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Abstract

With only six direct references and no actual stage appearances in A Midsummer Night's Dream, the Indian Boy, or changeling, emerges as an interesting anomaly for textual criticism. Due to Shakespeare's limited but careful treatment of the Indian Boy, critics struggle to isolate one unifying purpose for him. A number of scholarly opinions aim to interpret the puzzling role of the changeling in light of several matters: his relationship to parental figures, his role as both an object for gaining power and as an object of desire, his role in the natural disturbances that appear in the plot, potential reasons for his Indian descent, his characterization and representation in several stagings of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and two conflicting views as he represents situations of larger discourse—colonial imperialism and the precolonial spice trade. While these widespread and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the changeling's role seem impossible to reconcile, they overlap in their understanding of the ghost character as paramount to the plot of the play.

Keywords: Renaissance drama, Renaissance literature, Shakespeare, India

With only six direct references and no actual stage appearances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Indian Boy, or changeling, emerges as an interesting anomaly for textual criticism. William C. Carroll writes, "This unseen but suggestive changeling…figures as one of the chief mysteries of the play" (172). Since the Indian Boy causes the principal conflict between Titania and Oberon, some critics consider him to be primarily responsible for the dramatic action in the play's fairy realm (Dunn 20). William Slights writes, "The quarrel over the changeling boy is powerful but also peripheral, erratically described, and never properly resolved" (259). Due to Shakespeare's limited but careful treatment of the Indian Boy, critics struggle to isolate one unifying purpose for him. A number of scholarly opinions aim to interpret the puzzling role of the changeling in light of several matters: his relationship to parental figures, his role as both an object for gaining power and as an object of desire, his role in the natural disturbances that appear in the plot, potential reasons for his Indian descent, his characterization and representation in several stagings of *A Midsummer Night*'s *Dream*, and two conflicting views as he represents situations of larger discourse—colonial imperialism and the precolonial spice trade. While these widespread and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the changeling's role seem impossible to reconcile, they overlap in their understanding of the ghost character as paramount to the plot of the play.

At the beginning of 2.1, Puck tells us that Titania "hath a lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king; She never

had so sweet a changeling, and jealous Oberon would have the child" (2.1.21-24). A changeling is a child that has been left or taken by fairies during infancy (Garber, *Shakespeare After All* 220). David G. Hale writes, "Stealing children is something fairies do, a practice neither defended nor criticized" (54). Titania herself, however, says that the boy's mother, who was a "votress of [her] order" (2.1.124) died, and that for her sake, she will "rear up her boy" (2.1.136). In accordance with the two conflicting explanations behind Titania's possession of the boy, the changeling becomes a source of contention between Titania and Oberon in what Slights considers a "highly determined though minimally textualized custody battle" (259). This battle persists through the play, spurring the plot forward.

Mothers, Fathers, and Fairy Tales

In looking at Shakespeare's intentions for the changeling, scholars explore the mother-son relationship and the shift from childhood to adulthood. Marjorie Garber considers the plot to be a "movement from court to wood and back" or a shift from childhood to adulthood and then back to an altered version of childhood (*Dream in Shakespeare* 70). The changeling has "a curious plethora of parental interest" invested in him, including his biological Indian parents as well as his adoptive fairy parents, Titania and Oberon (Desai 129). Allen Dunn argues that the fantasy or dream present in the play is that of a child—the Indian Boy himself. He splits *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into two distinct storylines: the fairy plot and the romance plot. He chooses to read the fairy plot as a fairy tale and writes that in doing so, the play "has both an internal coherence and a crucial relevance to the romance" (Dunn 20). In a fairy tale, the point of view generally comes from a child protagonist who "struggle[s] to attain autonomy from the family generally and from the mother specifically. He or she struggles with separation, loss, and the fear of rejection and is rewarded with independence and a new sense of self" (Dunn 20).

