

‘A LOCAL HABITATION AND A NAME’: THE ORIGINS OF SHAKESPEARE’S OBERON

LAURA AYDELOTTE

‘... but the way is so full of y^e fayrey & straunge thynges, that such as passe that way are lost, for in that wood abydyth a kyng of y^e fayrey namyd Oberon’.¹ So the French knight, Huon de Bordeaux, is warned as he continues his journey in quest of four teeth and a tuft of the beard of Babylon’s ruler, Admiral Gaudys. Literary scholars looking at mortals lost in another wood full of fairy and strange things in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have long identified Sir John Bouchier, Lord Berners’s 1534 English translation of the French romance *Huon de Bordeaux* as the source for two aspects of the fairy king in Shakespeare’s play. *Huon* is generally recognized as the source for Oberon’s ‘local habitation’. That is, it provides the most likely precedent for his location, not only in terms of the wood he abides in when first introduced in both the play and the romance but also his original habitation in an eastern or ‘Indian’ region.² The other widely accepted contribution of *Huon* to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the name Oberon itself, which first began to become a popular name for the fairy king in the English tradition with the publication of Berners’s translation. However, while these origins of Oberon’s name and geographic origins have been cited and mentioned briefly,³ there has been little space devoted to a serious exploration of the way previous representations of the fairy king Oberon have influenced or been altered by Shakespeare in *Dream*.

This article takes a closer look at the Oberon character in Berners’s translation of *Huon de Bordeaux* and at the Oberon of Robert Greene’s 1594

play *The Scottish Historie of James the Fourth* as a way of inquiring into the origins of Shakespeare’s Oberon. The fairy king of the sources is an often contradictory character, at once a beneficent guide and a darkly powerful threat; a meddling trickster and a haughtily detached observer of human affairs. Understanding these mixed origins not only provides new insights into the ways in which Shakespeare’s Oberon was shaped by his predecessors but also suggests that certain aspects of Puck’s character and the relationship between Puck and Oberon are indebted to the single figure of the fairy king in previous texts. Though ample scholarship has demonstrated that a number of English sources contributed to the character of Puck, I suggest that continental sources are also important for understanding Oberon’s assistant, in that Shakespeare shares between Puck and

¹ *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeaux*, trans. Sir John Bouchier, Lord Berners (1534), ed. S. L. Lee (London, 1882–87), p. 62.

² Margo Hendricks, ‘“Obscured by dreams”: Race, Empire and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996), 37–60. Hendricks provides the longest critical account of *Huon* as a source for Oberon in a critical passage on his associations with India.

³ For the more significant mentions of *Huon* as a source for *Dream* see: Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, ‘Introduction’, pp. xlix–li; William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London, 2004, repr. 2006), pp. lix and lxxxiv; William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Oxford, 1994, repr. 2008), p. 31; Thomas Moisan, ‘Antique Fables, Fairy Toys: Elisions, Allusion, and Translation in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Critical Essays*, ed. Dorothea Kehler (New York, 2001).

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Oberon many of the features and actions that are assigned to the fairy king alone in earlier sources.

I begin by looking at the provenance of the name Oberon and the many facets of the character of the fairy king that precede his appearance in Shakespeare's play. I then turn to the ways in which Shakespeare adapts these conflicting aspects of the fairy king in the characters of Oberon and Puck. This exploration of Oberon's origins helps to shed light on the question of what 'sort' of spirits they may be. I conclude by looking to Oberon's 'local habitation', or rather his lack thereof, demonstrating that Shakespeare's Oberon, rather than being a fixedly 'Eastern' figure, has a global identity that he owes to the source texts, and that Oberon's mixed geographic origins and shifting location, like his mixed associations with dark and light, are also important for understanding his relationship with Puck and the status as 'wanderer' that the two characters share.

