque of the Four Seasons. This scene change includes the Sun rising red through a mist that dissipates as it rises; a fountain adorned with statues and surrounded by a "Walk of Cypress Trees" and a bower; stairways rising on either side of the scene, from near whose tops water "cascades" to fountains at the bottom; and finally, the pièce de resistance of the scene, a "very large Fountain, where the Water rises about twelve Foot" (40). Unfortunately, we have no record of how this theatrical magic was accomplished, but it is safe to make two statements about these innovations: first, that it is obvious that Purcell and the opera's other producers were trying to impress the audience with amazing machinery, and second, that when the librettist speaks in the Preface about "the mighty Charge in setting it out, and the extraordinary expence that attends it every day," there is no hint of hyperbole in the tone.

It is clear that these extravagant machines must have cost a fortune, causing Downes the prompter to muse that “the Expences in setting it out being so great, the Company got very little by it” (*FQ in Full Score v*).

The final crowning mechanical glory of this opera is Act V. During the course of this act, in which Oberon reveals himself and the other fairies to Theseus, several amazing mechanical wonders end the opera on a truly magical note. Titania draws Theseus's attention to “the Wife of mighty Jove,” whereupon Juno appears, “in a Machine drawn by Peacocks” (*FQ, An Opera 47*). As Oberon extols the virtues of Juno, the machine moves toward the audience and the peacocks stretch out their tail feathers, expanding the contraption until it almost fills the stage (47). At the end of Juno's words, her peacock-drawn machine “ascends” into the heavens. This is quite similar to (though probably more advanced than) the *deus ex machina* devices used pre-Interregnum.

It would seem that nothing more can be done to surpass this triumph, and yet, the audience has one more surprise in store. Oberon asks Robin Goodfellow to “over-cast the Day” to set the scene, and then the final masque begins: the Dance of Chineses. A “transparent Prospect of a Chinese Garden,” with buildings, trees, graduated arches in perspective, and flying birds appears, bounded above by a hanging garden and also including a fountain bubbling merrily into a “large Basin” (48). This scene remains while a Chinese man and woman sing together and are later joined by six dancing monkeys and Hymen, goddess of marriage, but then later transforms again when “[s]ix Pedastals of China-work rise from under the Stage; they support six large Vases of Porcelain, in which are six China-Orange-trees” (51). A final scenic transformation of this magnitude must have left no doubt in the audience members' minds about the mechanical prowess of the English stagecrafters. As Robin “over-casts the Day” and sets the scene for this last masque with the aid of the machinery, the makers of that machinery cast doubt

upon the assumption that English opera is inferior to Continental efforts. Now that the sheer difficulty of *The Fairy Queen's* machinery has been established, it is possible to explore the innovative techniques used in Purcell's time that would have made this grand spectacle possible.

#### Weta in London: Special Effects in the Restoration theater

Just as Peter Jackson and his Weta technicians had to invent completely new digital effects techniques to make their *Lord of the Rings* films possible, the technicians of Restoration theater were constantly finding it necessary to invent new ways to realize their vision. While scholarship on *The Fairy Queen* has been somewhat scanty of late, there has been research focusing on the techniques used in Renaissance and Restoration theaters to achieve the equivalent of “special effects.” As Jean I. Marsden remarks in “Spectacle, horror, and pathos” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration theater*, “on its most basic level, theatrical spectacle could consist of 'low tech' devices such as magnificent processions and exotic settings, but, once the new playhouses were completed in the 1670s, more elaborate special effects were possible” (175). Marsden cites two dramatic (though not operatic) adaptations of Shakespeare that included “new scenes of witches flying and spirits descending”: *Macbeth* (1664) and *The Tempest* (1674) (Marsden 175); however, these groundbreaking new special effects were only possible in certain venues. Because dramatic spectacle could only be enhanced as stagecraft changed and grew, many of these new special effects were only available in “theaters such as the new theater at Dorset Garden which could accommodate the machinery needed to make witches fly and fire stream from the firmament” (Marsden 174). The new effects required a new kind of theater, and the Dorset Garden theater was the right place for the job. Also known as The Queen's Theater, it was the venue which launched *The Fairy Queen*.