According to Dunn, child protagonists in fairy tales often imagine that they are responsible for parental conflict, which typically centers on competition for the child's affection. Such a conflict persists in the fairy realm plot. In their struggle, Titania does not surrender the boy willingly. Oberon drugs and tricks her, separating mother and son (21-22). With Titania, the Indian Boy finds nurture. When Oberon takes him away, he forces him to "relinquish his oedipal dependency on the mother, to forego the confused or innocent pleasure of infantile sexuality, and to submit to the father's law, the law that will ensure his own guilty masculinity" (Dunn 21). Oberon gives Bottom to Titania in the Indian Boy's place, replacing one changeling with another (Dunn 22). Thomas Frosch calls Titania's reluctance to give up her son the Titania Complex: "a mingling of genital and maternal impulses toward the son and her fantasy of possessing him forever as child/lover" (489). In his article, Frosch looks for the "missing child." The importance of the changeling comes from the fact that he only ever appears symbolically. The play's structure parallels a regression to the maternal relationship and infancy (485). The happy ending comes with Oberon's final blessing: "To the best bride-bed will we, / Which by us shall blessèd be; / And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate" (5.1.381-384). In this blessing, the missing child is found, still physically absent but present as a symbol of potential fertility (Frosch 485). Thus, the Indian Boy is pivotal not only to the fairy plot's conflict but to the rest of the play, since he returns in the conclusion as a "symbolic presence, looming over the world of the play, of the child of the future, who is still unborn; the child of the past, who is no longer visible; and the child of the present, who, after infancy, is never as much our visible possession as we want it to be" (Frosch 506).

In response, Slights writes that the previously described views "assume or assert a kind of particularity about the nature and function of the changeling boy that…Shakespeare's text does not provide" (262). As Frosch develops, the changeling never appears physically, but only in the words of those competing for his ownership. Slights remarks that the Indian Boy "illustrates a principle of indeterminacy evident in many parts of the play" (262). R.W. Desai also hesitates to accept previously mentioned interpretations of the changeling in the play, saying that "all such interpretations, plausible as they are within a limited context, do not satisfactorily explain the play's larger discourse" (134).

Alongside discussion of the mother-son relationship, several paternal figures prompt discussion of the father-son relationship in the play. Aside from Oberon, the once-mentioned Indian king emerges as a paternal figure. Even though the Indian Boy has been in his possession, the king is not necessarily the boy's biological father. However, he at least serves in this role symbolically since "no other father logically raises the possibility of his paternity" (Frosch 491). When Titania re-

counts the Indian mother's imitation of sails that would "conceive / and grow big-bellied with the wanton wind" (2.1.128-29), this is reminiscent of ancient myths wherein the wind provides paternity rather than a male. Frosch writes, "The absence of the Indian king and of a definite father for the boy suggests the unacknowledged paternity in prepatriarchal culture and the shadowy father of the preoedipal period. But in a play that begins with bad fathers, it also suggests the missing good father whom a child might wish for" (492). With the missing Indian Boy, the dead mother, and the faraway father figure, it seems an entire family is missing from the play. When the child becomes an adult, the nuclear family dissolves. The play, then, searches, through the dream of the Indian Boy, for the original nuclear family, "going back through oedipal and preoedipal entanglements until at last it discovers, or recreates, the pristine origin of the nuclear family in the promise of the child" (Frosch 502). Dunn, Frosch, and Garber each discuss the Indian Boy with relation to family. Although the critics' different interpretations cannot necessarily coexist, together they highlight one of Shakespeare's potential motivations for including the Indian Boy in the play—to emphasize, alongside the larger plot, the complexity of parent-child relationships.

Gender and Power Struggles

Garber writes, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play about a war between the sexes as figured in the dissension between Oberon and Titania...The question is which is to be master, the Fairy King or the Fairy Queen" (*Shakespeare After All* 215). In discussing the patriarchal power struggle for the changeling, Frosch coins the term "Oberon Complex," "in which the father seeks to replace the mother as the total focus of the son's life and have the son as his servant and second self" (505-06). From Oberon's perspective, as recounted by Puck in 2.1, Titania has stolen the Indian Boy from the king. This is not her version of what has happened, however. According to Barbara Freedman, patriarchal law establishes "right vision" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so Titania's different and female perspective thereby must be invalid:

> In order to place Titania in the position of an erring spectator, Oberon squeezes the juice of the flower love-in-idleness on her eyelids…No sooner is Titania's viewpoint rendered distorted than Oberon's perspective is triumphantly equated with right sight. By successfully distorting Titania's perspective, Oberon presents his own interpretation of events as unerring. (205)

Oberon's authority in this exchange reflects patriarchal notions of the day, working alongside other patriarchal elements in the larger plot such as Egeus' wish for Hermia to marry Demetrius.

