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ELEMENTS OF FANTASY IN SHAKESPEARE'S A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, THE TEMPEST AND MACBETH

Through a comparative analysis of the settings and characters in three dramas by Shakespeare, the work exposes the way in which this timeless artist uses the same, or similar fantastic elements so as to evoke entirely contrary emotions in the readers/audience. The mixture of comedy, uneasiness, and pathos emphasizes the greatness of this artist by comparing basically the same elements of fantasy which he uses while gradually creating three different types of drama (a comedy, problem play, and tragedy). The aim of the work is for the readers to achieve a better understanding of the tastes and expectations of the Elizabethan audience, as well as to motivate them to consider whether William Shakespeare simply followed the trend of his own time trying to please the audience of the Elizabethan times, or whether he was essentially a fantasy writer.

Key words: Shakespeare drama, fantastic elements, Elizabethan audience

Introduction

*„Castles in the air—they're so easy to take refuge in.
 So easy to build, too.“*

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Norwegian playwright,
„The Master Builder“

The world of reason and sense in which we live is but the surface of a vaster, unseen world. This seems to be the chief idea of many plays of William Shakespeare, the man who shaped the imagination of the Millennium and who remains, nearly 400 years after his death, the most influential writer who ever lived. His faith in the influence of the invisible and immaterial world on people's thoughts and actions makes the reader forget about his own reality and yield to illusion, or another dimension of existence in which one cannot doubt the great power of magic, nor question the existence of ghosts, fairies, and witches. What is more, in Shakespeare's world creatures who inhabit the fantasy realm often inter-

twine their existence with the life of men, affecting it in various ways, thus making fantasy seem beautiful and sublime, yet threatening and uncertain at the same time.

All primary emotions apply to this world. Here apparitions, ghosts, angels, fairies, and witches are audible and visible. But only deft strokes of a Master of Words can paint different visages of a fantasy world so as to evoke a diverse range of emotions: from the emotion *Once upon a time I lived happily ever after* deeply felt in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, through the quenched thirst for revenge in *The Tempest*, all the way to *Macbeth*, an illusion-sodden, fantasy-infested story, steeped in mystery. Shakespeare did it.

I

„All Nature wears one universal grin.“

Henry Fielding (1707-1754),
British novelist and playwright,
„Tom Thumb the Great“

The enchanted forest in which, once upon a time on a June 24th night, the four confused lovers, Demetrius and Helena, Lysander and Hermia, dream their Midsummer dream, could be found anywhere. Like all magical settings, it has the power to turn love into hatred, and vice versa, inevitably leading to a happy ending of a typical fairy tale. The magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is both a miracle, for the poor lovers do not know *how* something happened, and a piece of work for us who see the all-powerful hand of Oberon, the fairy king. As is typical of Shakespeare, people from the reasonable and often unjust world resort to the Green World in order to find consolation and freedom. What they are often unaware of is the existence of a surreal world which transcends the boundaries of reason. In this kind of world two groups of characters, the strange lovers and a group of six craftsmen rehearsing a play in celebration of a wedding, had voluntarily gone astray. It seems complicated even at this point, let alone when we add the whole band of fairies hovering over the rationalities of the poor stray people. From a world of reason, unrequited love, injustice, Shakespeare moves his characters into another setting, a dreamlike forest, letting them dream their goblins, sprites, and strange happenings, as was customary for the Midsummer Night. What happens to them in this sparkling realm of Nature is no longer under their control, for in a magical world one is not in control of one's environment. Supernatural beings are.

*„When the first baby laughed for the first time, the laugh broke
into a ten thousand pieces and they all went skipping
about and that was the beginning of fairies“*