As can be seen in the various gardens, grottoes, rivers, and forests that form the settings for the opera's masques, the men of the Dorset Garden were very skilled at creating beautiful and complicated scenes. As Tomlinson remarks, the conventions of early opera “assume pictorial form in the consolidation, across the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, of a collection of stylized scenic spaces [. . .] indoor spaces, from throne rooms to private chambers, outdoor perspectives on monumental architecture, gardens [. . .] and so forth” (47-48). One such beautiful scenic space is the cypress garden in the masque at the end of Act IV of *The Fairy Queen*. Campbell suggests that this lovely scene would have been created with “cypress trees and columns painted in diminishing perspective on the side flats, with the stairs and fountains on the backdrop” (188). The sets for *The Fairy Queen* perform two tasks: they showcase the machinery that could make witches fly, but also create these stylized scenes as described by Tomlinson. The attributes of mechanical prowess and beautifully designed sets combined to create the “sumptuousness of spectacle” which has been a feature of opera ever since (Lindenberger 56). The spectacular nature of early English opera, however, can also give us false ideas; Burden remarks that “we tend to think of the operas as 'spectaculars', large expensive works in large auditoria” that could seat huge numbers of spectators (7). We could not be more wrong in making this assumption; the bare spatial facts of these theaters reveal that “in reality, the comparatively small size of the theater meant that a Restoration audience had a quite different theatrical experience than we might expect. For example, the most cogent calculation of the seating capacity of Dorset Garden [. . .] results in an audience of only 820” (Burden 7). The surprisingly small size of the new theaters enhanced the impact of these new machines and techniques because, presumably, more theatre patrons were able to get a “good seat.” The new ways of moving scenery (and people) around on the stage or through the air were surely impressive, but some of the new innovations that the

audience experienced went beyond mere moving parts and extensive scenes; they imitated and changed the qualities of light itself.

### Lighting Innovations

The Restoration was a time of great development for theater lighting techniques, many of which were probably used to create the dazzling effects in *The Fairy Queen*. Formerly the theaters had been illuminated with candles, making it necessary for stagehands to replace and relight them frequently, in full view of the audience. However, by the time Purcell staged *The Fairy Queen*, a new lighting invention called “floats” had made the candles obsolete. According to Radice, floats were “a series of footlights which were constructed in a wonderfully ingenious way. A trough of iron or tin was placed in front of the stage [. . .] filled with oil; in it were placed circular pieces of cork through each of which a hole had been punched [. . .] and a wick ran through it” (112). These footlights were more convenient than candles because there was no need for relighting; as long as the trough continuously contained oil, the lights would never stop burning. These marathon footlights would have been especially necessary when staging an opera as long as *The Fairy Queen*, which lasted anywhere from four to seven hours.

The stagecrafters of the Restoration who revolutionized footlights also applied their genius to the development of special lighting effects. One such effect was the achievement of a “transparent aspect” on stage through the use of lighting machinery. In Act V of *The Fairy Queen*, the stage is darkened (by Robin Goodfellow) and then re-illuminated, revealing a “transparent Prospect of a Chinese Garden” (*FQ, An Opera* 48). Shutters would have been used to darken the stage, according to Campbell, and “lamps with reflectors would provide the light for the 'new transparent world' and probably there would be lights placed on movable machines which were worked by pulleys at the sides or the top of the stage” (Campbell 1890. The

reflectors and devices which moved the lights would have created a “shimmery” effect that surely dazzled the eyes of the audience, heightening their appreciation of the spectacle. By distorting the normal appearance of light, the stagecrafters were also making the scene seem more otherworldly and supernatural, allowing the members of the audience to forget for the moment where they were and imagine that they were actually in Fairyland. This kind of sensory and visual immersion in the moment was not nearly as possible in Renaissance theaters like the Globe and the Rose, because of the necessity in those venues of performing during the day, with natural light (though as an indoor theater, the Blackfriars would have been an exception).

“Transparency” was not the only special effect made possible through the lighting innovations of the seventeenth century; new developments in the machinery of lighting brought misty light, colored light, and “glorious” light to the stage. The method of creating misty light (such as might be used in the scene in which Robin creates mist to separate the warring Demetrius and Lysander) remains a mystery, though there have been some hypotheses put forth. Burden cites one such speculation when he quotes from Richard Southern's *Changeable Scenery* (1952), stating that for Southern the term “mist” in this scene “‘indicates that a passage of the scene was cut away and filled with translucent material, such as varnished silk, so that light might be exhibited behind it for more dramatic effect’” (Burden 13). While Burden also states that Southern did not believe that the method he described was used in the early masques, it is possible that by the time Purcell staged his opera this method was being used in the theater (13).

Colored light was achieved through fairly simple methods: similar to the lighting gels we place over theater lights today, Restoration colored light effects were created by simply placing a colored medium between the light source and the audience. The colored light in Oberon's cypress garden in *The Fairy Queen* “would probably have been achieved through the glass bowls filled with coloured liquid” (Campbell 188). These containers would be placed in front of oil

lamps to create the effect of colored light, a technique that “had been in use by the Italians since 1598” (Campbell 65). The English did not only follow the Italian model for light, however; they also invented some lighting techniques of their own. For example, “at the court masques of Charles I a similar effect had been achieved by placing silk stretched on frames the size of a stage wing in front of the groups of candles and lamps which stood behind the scenes” (65). This innovation reveals the English technicians expanding lighting effects to make them work on a larger scale, a practice which no doubt made ever more elaborate productions (like *The Fairy Queen*) possible. One other lighting special effect that utilized the screen technique was the “glory.”