I. OBERON BEFORE *DREAM*

The name 'Oberon' derives from the French name for the fairy king, 'Auberon', which in turn comes directly from the name of the Germanic elf king, 'Alberich'.⁴ The line from Alberich to Oberon can be traced, not only through the etymology of the name but through shared narratives, events and features associated with the fairy king as he developed from the medieval Alberich to the Elizabethan Oberon. One common thread between all three incarnations of the fairy king is his association with the East, which I will look at more closely at the end of this article. Another common thread is his position as a matchmaker who assists or interferes with the love matches of mortals. Though Alberich may now be most famous as the dwarf from the *Nibelungenlied* that inspired Wagner's opera cycle, he was also a prominent character in the early thirteenth-century romance, *Ortnit*, in which the diminutive elf king Alberich encounters the hero Ortnit in the woods, where various struggles and trickery ensue between the two of them before Alberich goes on to aid

Ortnit in journeying to Tyre in order to win the hand of the beautiful daughter of Machorel, King of Jerusalem. This basic plot is clearly related to the plotline in *Huon de Bordeaux* in which Auberon aides Huon, not only in retrieving the teeth and beard hairs⁵ of the pagan ruler of Babylon, Admiral Gaudys, in order to return with them to Charlemagne and restore his tarnished reputation, but also in winning the Admiral's beautiful daughter, Esclarmonde. Though Shakespeare's Oberon does not provide assistance with the same sort of romantic quest, he nonetheless falls in with a tradition of fairy kings helping mortals to meet their match.

The observation that the fairy king acts as a matchmaker for the humans he encounters may not be very revealing in and of itself, but it does raise the more complex issue of how he interacts with and is viewed by members of the non-fairy world in these narratives. The fairy king is notably a variable character who is alternately represented as dark, threatening and potent and as a light, helpful character, fond of jests and jolly entertainment. Within the Germanic and French romances, this split between a friendly and harmless fairy king and a powerful and fearsome fairy king is most clearly located in his physical appearance. When Ortnit first meets Alberich, he mistakes him for a harmless child, but is quickly put in his place when the dwarf packs a very powerful punch that knocks him flat.⁶ The Auberon ('Oberon' in the Berners translation) of *Huon de Bordeaux* is described as 'but of .iii. fote, and crokyd shulderyd, but yet he hathe an aungelyke vysage, so that there is no mortall man that see the hym but that taketh grete pleasure

⁴ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, 'Introduction', pp. xxix–xxxi. Lee provides a more extensive account of not only the Germanic but the possible Welsh and Celtic origins of both the name and figure of Oberon the fairy king.

⁵ As has been noted elsewhere, this is the probable source for Benedick's reference to 'fetch you a hair off the Great Cham's beard', in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.1.251), a thing he would rather do than exchange three words with Beatrice.

⁶ *Ortnit and Wolfdietrich: Two Medieval Romances*, trans. J. W. Thomas (Columbia, SC, 1986), p. 8.

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to beholde his fase'.⁷ Later he is referred to as 'the fayrest creature that ever nature formed'.⁸

This seemingly contradictory state of being both a deformed hunchbacked dwarf and the fairest creature formed by nature extends to the contradictory nature of the fairy king's actions in relation to the humans he meets. The figure of Alberich, in *Ortnit* and elsewhere, is certainly the most playful incarnation of the fairy king and relates the most clearly to an impish folklore figure like the English Puck. In *Ortnit* he delights in playing tricks on the pagan emperor and others using his invisibility, and he is frequently a figure of humour and mirth. At the same time he is clearly a figure of great power. His woods have enough of a bad reputation that, when Ortnit returns to the court after spending a few days out in the woods meeting Alberich, everyone has practically given him up for dead. Not only does Alberich display unexpected physical strength but he is able to make whole armies materialize on a whim and aids in the slaughter of huge numbers of pagans in assisting Ortnit to win the woman he desires. There are also several moments when Alberich plays with the boundary between exercising his power or behaving benignly towards Ortnit, such as the occasion of their first meeting when he steals and puts on Ortnit's most prized possession, a magic ring from his mother, uses the ring to turn invisible and taunt and frighten the knight, but then quickly changes his mind and restores the ring to the knight once more along with an offer of friendship.

Shakespeare was unlikely to have known the Alberich of such Germanic legends, but many aspects of the Alberich in *Ortnit* crop up in the source Shakespeare was most likely familiar with in the character of Auberion in *Huon de Bordeaux*. Auberion is a decidedly less humorous character than Alberich, and it is with the Auberion of *Huon* that the fairy king acquires a greater air of gravitas and a noble classical and magical lineage as the child of Julius Caesar and the fairy of the 'privy isle'.⁹ All the same, there are distinct traces of the merry trickster Alberich in Auberion, who causes castles and other objects to appear or disappear in the forest in order to trick the senses of the men passing