J.M.Barrie (1860-1937), British playwright and novelist, „*Peter Pan*“

The maintenance of the enchanting atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was made possible by juxtaposition of two parallel dimensions of existence, i.e. by framing the play with the daylight world in which Hippolyta and Theseus, the bride and bridegroom-to-be, reside, representing order and stability. Into this frame a magic night is woven, creating a whirlpool of five different story layers. In the center of this whirlpool is a fairy kingdom with Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairies, radiating from it and carrying the action forward. There is jealousy and quarell even between fairy couples. One such quarell between Oberon and Titania wreaks havoc on their perfect world. The fairy king is to be revenged on Titania by means of a love potion made from the juice of a flower which a Cupid's arrow struck by mistake. The jumble of erratic situations begins right here, with the love potion and the introduction of a charming, mischievous fairy named Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, who is according to many the closest to a protagonist of the play. As Oberon's jester he follows the king's orders, but his actions are completely misguided, thus causing chaos within the four lovers. By mistakenly anointing the love potion to Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius', he reverses the positions of the lovers completely, while basically the situation stays the same: one woman is left with too many suitors and one with too few. But Puck does not rest here, for he is a mischievous, quick-witted sprite who enjoys playing 'Puckish' pranks on mortals. The merry mischief-maker goes on to transform the head of the overconfident weaver Nick Bottom into the head of an ass for mere enjoyment! The ass-headed Bottom causes further havoc: since Titania's eyes have also been anointed with the love potion, the first thing she sees upon awakening is the self-important quasi-actor. The potion-induced love brings about hilarious situations, allowing us to see what happens when the lives of an ordinary man and a gracious fairy intertwine, thereby contrasting once more appearance with reality.

*„Blessings on him who invented sleep,
the mantel that covers all human thoughts, the food that satisfies hunger,
the drink that slakes thirst, the fire that warms cold.“*

Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), *Don Quixote*

Insubstantial as this Midsummer Night's dream may be, it still survives the probing of our imagination. To make things more complicated,

Shakespeare presents many dreams within a single dream, thus stressing the importance of the dream world in a fantasy setting. It is said that peculiar things happen during the shortest night of the year, namely that people tend to have prophetic dreams, and experience the most unusual happenings. In the play, dreams are the essential ingredient for incredible events. The love potion works only when anointed on the eyes of those who sleep. While sleeping, people are plunged into the semi-imaginary world of the unconscious, and more importantly, the subconscious. For those who live in the world where reality equals reason, it is difficult to accept any activity that defies logic, the idea expressed in Theseus' famous speech on imagination:

Theseus: *More strange than true. I never may believe
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact. V,1, (1-8)*

Conversely, when such people give in to dreams, their minds stop worrying about what is real and what only appears to be real, for in dreams everything is possible. Interestingly, this law applies to the fairy world as well- Titania is not exempt from the effect of the magical elixir, she too is powerless against dreams. Titania's dream leads to an almost unbearable moment in the play: the gracious, transparent fairy queen falls madly in love with an ass, strokes his long ears, kisses his big muzzle, and appoints four of her faithful fairies to comply with the ass-headed Bottom's wishes.

The story of the four lovers takes different course though. Dreams represent a kind of escapism for the bewildered Four, bringing them confusion at first, and a satisfactory resolution in the end. The character who experiences a prophetic dream is Hermia, immediately after Lysander has disclosed his potion-induced love for Helena:

Hermia: *(Awaking) Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best
To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast.
Ah me, for pity!-what a dream was here!
Lysander, look, how I do quake with fear.
Methought a serpent eat my heart away,
And you sat smiling at his cruel prey. II 2, (144-149)*

The power of dreams shows itself upon Hermia's awakening, bringing further confusion among the lovers. The only way to resolve the problem is to break the spell off one man and leave the other to live under the spell for the rest of his life.

The most fully drawn character in the play, Nick Bottom, is the one who does not actually dream, but can explain bizarre events that happened to him only by means of dreaming. He is totally unaware that his head has been transformed to that of an ass, takes Titania's devotion to him for granted, like something completely ordinary. Still he admits to his friends that he cannot fathom out what actually happened to him, ascribing it all to a slumber:

Bottom:...it shall be called Bottom's dream,
Because it hath no bottom . IV,1, (212-213)

By morning all is well, the end of the fantastical experience is approaching, for fairies do not belong to the reasonable world of the daylight. Their brief appearance in Act V, Scene 1, at the very end of the play, when Oberon, Titania, and „all their train“ bless the sleeping couples with a protective charm rounds the work of magic, and as the dawn breaks they all disappear, a dream dispersed. All but one, the genial Puck, who remains to ask the audience for forgiveness urging them to imagine the play as being merely a beautiful, passing slumber.