While Titania cares for the Indian Boy as a result of a promise she made to his mother, Oberon's interest in him is not as explicitly stated. He wishes for the boy to be his "henchman" (2.1.121) or a "Knight of his train" (2.1.25), seemingly desiring to possess him as a token of political authority and dominion. His wish also demonstrates a desire for dominion over Titania (Hendricks 52-53). Oberon believes "he has suffered an intolerable 'injury' (2.1.147) at the hands of a 'wanton' (2.1.63) wife" (Slights 260). He punishes her disobedience by putting the juice of the aphrodisiac flower on her eyelids. By doing this and by causing Titania to have sexual desire for Bottom—an altogether different and more unnatural changeling—Oberon highlights Titania's foolish infatuation with the Indian Boy. Slights writes, "Like Helena, Hermia, and Hippolyta, she is taught that the only true concord for the sexes requires her to acknowledge the central fact of benign (and, by analogy, divine) male superiority in a patrilineal-patrological culture" (267). Although Oberon gets his way, Titania merely acquiesces. Rather than acknowledging Oberon's superiority, she says that she distastes the sight of the transfigured Bottom. For this reason, Slights argues that in pursuing comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "does more to unsettle than to inscribe traditional assumptions of courtly culture concerning marriage" (267), undercutting the superiority of reason (male strength) over will (female weakness) common to Renaissance psychology and society (262).

According to Freedman, "appropriative, narcissistic fantasies of self-indulgence and power are the order of the day" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (187). Aside from the aforementioned potential motivating factors, perhaps the pursuit of making something one's own for the sake of increased power or social status provokes the contest for the changeling. In a sense, Shakespeare ironically mocks the pursuits of his characters to advance their statuses as he advances his own by writing successful plays (Freedman 186). In the play, the desire to change one's role or social status is portrayed as almost criminal. Titania receives punishment when she wishes to be both lord and lady, thereby subverting Oberon's

authority (Freedman 185). Their struggle for possession of the Indian Boy "assumes larger proportions than being merely the product of Oberon's capricious fancy and becomes symptomatic of the wielding of power" (Desai 131-32). In this comedic power struggle, Shakespeare highlights the triviality of the human condition and reinforces that "conflict is the indispensable mechanism through which social difference and, therefore, social order is created" (Dunn 30). In these interpretations of the Indian Boy, there are repeated emphases on demonstrations of power—sexual, social, and spousal—which reflect another of Shakespeare's potential motivators for including the changeling in the plot.

Mimesis, Eroticism, and Desire

Other critics view the Indian Boy as an object of desire. Garber writes, "He represents, in effect, the powerful irrationality of desire itself, as well as the element of 'change' that afflicts every aspect of the play. In the most local sense, he is the cause of the quarrel that has brought dissension and disorder to fairyland" (*Shakespeare After All* 220). Garber cites René Girard's discussion of mimetic desire in his article "Myth and Ritual in Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." Desire in the play "perpetually runs to desire just as money runs to money in the capitalistic system" (Girard 191). The characters seem to be in love with love. When characters love something or someone, other characters love it too. Girard writes, "If we keep borrowing each other's desires, if we allow our respective desires to agree on the same object, we, as individuals, are bound to disagree. The erotic absolute will inevitably be embodied in a successful rival" (192). From looking at Girard's discussion of mimetic desire, Garber maps out the triangular pattern of erotic life. Titania wants the Indian Boy, an "irrational, unattainable" emblem of desire. Because Titania loves the boy, he becomes valuable to Oberon. Eventually, he succeeds in taking the changeling away from Titania's all-female world and "school[s] him instead as a knight, to 'trace the forests wild'" (Garber 219-20).