“Glorious” light was quite popular during this period, and was yet another way of manipulating the color and general appearance of light to create an effect. A “glory” was a “wooden [frame] covered with taffeta (i.e., a shiny silken fabric- it is frequently used nowadays in the lining of billfolds) behind which lights were placed. This created an aura around the personage represented in front of the 'glory’” (Radice 122). Radice remarks that in *The Fairy Queen*, glories could have been used to create the sunrise at the beginning of Act IV and to enhance the entrance of Juno at the beginning of Act V (122). When used with characters, these halos of light served to highlight important personages for the audience, to say “look, here is someone who deserves your admiration and/or worship.” When used as part of the scene surrounding the characters, the glories can be used to suggest various celestial bodies that give a sense of time (like with the sunset) (122). These lighting techniques created a unique atmosphere in the Restoration theater, one that had never been experienced in any previous theatrical era, except that of Charles I. These glorious lights are just one more example of the great skills developing in English opera during Purcell's time and reveal just how much the English stage technicians had to be proud of in the new operas.

It is obvious that when Purcell used Robin Goodfellow the stage-hand to emphasize the technical skills of English stagecrafters, he had plenty of material to accentuate. Scenery and lighting innovations combined with dramatic prowess to form the new English opera, which I will argue in my final section was not in fact a lesser brother of continental opera, but a proud new form all of its own, with its own particular strengths. In *The Fairy Queen*, Purcell reveals that he is not trying to imitate Italian traditions, but is forging a new English form.

## CHAPTER VIII

## CONCLUSIONS

In *The Fairy Queen*, Purcell was responding to criticism by breaking away from continental traditions to make a new, more English form of opera. The most obvious example of this break is that rather than looking to more traditional continental narratives for this opera (as he did with *Dido and Aeneas*), Purcell chose to adapt a play by one of the best known English playwrights of the previous generation. Raised in London, Purcell chose to use a tried-and-true story written by another born-and-raised Englishman, whose plays were performed at court for the leaders of the country. Purcell also retains the sound of the Shakespearean language and does not try to make it fit to music. He allows the numerous lines of Shakespeare in the text to stand on their own and tell the story, rather than simply filling in the basic plotline with incidental music. He combines the spoken text that had characterized English theater for so long with music, creating “an essential diversity that made such extravaganzas appealing” (Radice 129). Price states that at this time, Purcell and company “were not inching towards all-sung opera [ . . . ] they did not deem the native semi-opera an imperfect form to be improved by adopting continental practices” (Price xi).

Purcell intentionally kept the sung music and spoken lines separated, knowing that the English audience already had a love for and knowledge of spoken-word theater, and so deliberately catered to those English tastes, rather than forcing his audience into the mold of a continental one. In his text *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night's Dream in the Theater*, Gary Jay Williams makes an excellent point regarding the separation of spoken lines and songs in Purcell's “non-Italian form”:

There was considerable debate among the English throughout the Restoration and beyond over what the best English form of 'opera' should be (even the Italian term is problematic for the English), a debate that manifests considerable anxiety about the national identity. But in general it may be said that the English did not wish to see the spoken word completely sublimated to those less than rational seductions of music that the 'soft' Italians favored. (45-46)

In *The Fairy Queen*, Purcell took pains to keep the “soft” singing and “rational” acting completely separate, probably in the name of what we today would term “audience awareness.”

In an earlier section, I quoted Peter Motteaux's statement (with which Purcell concurred) from a 1692 *Gentleman's Journal* in which he said that “our English genius will not relish that perpetual Singing;” this statement is very revealing of the attitude toward Italian opera at that time, but the rest of Motteaux's statement reveals even more (Williams 46). Further along in the same piece, he writes that “our English Gentlemen, when their Ear is satisfy'd, are desirous to have their mind pleas'd, and Music and Dancing industriously intermixed with Comedy or Tragedy” (Williams 46). Purcell expertly accomplished this intermixing by integrating his music into an established and popular comedy, whose complicated language surely “pleas'd” the minds of the audience. He also literally “industriously” intermixed the two, by using various stage machines to accomplish this task.

While many opera scholars regard early English opera as an inferior form, a bastard child of spoken drama and incidental music, I must agree with Price's statements that “the English felt no compelling need to have [Italian-style opera]” and that “[t]o understand [Purcell's] theater music one must begin by questioning the assumption that opera in the Italian style is the apex of music drama and that those hybrids which mix song and speech are necessarily inferior” (3).