II

„A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green.“
Francis Bacon (1561-1626),
English philosopher, statesman, and lawyer

Apart from the enchanted forest, there also exists in Shakespeare's world an enchanted island where things are not what they seem to be, and where magic does not entertain at all, but regenerates the sinful, reconciliates the estranged, and restores the lost. One does not see a train of fairies hopping about and making mischief in *The Tempest*, but a strong central character, a magus dealing with seemingly white magic, controlling the forces of Nature and using his favourite slave, the airy spirit Ariel, as the chief executive for his carefully planned schemes. Similar to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the extent that both have magical settings where everything is possible, the two plays still differ significantly, for it is easier to comprehend the events caused by a magician, a man seeking revenge, and the audience is likely to suspend its disbelief with ease, recognizing the play not as a fairy tale but as a moving, human-like ac-

count of an act of revenge. It was all the more easier for the Elizabethan audience to believe the story because magic was believed in back then and considered to be a branch of science. Shakespeare used magic in this play to show that it can be both merciful and terrible power, making the audience experience feelings of unease throughout the play before finally using the very same magic to bring about a happy, or at least a satisfactory ending. In other words, this is the one play in which fantastic elements are used more or less realistically.

The magic Prospero uses is referred to as „Prospero’s Art“ in the play, whereas it is more likely to be called „Prospero’s Power“, which has its source in his famous Books, but also in music and drama. It was necessary, though, to give Prospero a certain amount of supernatural power in order to make the Island different from the real world, and to account for the strange happenings in the play. Yet, it is of vital importance to note that it is *not* Prospero who holds the magic wand, but the character who is visible only to Prospero and the audience, Ariel, slavishly obeying his master’s orders so that he could regain his freedom. Prospero’s power is frightening, ominous, and potentially malevolent, so we can never predict the next move of the deposed Duke of Milan, nor completely justify his actions/directions. With his magical power Prospero raises a storm, makes his daughter Miranda and the young prince of Naples fall in love¹, cheats Alonso into believing that his son is dead, probably using punishment as a cure. Furthermore, he creates various illusions to make his enemies mad (the magical banquet), another for the benefit of his daughter’s marriage as it seems (the wedding masque), and all sorts of dreamlike events. On this utopian island magic yields power, and nothing could be done without it.

*„If you ever met anyone with one green and one brown eye we
were to cross ourselves, for that was a human child that had
been taken over by the fairies.*

The brown eye was the sign it had been human.“

Seamus Deane (1940-), Irish writer and academic

Before the tempest the Island was inhabited by a multitude of spirits, a „savage and deformed Slave“, and two humans, one of them holding an enormous amount of magic power in his hands and becoming the Master of the Island. The question is: Dare we compare the non-human dwellers of the Island with the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*? In a way, one can find a connection between the characters of

¹ A point open to interpretation, for some critics say that Prospero’s magic plays no part whatsoever in the love affair between Miranda and Ferdinand.

Ariel and Puck, or Caliban and Bottom. The comparison of the latter pair is highly disputable since no one has ever been able to claim with certitude that Caliban is anything else but human. As for Bottom, he is beyond doubt a man, but the head of an ass makes him something more (or less) than a human.

Caliban is frequently compared to a fish in the play, described as „slimy, smelly, cold-blooded monster“, but Miranda exclaims upon first seeing Ferdinand that he „is the third man that e'er“ she saw thus overtly exposing Caliban as a human being. He speaks in verse, is able to feel hatred for Prospero and admiration for his „new Master“, Stephano, is capable of plotting against his real Master, grieves over his wretched state, i.e. shows all human-like characteristics. Yet, he is of a witch born! What does this make him then? One should bear in mind that *a witch* could mean nothing more than *an old woman* if not specified, and Prospero himself describes Caliban's mother, Sycorax, thus:

Prospero:...*This damn'd witch, Sycorax,
For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible
To enter human hearing, from Argier
Thou know'st was banish'd...* 1, 2, (264-268)

According to this description, Sycorax could be a female counterpart to Prospero, hence Prospero could be labelled *a sorcerer!* This merely means that „if something about a character in the play is not in the play or mentioned in the play, then it is not a part of the character.“

Indeed, it is our reality that deformed people like Caliban exist nowadays too. Caliban has many deformities, yet we are not sure whether the characters express what they see, or what they think they see. Shakespeare intentionally includes this monster-like man in the play because this character is essential for our deeper understanding of the purity of other magic creatures that inhabit the Island.

„A bird of brilliant plumage,
fluttering over the horrors of the abyss.“

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), French poet,
comment on the music of Frédéric Chopin, who was a friend

The purity and delicacy that illuminate the whole play is shown through the character of Ariel, the spirit who, similar to Puck, fulfills his duties forever apologizing, but unlike Puck has an ulterior motive: a desire for freedom. Caliban and Ariel are ingeniously juxtaposed: where Caliban is compared to a fish, Ariel is compared to a bird; while Cali-

ban's music sounds awkward and monstrous, Ariel's music is magical, delicate, soothing. But apart from these points of divergence, they do have one thing in common-they both yearn for freedom.