through and who delights in feasting and entertaining in high style. More importantly, the ambiguity as to whether the fairy king is friendly or fearsome is heightened in *Huon*. The old man who first warns Huon about Auberion first expresses fear of a terrifying magical being who will prevent them from ever leaving the woods again and 'wyll make meruelous tempestes with thonder and lyghtenynges so that it shall seme to you that all the worlde sholde pereshe'.¹⁰ At the same time he indicates that the dwarf's charms are, in fact, impotent and insubstantial. Though Auberion can conjure up 'a grete rynnynge riuer, blacke and depe' before the travellers, still 'ye may passe it at your ease, and it shall not wete the fete of your horse for all is fantesey and enchauntmentes'.¹¹ Thus Auberion is a figure both potentially terrifying and completely harmless. The great black river suggests a dark and frightening side of the fairy king, while the insubstantiality of that river reduces the ominous dark threat to an almost laughable trick.

This dynamic of fearful threats mixed with harmless illusions continues in the scene when Huon first encounters Auberion. As predicted, angry that Huon and his company will not speak to him because they have been warned of the dangers of doing so,¹² the fairy king not only stirs up terrible storms but also the foreseen dark river before

⁷ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 63.

⁸ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 73. We learn that his short stature and disfigurement are attributable to the curse laid on him by a fairy who didn't receive an invitation to his birth, and that another made it up to him by ensuring that he would be considered the fairest creature on earth. There may or may not be some connection between the short stature of the Oberon figure and the sometimes diminutive descriptions of Shakespeare's fairies.

⁹ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 64.

¹¹ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 64.

¹² As Lee points out in his introduction to *Huon de Bordeaux*, p. xxxii, this prohibition of speaking to fairies is one that Shakespeare refers to in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Falstaff declares 'They are fairies. He that speaks to them shall die' (5.5.46). It is possible that this detail was inspired by *Huon*, though it was also a widespread folk belief according to Melchiori's note on the line in the Arden edition of *Merry Wives*.

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the hapless travellers. Yet his attacks and threats on the knight and his company range from the entertaining, almost comic, when he blows his horn and as a result the men 'hadde no powr to ryde any further but they began all to syng', to a serious threat to life and limb when Auberon orders his minions to 'go after them and slee them all, let none escape'.¹³ There is a fine line between bloodshed and song until Huon finally speaks to the fairy king and Auberon professes his love and friendship for the hero, placing the fairy king squarely on the side of right.

Indeed, it is worth noting that both the Alberich and Oberon incarnations of the fairy king not only play friendly roles towards humans but they also strongly take the side of right in ensuring that justice is fairly served. Alberich serves more than once to draw attention to wrongs committed in violation of a chivalric code of ethics, as in the instance when Ortnit's uncle kills innocent women in the storming of Tyre,¹⁴ while Auberon confronts Charlemagne in order to prevent him from unjustly hanging Huon, whom the fairy king sets free using his magic powers.¹⁵ Thus the character of the fairy king varies from a seemingly unstable and menacing one to a measured provider of justice.

Before looking at the way the multi-faceted Oberon of *Huon* emerges in Shakespeare's *Dream* it will be useful to look first at the way Oberon entered the English dramatic tradition prior to Shakespeare's play. Not only was Lord Berners's translation of the romance popular enough to have gone through three sixteenth-century editions, but Henslowe notes the performance of a play adaptation entitled *Hewen of Burdoche* in 1593, just a few years before the probable date of *Dream*.¹⁶ That play has unfortunately been lost, but there are a few other significant references to Oberon in the literature immediately preceding *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of these is the mention of Oberon in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where the sort of noble lineage established for him in *Huon* is both emphasized and given a contemporary political valence when he appears at the end of a long list of the highest lineage in fairy land in the book 'that hight, *Antiquitee of Faery lond*'¹⁷ which Guyon

peruses in Book Two. Oberon is listed as the penultimate figure and father of the fair queen Tanaquill or Glorian, and is a thinly veiled stand-in for Henry VIII.¹⁸

In addition to this rather lofty use of Oberon's name, the fairy king also appears as a character in a series of rather peculiar choruses or framing scenes in Robert Greene's play, *The Scottish History of James the Fourth* (1594). The Oberon of this play is first depicted in shadowy tones in a graveyard speaking with a man, Bohan, who has chosen to live among the tombs and shun the world of men. While the Oberon of *Huon de Bordeaux* professes that he loves the hero and will help him to make his way in the world by fulfilling his quest, the Oberon of Greene's play introduces himself as 'Oberon, King of Fairies, that loves thee because thou hatest the world'.¹⁹ The theme of the play itself, which the conversations between Oberon and Bohan frame, is about faithless love in which the King of Scotland attempts to kill his wife in order to take another woman as his lover, and Oberon's role in the play, rather than one of helpful matchmaker, like that of the Oberon and his predecessor Alberich in the romances, is one of detached and wryly amused observer as he watches the story of lust and betrayal unfold.