Besides mere mimetic desire, the Indian Boy could also be a source of Oberon's erotic desire. Frosch writes that the forest is full of "polymorphous perversity": voyeurism, sadism, masochism, bestiality, and perhaps homoeroticism in "Oberon's unyielding wish to have the Indian Boy as his page, like a Ganymede" (489). Thus, romantic desire, neither mimetic nor fatherly, could motivate Oberon. His desire could, in fact, be for a sexual servant when he says, "I do but beg a little changeling boy to be my henchman" (2.1.120-21). For whatever reason, both Titania and Oberon desire the boy. Critics have struggled to conclusively classify this desire, which again reinforces the vagueness that accompanies Shakespeare's changeling.

Natural Disturbances

Many scholars assume that the weather was especially bad the year Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Girard remarks, "It must be true, indeed, that Shakespeare needed some really inclement weather to write what he did" (199). The Indian Boy is the source of contention between Titania and Oberon, but this contention has larger implications for the setting of the play. In the beginning of 2.1, Titania gives a long speech about the strange weather afoot in the Athenian wood:

> An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
> Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
> The childing autumn, angry winter change
> Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world
> By their increase now knows not which is which.
> And this same progeny of evils comes
> From our debate, from our dissension.
> We are their parents and original.
> (2.1.110-17)

The dramatic action of the play and resulting weather revolve around Oberon and Titania's quarrel over the Indian Boy. As Dunn writes, "The natural world has been thrown into chaos; the natural sequence of the seasons has been interrupted, and human society has suffered famine and pestilence as a result" (20). Garber discusses this phenomenon as a case of "sympathetic nature" and compares the misconduct of Oberon and Titania to that of Adam and Eve, whose parallel misbehavior upsets Eden and the world around them (*Shakespeare After All* 219). At the end of the play, when Titania and Oberon no longer fight, "Good weather is back, everything is in order once more" (Girard 208). Thus, Shakespeare again uses the unseen entity of the Indian Boy—in this case to affect the setting of the entire play. Although he never appears, the changeling's role in the weather is pervasive and perceptible.

Why India?

A question often arises as to why the changeling boy is Indian. Titania, early in 2.1, says that Oberon has recently come back from India. Frosch remarks, "In the play, India, the East, where Oberon has just come from and where Titania spent her time with her votaress, is symbolically the place where things begin" (507). Oberon, in literary history, has strong ties to India. Margo Hendricks points to three literary pieces: the medieval romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, and Robert Greene's *Scottish Historie of James the Fourth* (43). In the first of the three selections, Huon, while on quest to Babylon, goes east and meets Oberon, king of the fairies. In the end, Huon moves to Momur, which was known to medieval writers as India (Hendricks 45-46). In Spenser, the first mention of India comes with Elfin, Oberon's ancestor: "him all India obayd, / And all that now America men call" (2.10.72.5-6). Eventually, Oberon gains this same power. In Greene, Oberon says, "Tied to no place, yet all are tied to me" (1.3.7), but this claim is not entirely true as he specifically ties himself to India in a dumb show he performs (Hendricks 48). In these types of depictions of Oberon, we see "the dense geographical umbra that stands at the imaginative center of the fairy king's literary history. Whether he appears in England, Scotland, or the outskirts of Jerusalem, Oberon enters each locale as an already 'localized' entity…We see him as clearly linked to the vast, undifferentiated region called India" (Hendricks 48).

Aside from Oberon's literary ties to India, Shakespeare's choice for the character's ethnicity may have resulted from the prevalence of travel narratives with which his readers would have been familiar. Hendricks writes, "This familiarity did not necessarily require that all members of the audiences had read these narratives or even possessed the same degree of literacy" (45). The seamen's same information from the written narratives traveled orally as well. Thus, even those who could not read would have been familiar with the contents of the narratives, which included descriptions of the Indian region (Hendricks 45).