Ariel is the executive of Prospero's wishes. It is *his* wand that raises the tempest; it is *Ariel* who appears in a form of a harpy², sets up a magical banquet for the strayed company, and accuses the three guilty ones; *he* puts on the wedding masque organized for the benefit of Miranda and Ferdinand by conjuring Iris, the goddess of rainbow, Juno, the goddess of sky, and by disguising himself as Ceres, the goddess of earth.

While this celebration of the fertility of Nature is in progress, he is swiftly redirected into performing another task- he is to prevent Caliban's conspiracy against Prospero. Everything he does is accompanied by his mesmeric music, so essential for the overall atmosphere of the play. He sings, for the moment of his liberation is near, the moment when he would soar to the air again and be freer than a smile in a baby's sleeping eyes, without ever again having to perform someone else's wishes and incessantly ask „*Was't well done?*“. Even the almighty magus admits and promises:

Prospero: *Why, that's my dainty Ariel! I shall miss thee;
But yet thou shalt have freedom.* V,1, (95-96)

III

„By playing with those mysterious powers out of pure folly I had given reins to my evil desires, but they, guided by the hand of the Unseen, had struck at my own heart.“

August Strindberg (1849-1912), Swedish dramatist, *Inferno*

From the merry world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, through the somewhat disturbing atmosphere of *The Tempest*, we plunge straight into the dungeon of Macbeth's mind. Great as the peculiarities of the already discussed plays may be, *Macbeth* overshadows them both. His is the world that steeps in mystery, the world where the colour of a thousand-eyed night dominates, and the colour of blood stains his guilty mind, or as Shakespeare ingeniously puts it, the world where „*fair is foul, and foul is fair*“ - the greatest oxymoron of all. Imagine a world where sun does not shine but twice in the play, where blackness prevails, and where

2 In Greek mythology, a harpy was a flying monster that was half woman, half bird of prey, which carried out acts of vengeance on behalf of the gods.

a plethora of bizzare supernatural events takes place. By unnatural replacement of the King, Macbeth has invoked the wrath of greater beings, thus throwing Nature into turmoil. Horses cannibalise each other, a small owl kills a regal hawk, and dawn comes with no light.

The creatures whose chanting sets the overall tone of moral ambiguity are the three Witches, the servants of the Devil. The mention of these foul creatures poses the uttermost dilemma: are they merely old women, goddesses or fates, supernatural beings, or symbolic representations of Macbeth's guilty mind?

If we properly take the play to be a pure myth, an historical fantasy, then the Witches are bound to be real witches, creatures whose cauldron is filled with blood, who can raise tempests and hurtful weather, prophesy and give foul advice, setting the action in motion. Their masters are spirits, and Hecate, a superior devil, the goddess of witchcraft. Referred to as *The Weird Sisters*, the Witches use magic to enforce a supreme crime tale, but not by soliciting, simply by predicting future. All their prophecies are riddles in themselves, and it is on the wise fool, Macbeth, to solve them.

„A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory
Of calling shapes, and beckoning shadows dire,
And airy tongues, that syllable men's names
On sands, and shores, and desert wilderness.“
John Milton, (1606-1674), English writer, *Comus*

Macbeth furthers the idea that it is not us who rule the world, but an invisible power in a parallel universe. Is everything indeed predestined, or are we merely given hints so as to how to act and what to expect? The Witches do not call Macbeth to act, so the responsibility for the bloody deeds is entirely his. The first prophecy, that he will be the Thane of Cawdor, is fulfilled by itself, so why doesn't he just wait to become the King? The Witches' prophecies spark Macbeth's ambitions, for he has probably thought about the murder before them, and then encourage his violent behaviour. More importantly, they stir his powerful imagination so that his mind conjures up images of satanic and earthly evil. We do see his conscience, he seems not to be able to distinguish imagination from reality. His perverse imagination enables him to imagine the bloody deeds for the pleasure of his twisted mind, and then his criminal fantasy comes true. Macbeth's actions awaken horror and supernatural dread, a dread of the presence of evil. Both Macbeth and his accomplice in crime, Lady

Macbeth, have been humanized though, making the audience feel sympathy for them. Their world is chaotic, contradictory, and confusing, similar to a distorted mirror. Whereas fantasy is treated as a complete frenzy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and somewhat realistically in *The Tempest*, in *Macbeth* fantasy is more metaphorical and plays havoc with the protagonists' minds.