Yet, despite the darker overtones of the graveyard setting and his approval of Bohan's hatred of the world in response to the story of love gone dangerously awry which Bohan presents to the fairy king, Greene's Oberon seems concerned that he make clear that 'Oberon is king / Of quiet,

¹³ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Ortnit, p. 24.

¹⁵ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, pp. 258–9.

¹⁶ *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. Walter W. Greg (London, 1904), p. 16. For a succinct account of the many variations of the text of *Huon de Bordeaux* and its English publication, see Michael Murrin, 'Huon at the Castle of Adamant', *Modern Philology*, 100 (2003), 552–5.

¹⁷ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London, 2003), II.ix.60.

¹⁸ Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II.x.75. Oberon is also mentioned in connection with Huon at II.i.6.

¹⁹ Robert Greene, *The Scottish Historie of James the Fourth* (London, 1970), Induction, 76.

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pleasure, profit, and content.²⁰ Just as the Auberon of *Huon* saves the hero from an unjust hanging, so Greene's Oberon similarly saves the foolish clown, Slipper, from the noose, and thus functions to see that justice is served and the most blatantly comic character of the play does not meet a tragic end. He also harkens back to the humour and delight in trickery and illusion that we have already seen with Alberich and the Auberon of *Huon de Bordeaux*, but rather than making castles and rivers appear and disappear or entertaining knights with an elaborate banquet, as Auberon does in *Huon*, Greene's Oberon resorts frequently to putting on dances, 'jigs' and dumb shows intended to amaze and entertain both himself and his companion Bohan. In one notable moment Oberon turns from the main action of the play and comments 'Here see I good fond actions in thy jig, / And means to paint the world's inconstant ways; / But turn thine eyen, see which I command.'²¹ What follows is a dumb enactment of Semiramis in battle, with some brief explanation of how she fought after the death of Ninus and how her overthrow depicts the vanity of 'worldly pompe'. This portrayal of classical tragedy is presented and viewed with the same sort of detachment as the amusing dancing of the comic relief character Slipper and his brother the dwarf earlier in the play, and there is a very distinct sense in this scene of yet another Oberon character for whom the line between song and bloodshed is a relatively thin one.

Oberon's presentation of a 'jig' or brief entertainment alluding to Ninus and Semiramis in Greene's play may remind readers of the mechanicals' attempts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to present their scene at 'Ninny's tomb' (3.1.91) and is certainly a similarly incongruous – though significantly less sophisticated – presentation of a traditionally tragic scene in an over the top context.²² More notably, Oberon's expression of approval of and interest in the 'fond actions', the errors and foibles of love and politics presented in Greene's play, mirrors Puck's well-known utterance at the prospect of watching the errors and foibles of the four lovers in *Dream*: 'Shall we their fond pageant see? Lord, what fools these mortals be!' Thus, in

the earliest existing appearance of Oberon on the English stage, he is already associated with the position of a spectator of 'fond' mortals and a certain amusement or light attitude towards the potentially ruinous aspects of love and life among men and women.

2. PUCK AND OBERON

As we have seen, by the time Shakespeare began writing his own depiction of the fairy king in *Dream* the figure of Oberon had amassed a character of varied and even apparently conflicting facets – from his origins as a trickster dwarf to his more serious and noble but still changeful character in *Huon de Bordeaux*, to his role as detached observer in Greene's play. The fine line between malice and benevolence, between dark associations and a position as an arbiter of justice that has emerged from a close look at the precedents for Shakespeare's Oberon is readily apparent in the presentation of the fairy king in *Dream*. As Michael Taylor has suggested, this is an essential but sometimes overlooked dynamic in the play:

An awareness of the fairies' delightfulness, however, should not blind us to the suggestion of equivocation in their presentation. There seem to be fine lines drawn between fragile charm, impish mischief and trivial malice.²³

Indeed, there is not a clear cut answer to the question of exactly how dark or shady the 'king of shadows' (3.2.348), as Puck terms Oberon, is meant to be.