Oberon's ties to India, as well as the sea narratives, prove the audience's familiarity with India. Why, then, is the changeling Indian? According to Frosch, the Arthur Golding translation of Ovid, which Shakespeare used for the dumb show of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, says that they come from the East: "So faire a man in all the East was none alive as he, / Nor nere a woman maide nor wife in beautie like to hir" (4.72-73). The story of Pyramus and Thisbe comes from the frame story of Bacchus, who was considered to be Indian. Through this, Frosch develops another meaning for the Indian Boy of Shakespeare's play. Bacchus has two mothers. After his original mother Semele has been killed by Zeus, her sister cares for the boy. Frosch writes, "In having two mothers, Bacchus is like the Indian Boy, who has both birth mother and Titania" (506). As such, because of Oberon's literary ties to India, audience familiarity with travel narratives, and possible parallels to Roman tragedy, it makes some logical sense that Shakespeare chose for the Indian Boy to be Indian.

Staging

When it comes to staging of the Indian Boy in productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is no single choice. Hale examines treatment of the Indian Boy in five different film productions of the play: Max Reinhardt's (1935), Peter Hall's (1968), Adrian Noble's (1996), Michael Hoffman's (1999), and Christine Edzard's with a cast of London schoolchildren (2001). He also examines television versions by Joan Kemp-Welch (1964), Elijah Moshinsky for the BBC (1981), and James Lupine (1982). Hale argues, however, that "for a variety of reasons, including constraints in the play text, these performances do little to illustrate or clarify the political and possible imperial issues of the play" (53) and that "the Indian Boy provides another example of the recurrent disconnection between academic criticism and performance" (56). Frosch would argue that Shakespeare intends for the changeling never to appear onstage, saying that "by not putting the Indian Boy onstage, Shakespeare transforms him into a symbol" (501). He once again points to the missing child in the play. According to Frosch, the Indian Boy's only appearance should be, as mentioned before, symbolic, in the fairies' final blessing of the bridal beds (501). Because Oberon reports that Titania has "her fairy sent / To bear him to my bower in Fairyland" (4.1.57-58), "there is no warrant in the play text for the appearance of the Indian Boy" (Hale 54), and he should be absent in Acts 4 and 5. Although this is the case, some productions choose to include him. During Titania's initial speech in the play, she describes India, though none of the performances studied by Hale take the opportunity to visually show this description.

Each of the plays Hale examines, excluding Hall's, includes appearances of the Indian Boy, whose ethnicity is typically marked through intentional casting and costuming. Lupine casts a young African-American boy. Reinhardt has him ride a unicorn and wear a plumed turban. In this same rendition, Titania (Anita Louise) picks the boy up with a big hug and later "crowns him with flowers" in 2.2, evoking Puck's phrase from 2.1. In Hoffman's version, the long-haired changeling enters on a pony, and Titania (Michelle Pfeiffer) later grips the boy, keeping him from Oberon. This is the changeling's only appearance in Hoffman's rendition of the play. Kemp-Welch portrays an older version of the boy who wears only breaches and stands shoulder-high to Titania (Anne Massey). In Moshinsky's version, the boy is young enough to wear a diaper, and Titania (Eileen Atkins) carries him as Puck gives his initial speech. She keeps the boy in her arms during her first interaction with Oberon, but he is not seen afterward. In Lupine's rendition, Titania (Michelle Shay) again carries the boy but this time sets him down to run about as she describes the weather. Then the boy sits in Oberon's lap, foreshadowing the events that will transpire later in the plot. In Noble's, a British boy dreams the entire play, and as Puck makes his speech about the changeling, the British boy imagines a turbaned version of himself as the Indian Boy floating in a bubble (Hale 54-55). Like Frosch's interpretation, Noble's production of the play shows a dreamer's experience paralleling that of the changeling.