„-Man of the wordly mind!-replied the Ghost,-Do you believe in me or not? -I do,-said Scrooge,- I must.“

Charles Dickens, (1812-1870),
English writer, *A Christmas Carol*

The ominous knocking at the gate, the omnipresent sounds of thunder and shrieking, reinforce the fear of both the audience and the protagonists. The visions of their minds represent supernatural signs of their guilt. The first glimpse at Macbeth's intense imagination is his vision of the invisible dagger:

Macbeth: *Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:-
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?* II, 1, (33-39)

This optical illusion, this „fatal vision“, makes him plunge into unreality and leads him to Duncan's chambers. From this point on the gradual sinking into madness begins. Macbeth has slain sleep and dreams his nightmares awake.

„The dagger of the mind“ is the first in a sequence of hallucinations that ensue; his guilty mind does not allow him to rest.

One bloody deed triggers yet another, all for fear of fulfillment of the Witches' malign prophecies. But it is Macbeth, maddened with insomnia, that fulfills them, carefully avoiding to kill Banquo by his own hand, yet still tormented by the victim's ghost. Without an utterance, the ghost of Banquo accuses the real culprit, poisoning the guilt-ridden mind of the tyrant with scorpions. Cursed with insomnia, floundering in blood, he now seeks the Witches and demands answers, only to be told two puzzling prophecies: that none of woman born shall harm him, and that he shall never be vanquished until Great Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane. But it is the next vision that startles him, the vision of

eight Kings, Banquo's children crowned, upon which he realizes that all has been done in vain.

Are these hallucinations and visions conjured by the Witches? Or are they simply product of madness, remorse, and of guilty conscience? The latter is more likely to be true, since Macbeth is not alone in being tormented by unreal images of the mind. While he is cursed with insomnia, Lady Macbeth, a highly complex character, is haunted by sleepwalking, doomed forever to undergo their bloody actions over and over again, until death has taken pity on her. The bloody stains cannot be washed off their hands. Had the two lived, their souls would be forever tainted, so in *Macbeth* death connotes mercy. Thus the fantasy of this tyrannical tragedy breeds evil, and evil breeds doom.

Conclusion

*„A fantasy can be equivalent to a paradise and if the fantasy passes,
better yet, because
eternal paradise would be very boring.“*

Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958), Spanish poet

Fantasy exposed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, and *Macbeth*, together with their memorable characters, is what seems to give them extraordinary literary and imaginative power. They get more powerful and evocative the older they get. The more distant, magical, and fantastic these plays seem to us, the more delight they imprint on one's mind. Shakespeare could not even conceive of having such a profound influence on the genre of fantasy in the centuries following his death, for he was simply following the trend of his own time, aware that a play featuring magic creatures would attract theatregoers. He sure knew to weave his magic. Even though dreams play a prominent role in his fantasies, Shakespeare does not allow us to watch them with somnolent eyes, but keeps us on the edge of our seats all the way through. Events happen helped by fortuitous circumstances, magical power, and puzzling prophecies. Disembodied voices, perilous situations, brutal murders etc are integral part of his fantasies, but so are enchanting voices, idyllic environments, and adorable creatures. The infinite density of Shakespeare's alternative universe makes it possible for the audience to recognize the potential of fantasy whose elements are used with such ingenuity so as to fashion wonderful works of art.

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**ЕЛЕМЕНТИ ФАНТАЗИЈЕ У ДРАМАМА
САН ЛЕТЊЕ НОЋИ, БУРА И МАГБЕТ**

Резиме

Кроз компаративну анализу окружења и ликова у три Шекспирове драме, рад открива начин на који овај безвремени уметник користи исте или сличне елементе фантазије да изазове у читаоцима/гледаоцима потпуно опречна осећања. Мешавина комедије, неспокоја и патоса истиче величину овог уметника кроз поређење у основи истих елемената фантазије које он користи да би постепено изградио три различита типа драме (комедију, проблемску драму и трагедију). Циљ рада је да читаоцима омогући боље разумевање укуса и очекивања елизабетинске публике, као и да их подстакне на размишљање о томе да ли је Вилем Шекспир напросто пратио тренд свога времена и трудио се да удовољи публици елизабетинског доба, или је у бити био писац фантазије.