²⁰ Greene, *Scottish Historie*, Chorus I, 4–5.

²¹ Greene, *Scottish Historie*, Chorus VI, 1–3.

²² Whether Greene's mention of Ninus could have had any influence on Shakespeare's mentions of Ninus's tomb would be a matter of conjecture; however, the connection of such a scene with the term 'jig' in Greene's play might be interesting in light of C. L. Barber's conjecture that the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play in *Dream* could be considered a developed jig, a suggestion which Peter Holland highlights for consideration in the Oxford Classics edition of the play. See C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959), p. 154, n. 25; Holland, 'Introduction', p. 92.

²³ Michael Taylor, 'The Darker Purpose of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Studies in English Literature*, 9 (1969), 259–73.

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Shakespeare's Oberon is a potent king of the fairies, and we learn during his first encounter with Titania that in his anger, like the angry Oberon of *Huon de Bordeaux*, he has the power to affect the weather, causing killing fogs to creep up over the land until 'The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts / Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose' (2.1.107–8) and, as Brooks notes, Oberon's command to Puck, 'overcast the night; / The starry welkin cover thou anon / With drooping fog as black as Acheron' (3.2.356–8) is reminiscent of Oberon's power in *Huon* to conjure the black river in order to frustrate and control those wandering in his woods.²⁴

So Shakespeare's Oberon shares a darker cast with previous depictions of the fairy king, and he also shares with them a mischievous edge that leads, among other things, to the trick he plays on Titania and Bottom. What is different, however, about Shakespeare's fairy king is that he works as a part of a team in which many of the darker or more mischievous motives and actions are delegated and attributed to Puck, even if some of them may originate as Oberon's own ideas. The two characters spend a considerable amount of time on-stage together, almost acting as one character at times. Puck's role, though it doubtless owes much to English origins, looks back to the roots of Oberon's character in the trickster dwarf Alberich, parts of which still lingered in the representations of the fairy king in *Huon de Bordeaux*. Puck serves as the character to whom Oberon can delegate the task of fooling his wife and having fun with the mortals, things he wishes to happen and is entertained by but does not do himself. Puck is also the character to whom Shakespeare as a dramatist can delegate the task of being the one to make the errors and the injudicious moves that engender much of the humour and the mishap in the play while Oberon the fairy king can come in as the reassuring figure of temperance and justice who straightens everything out in the end.

This dynamic between the two characters is most evident in the two speeches that address the issue of just what sort of shadows the fairies of the play really are. Puck first urges Oberon to make haste so that they can finish their work by daylight:

My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,
For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,
And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger,
At whose approach ghosts, wand'ring here and there,
Troop home to churchyards; damnèd spirits all . . .
Already to their wormy beds are gone,
(3.2.379–85)

In an often quoted passage Oberon responds by claiming, as the Oberon of *Huon* and of Greene's *Scottish History* also do, that he is not an unsavoury sort of fairy tied up with night and black magic:

But we are spirits of another sort,
I with the morning's love have oft made sport,
And like a forester the groves may tread
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery red,
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
(3.2.389–94)

Oberon's defence is that they are not bound by the night and he thus attempts to distance himself from any association with damned spirits.²⁵ Here Puck is the one who injects a darker tone, just as when we first meet him he introduces a mildly dark humour when he describes his enjoyment in playing tricks on people by pulling stools out from under a woman, or spilling a gossip's drink. Puck is also the one elsewhere in the play who, though surely not a 'damned spirit' like the ghosts 'wand'ring here and there', still acts as the 'merry wanderer of the night'. He is the one who creates the majority of the trouble and unrest in the play, frightening the mechanicals with Bottom's transformation and causing the misunderstanding that creates the argument between the lovers which has the potential to become dangerous when they come to fight. Oberon, in contrast, plays the role, as he does

²⁴ See note in the Arden edition, ed. Brooks.

²⁵ In addition to the association of the Oberon in Greene's *Scottish History* with tombs, Katharine M. Briggs found one mention of a name similar to Oberon before Berners's translation of *Huon de Bordeaux*, a magician who was supposed to have conjured a spirit named 'Oberion', indicating that it is possible that this speech is intended to dispel any such old associations. *The Anatomy of Puck* (London, 1959), p. 114 and Appendix IV, pp. 255–61.