Aside from the changeling's introduction, the various directors make different choices for his role in the reconciliation between Titania and Oberon. Since the resolution is reported by Oberon rather than staged by Shakespeare, the scene can be represented in a number of ways. Hoffman chooses to cut Oberon's narrative altogether, demonstrating reconciliation by having Titania and Oberon walk together hand-in-hand at the end of the play. The published screenplay of Hoffman's production states that the changeling stands between them, but the video version does not follow this plan. Kemp-Welch, Moshinsky, and Noble keep Oberon's speech but provide no visual element. Hall flashes back to a reconciled shot of Titania and Oberon but chooses to leave out the changeling. Edzard, Reinhardt, and Lupine tackle the resolution in more complicated ways. In Edzard's version, Oberon verbally wraps up the loose ends of the plot while Titania and some others stand in the distance. Then, the changeling makes his only appearance as two fairies lead him over to Oberon. Reinhardt chooses to show the transfer of the Indian Boy with special connection to Titania's relationship with Bottom. In 3.1, she walks toward Bottom as the changeling comes toward her. She puts the crown of flowers on Bottom's ears and ignores the boy. Oberon picks up the neglected changeling and rides off with him. In Lupine's, the boy wanders off while Titania lies with Bottom. Oberon then finds the boy playing with a toy ship. At the end, Puck carries the changeling on his back while Oberon and Titania kiss and dance. The boy then appears between the couple during their final blessing and the curtain call (Hale 56). This range of interpretation from directors demonstrates the elusive appeal of the Indian Boy not only for criticism, but for production as well.

Race and imperialist conquest

Hendricks, in her article that looks at race and empire in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, examines another staging of the Indian Boy: a July 1991 production by the Shakespeare Santa Cruz repertory company (SSC), directed by Danny Scheie. Hendricks sees this production's treatment of the Indian Boy as "radical and problematic" (37). While Hendricks views the Indian Boy as "little more than a stage prop" between Titania and Oberon in their first interaction in the play, he does make an appearance, which "[bears] ideological significance worth examining" (38). Scheie cast Jaime Paglia as the changeling. In his early twenties, Paglia was six-feet tall and tan. His costume included a gold loincloth, a feathered turban, "Turkish" slippers, and a jeweled dagger. Hendricks writes that this depiction of the Indian Boy portrays him as "a veritable Sinbad, a rich oriental 'trifle' accessible to the gaze of predominantly white audiences for six weeks" (38). With the strange casting choice for the Indian Boy, Hendricks writes that Scheie "reaffirm[s] an aspect of orientalist ideology…conjur[ing] the template of eroticism and exoticism adumbrated in the West's vision of India and the East" (38).

SSC's presentation of the boy paves the way for Hendricks' examination of the racial implications of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She argues "that the figurative evocation of India localizes Shakespeare's characterization of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and marks the play's complicity in the racialist ideologies being created by early modern England's participation in imperialism" (43). India is a simultaneous setting. It exists on maps but also in the imagination, which "permits the articulation of a racial fantasy in *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream where Amazons and fairies signify an alien yet domestic paradox in an otherwise stable, homogeneous world" (Hendricks 52). Titania's speech about the Indian Boy's origins (2.1.126-34) highlights India's exoticism and also its role in mercantilist trading and domestication (Hendricks 53). The aforementioned travel narratives of the time as well as the play's reinforcement of pervasive racial ideology represent India as a place to be dominated and its people as "rich trifles to sate the European appetite for exotic novelty" (Hendricks 59). As demonstrated in Hendricks' discussion of Scheie's choice, casting the Indian Boy is a complex and difficult task since a director cannot fully avoid the "culturally predetermined orientalism" that comes with Shakespeare's chosen locale of India (60). Hendricks cautions that until directors, scholars, and readers begin to look at the Indian Boy in a broader context, productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will continue to "rehearse endlessly a racial fantasy engendered as part of imperialist ideology: the fantasy of a silent, accepting native who neither speaks nor resists" (60). Considering Hendricks' case study alongside Shakespeare's supposed intentions, it is important to note that the racially marked ghost character is given no lines—and therefore no voice—in the play. While this decision does not necessarily implicate Shakespeare as actively racist, perhaps it does illuminate some implicit racism in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or at least in some of its performances.

Precolonial Spice Trade

Desai thinks Hendricks' interpretation of the role of the Indian Boy is "too deeply colored by a phenomenological preoccupation with England's colonial aspirations" (128). He develops an allegorical view of Titania, Oberon, and the Indian Boy in light of Europe's relationship with India in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the struggle for a monopoly of the Indian spice trade between England and Portugal in the late sixteenth century (127). Titania emerges as the figure of Portugal, Oberon as the figure of England, and the changeling as the figure of the Indian spice trade. Desai asserts that "a precolonial era *did* exist, incredible as this may seem, when trade, and not conquest, was the goal, an era when Elfin, king of the fairies, ruled three dominions—India, Britain, and America—with equal justice and impartiality" (127-28). Though it is difficult in the present age to imagine a precolonial relationship between the West and the East, the play was created in a time prior to overwhelming conquest. Written 1595-96, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* came about before British imperialism began to emerge in the mid to late eighteenth century at the battles of Plassey (1757) and Panipat (1761). Desai quotes Percival Spear: "During this period of Indian history it is specially necessary to avoid the mistake of interpreting the past in terms of the future" (128).