Robin Goodfellow's multiple roles, which illuminate and then poke fun at critical anxiety, serve

to support these conclusions by revealing that in *The Fairy Queen* Purcell is not only unconcerned about imitating the Italian ways, but rather is subtly thumbing his nose at those critics who would judge the Italians to be superior. Purcell calls attention to the greatest strengths and innovations of the revitalized London stage, as well as referring back to the illustrious dramatic tradition of England. Through his roles of theater critic, actor, and stage-hand, the mischievous Robin Goodfellow pulls one last trick on any critical audience members. He takes those who have come expecting to see a clumsy effort at Italian opera and shows them a breathtaking, uniquely English spectacle instead.

## WORKS CITED

- Belsey, Catherine. *Why Shakespeare?* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
- Briggs, K.M. *The Anatomy of Puck*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.
- . *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*. [I need to track down this pub. info.]
- . "The English Fairies." *Folklore* 68.1 (1957): 270-87.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, Volume I: Early Comedies, Poems, Romeo and Juliet*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.
- Burden, Michael, ed. *Henry Purcell's Operas: The Complete Texts*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Calderwood, James L. *Shakespearean Metadrama*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971.
- Campbell, Margaret. *Henry Purcell: Glory of His Age*. London: Hutchinson, 1993.
- Dobson, Michael. "Adaptations and revivals." *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theater*. Ed. Deborah Payne Fisk. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 40-51.
- The Fairy Queen, An Opera*. 1692. Facsimile published from the Birmingham Shakespeare Library (London) copy. London: Cornmarket Press Limited, 1969.
- Graham, Arthur. *Shakespeare in Opera, Ballet, Orchestral Music, and Song: An Introduction to Music Inspired by the Bard*. Studies in the History and Interpretation of Music 57. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Hutcheon, Linda, and Michael Hutcheon. "A Convenience of Marriage: Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity." *PMLA* 116 (2001): 1364-76.
- Jonson, Ben. *Oberon: The Fairy Prince*. *The Yale Ben Jonson*. Ed. Stephen Orgel. New Haven: Yale UP, 1969. 159-73.

- Kott, Jan. "Bottom and the Boys." *New Theater Quarterly* 9.36 (1993): 307-15.
- Lamb, Mary Ellen. *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- . "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.3 (2000): 277-312.
- Langhans, Edward A. "The Theatre." *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration theater*. Ed. Deborah Payne Fisk. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 1-18.
- Lee, Virgil. "Puck's 'Tailor': A Mimic Pun?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26. 1 (1975): 55-57.
- Lindenberger, Herbert. *Opera: The Extravagant Art*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984.
- London Stage, 1660-1800, The*. Vol. I. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-68. xxxix-xl, 402, 405, 408-9.
- Marsden, Jean I. "Spectacle, Horror, and Pathos." *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration theater*. Ed. Deborah Payne Fisk. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 174-90.
- Montrose, Louis. "A Kingdom of Shadows." *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*. Ed. Dorothea Kehler. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998. 217-40.
- Muller, Frans and Julie. "Completing the Picture: The Importance of Reconstructing Early Opera." *Early Music* 33.4 (2005): 667-81.
- Orgel, Stephen. *The Jonsonian Masque*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.
- Paster, Gail Kern and Skiles Howard, eds. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.
- Plotkin, Fred. *Opera 101*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

- Price, Curtis Alexander. *Henry Purcell and the London Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Price, Curtis, and Louise K. Stein. "Semi-opera." *Grove Music Online*. Ed. L. Macy. 5 November 2007.  
<<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=opera.00747>>
- Purcell, Henry. *The Fairy Queen in Full Score*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000.
- Radice, Mark A. "Theater Architecture at the Time of Purcell and Its Influence on His 'Dramatick Operas.'" *The Musical Quarterly* 74.1 (1990): 98-130.
- Rendall, E.D. "Some Notes on Purcell's Dramatic Music: With Especial Reference to *The Fairy Queen*." *Music & Letters* 1.2 (1920): 135-44.
- Savage, Roger. "The Shakespeare-Purcell *Fairy Queen*: A Defence and Recommendation." *Early Music* 1.4 (1973): 200-19, 221.
- Schanzer, Ernest. "The Moon and the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 24.3 (1955): 234-46.
- Schleiner, Winifried. "Imaginative Sources For Shakespeare's Puck." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36. 1 (1985): 65-68.
- Schmidgall, Gary. *Shakespeare and Opera*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. David Bevington. *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Texts and Contexts*. Ed. Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 11-86.
- Tomlinson, Gary. *Metaphysical Song : An Essay on Opera*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Wall, Wendy. "Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52.1 (2001): 67-106.
- White, Eric Walter. *A History of English Opera*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1983.

Williams, Gary Jay. *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night's Dream In The theater*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1997.