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in much of the play, of the fairy king correcting the darker impulses and descriptions of his servant while he himself supplies an image of a 'spirit of another sort' cavorting with the golden dawn and bringing order. David Bevington has commented on this dynamic, connecting it with potentially violent or darker tensions within the play as a whole: 'This debate between Oberon and Puck reflects a fundamental tension in the play between comic reassurance and the suggestion of something dark and threatening.'²⁶ What is revealing about viewing this 'debate' between Oberon and Puck in light of previous representations of Oberon is that it suggests the way many of the features that Shakespeare brings out in these two characters originated in the many characteristics of a single character, that of Oberon the fairy king. The multiple aspects of Oberon's character are still present in Shakespeare's Oberon but the addition of the Puck character allows a dialogue to open up between the two, which in turn enables Oberon to distance himself from traits he wants to downplay, such as his darker tendencies or his less dignified desires to play tricks on people or otherwise interfere with human affairs. It also enables him to indulge certain less justifiable desires, such as the desire to get the better of Titania in their quarrel, while allowing Puck to take the credit and the blame for the humour and the misfortune he occasions.

3. GLOBETROTTING FAIRIES

Though he makes much of being able to frolic with the dawn, Oberon does, in fact, seem to be a creature mostly tied to the night. After the four lovers have been arranged appropriately he and Titania agree that they will return the next night for the nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta but that in the meantime they will now depart:

Trip we after night's shade,
We the globe can compass soon,
Swifter than the wand'ring moon.

(4.1.95-7)

The implication is that they must go with the passing of this night and return with the next, following

the orbit of the moon's sphere. The comparative 'swifter' suggests something akin to Oberon's boast that he is able to stay and flirt with the dawn. It also nicely implies a hastening of time whereby Oberon and Titania can push the boundaries of the night itself just as the time of the play will move us into the following night swifter than the time it would really take the moon to travel back again.²⁷

This implied hastening or collapse of time also indicates a collapse of space or a hastening through space to new lands. Oberon and his queen are not only following the night but they are going to compass the globe, presumably following wherever night falls. If this is the case, then Shakespeare's Oberon is not only a figure who originates in the East or in 'Inde' but he visits that clime regularly as he follows the night around the globe, and the association with the East is one that he shares with previous incarnations of the fairy king as well. The Oberon of *Huon de Bordeaux* clearly resides in the East in his city of Momure, not far from the spot where he meets the knight Huon a few days' ride from Jerusalem and claims to be the son of Caesar and to have close family ties to a king of Egypt and Alexander the Great.²⁸ The Oberon mentioned in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is listed as the end of a line that begins with Elfin whom 'all India obeyed / And all that now America men call'.²⁹

Margo Hendricks notes these eastern origins for the previous incarnations of Oberon and also suggests that the Oberon of Greene's *Scottish History of*

²⁶ David Bevington, "'But We Are Spirits of Another Sort': The Dark Side of Love and Magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 13 (1975), 80-92. One impetus for Bevington's article is a response to the dark and violent reading of the play by Jan Kott, which, I tend to agree with Bevington and others, is too extreme a view of the play's delicately handled darker threads. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York, 1964).

²⁷ There are other echoes of this line in Hippolyta's opening speech, 1.1.7-11 and in the boast of the fairy who first speaks with Puck: 'I do wander everywhere / Swifter than the moon's sphere' (2.1.6-7).

²⁸ Lee, ed., *Boke of Duke Huon*, p. 74.

²⁹ Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II.x.72.5-6.

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James the Fourth is similarly tied to the East because he presents dumb shows depicting the Assyrian queen, Semiramis and other eastern figures, such as Cyrus of Persia. Hendricks claims that: 'Whether he appears in England, Scotland, or the outskirts of Jerusalem, Oberon enters each locale as an already "localised" (thus ethnic) entity.'³⁰ Though Hendricks is right in indicating that the East and India are important locations for each of these presentations of Oberon, her claim for Oberon as a consistently 'localized' figure misses the fact that he becomes increasingly less 'localized', less easy to pin down to a specific spot across the sources. The identity of an eastern other is still in play for the Oberon of Shakespeare's *Dream*, but in a very different way from that in play for the Auberon of *Huon*.