Since Oberon functions allegorically as Henry VIII in *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser puts Queen Elizabeth in the character's bloodline and succession. Shakespeare likewise makes a connection between Oberon and England, albeit less overt, when he calls the queen "a fair vestal, thronéd by the west" (2.1.158; Desai 128). Titania's long description in 2.1 reflects the Malabar Coast of India, from Goa to Cochin. English explorer Ralph Fitch took a 1583 expedition in the *Tiger* and detailed the Malabar Coast in his travel narratives, recounting the area's bustling trade and commerce. Shakespeare knew of these expeditions, as made certain when the First Witch in *Macbeth* plans to sail in pursuit of the *Tiger*. Fitch's travel account was published between 1598 and 1600, and the first edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was published in 1600. This was a long enough time period for word to have spread or for Fitch and Shakespeare to have met. It also seems that Titania's graphic description is reminiscent of Fitch's narrative (Desai 129-30). Desai indicates that Titania's line, "The spicéd Indian air by night" (2.1.124), not only describes the weather of the Indian coast, but also carries "implications of the great trade and commerce in spices… that made this part of India famous both east and west" (131). When she references "th'embarkéd traders on the flood" (2.1.127) with sails that are "big-bellied with the wanton wind" (2.1.129) and "rich with merchandise" (2.1.134), she highlights the wealth of India as well as the commercial traffic of the area. Her speech "evoke[s] images that bring together increase, in terms of fertility and commerce" (Desai 131).

The trading relationship between India and Portugal during this time period was cooperative and benefitted both parties (Desai 133). By the middle of the sixteenth century, Portugal's empire was vast, "extending eastward from Morocco to the East Indies and westward to Brazil" (Desai 134). In Desai's allegory, the Indian mother's death and Titania's adoption of her son show Portugal's displacement of Indian identity, "a process that had reached its completion by the time England appeared on the Indian scene" (134). It was not until the 1590s that England displaced Portugal from this monop-

oly, causing the country's trade relationship with India to plummet. Desai writes, "Thus does Oberon trick Titania into doting on Bottom, a weaver, rendering her foolish, ridiculous, and degenerate, so that toward the play's end she yields the Indian Boy to him without a struggle" (133).

Then, since England's initial involvement in India was one of trade and commerce, not imperialism, Desai writes that "it is outside the jurisdiction of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that refracts some of the historical circumstances prevalent at the time of its composition" (139). Instead, the subsequent relationship between England and India, including the creation of the East India Company in 1600 and India's eventual independence from England, "is a different story, which is a record of the love-hate relationship that develops over three-and-a-half centuries between Oberon and the Indian Boy who, in this time, grows up and comes to manhood" (Desai 139). Although Desai's interpretation is compelling in its uniqueness and historical parallels, it seems perhaps more coincidental than intentional on Shakespeare's part. His reading, however, once again illustrates the problematic indeterminacy and irreconcilable complexity of the Indian Boy.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most silent of characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Indian Boy never receives a chance to express his own desires, while the other characters get lines and scenes in which to do so. His limited role is the source of debate and speculation behind Shakespeare's intentions. With a history of varied performance and critical inquiry, the Indian Boy stands as an enigma for directors and scholars alike. Whether he is the dreamed symbol of a missing child, an object of parental or erotic desire, a representation of the spice trade, a means through which to assert social status, or a trifle of imperialist conquest, it seems there is one thing on which readers can agree: that Shakespeare's Indian Boy plays a pivotal role in the plot of the famous fairy play. He is a source of contention between the Fairy King and Fairy Queen and a source of contention between critics, but without him the "dream" cannot come true.

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