As noted above, the Oberon of *Huon de Bordeaux* has a specifically named eastern habitation in the city of Momure. He does travel, usually employing magic to go directly from one spot to another, whether from place to place in the Middle East, or from his homeland to France, in order to intervene directly in the affairs of mortal men. The narrative of the *Huon* romance is also very much one of the Western knight visiting the Eastern realm, with the visits from the Eastern Oberon being a result of that journey. However, even by the time Oberon is mentioned in Spenser, this dynamic has changed. Now, rather than Oberon being a fairy king clearly resident in the East, he is the descendent of Elfin who is ruler not only of India, but also of the Americas. Oberon himself is associated with the lineage of Spenser's Faerie Land, a realm that both places him in a literary and imaginary space, and allegorically connects him to the Tudor monarchy of England.³¹ The Oberon of Greene's play, despite the fact that his choice of subject for his dumb show may indicate some tie to the East, in fact resists any regional label, declaring himself 'of all the world / Tied to no place, though all are tied to me'.³² Nowhere in the play is any particular place of origin specified for Greene's Oberon, so there is no reason to question his self-definition as a citizen of the world, not localized in any way. The Oberon of Greene's play is additionally 'tied

to no place' even in terms of his location in the play. Within the play's setting Oberon and Bohan occupy the space of the graveyard separate from the action of the court, a nebulous place on the border between the living and the dead where they can philosophize about the tragic or foolish actions of the play's characters. Textually speaking, they also occupy the series of choruses that exist outside the main narrative, in a sense again 'tied to no place' and quite unlike the place of the Auberon in *Huon* who is located in a specified destination central to the narrative of the romance.

The fly-by-night compassing of the globe undertaken by Oberon and Titania in Shakespeare's *Dream* is also very unlike the Auberon of *Huon* and more like the Oberon of Greene's play, tied to no place in the world. Rather than having any clear 'habitation' in either India or the woods outside Athens, Oberon and his queen are travellers between and through these and perhaps other places as well. Like the graveyard in which the Oberon of *The Scottish History* appears, Oberon and his fellow fairies in *Dream* also inhabit the forest as a space separate, transitional and ill-defined – difficult to tie down but for its opposition to the world of Theseus's court.

This lack of 'local habitation' is a characteristic shared by other fairies in the play, and one which again ties Oberon and Puck closely together. Oberon's declaration in Act 4 that he and Titania will compass the globe 'swifter than the wand'ring moon' echoes lines from the first speech by an anonymous fairy in Act 2, scene 1:

Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,

³⁰ Hendricks, 'Obscured by Dreams', 48.

³¹ R. W. Desai, in his response to Hendricks, similarly points out that Oberon's ancestor is 'an ideal ruler who is the founder of England's royal line', and that this problematizes readings of the passage that seek to place it in an imperialist framework. 'England, the Indian Boy, and the Spice Trade in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *India's Shakespeare* (Newark, 2005).

³² Greene, *Scottish History*, Chorus 1, lines 6–7.

THE ORIGINS OF OBERON

Thorough flood, thorough fire:
I do wander everywhere
Swifter than the moon's sphere . . . (2.1.2–7)

Thus, from the very beginning, the fairy world is defined as one inhabited by moving creatures, unfixed, outpacing the moon in their global flight, and wandering 'everywhere' while belonging nowhere. The term 'wander', which the fairy repeats in applying it to himself when he answers Puck's initial query 'Wither wander you?' appears again when Puck describes himself as 'that merry wanderer of the night'. In Oberon's description of himself travelling, ever tripping 'after night's shade', he would seem to have a close connection with his assistant Puck as a fellow wanderer of the night, despite his protests being 'of another sort'. Indeed, in addition to its relation to 'Auberon' and 'Alberich', the name 'Oberon' has an alternative etymology in the Latin verb *oberrare*, 'to wander'.

Yet, despite its marked similarity to the first fairy's description of travelling faster than the moon, Oberon alters the description of his own travels so that it is not himself but the moon which is 'wand'ring', thus subtly suggesting that the fault lies not in himself but in the stars. Just as the errors of the fairy king – the tricks and slips and mistakes – are deflected onto Puck while Oberon emerges as the potent figure who sets everything right in the end, so the fairy king's errant ways are also deflected, making Puck and the other fairies the wanderers of the play; even the moon is a wanderer, while Oberon emphasizes his own power to circle the globe rather than his nightly position as wanderer.³³

Oberon is able to use Puck as a proxy for the actions of his own darker or less regulated impulses, and also as the intermediary between the fairy and the human world. This allows him to maintain a distance and separation between himself and the non-fairy world he influences. At the same time it is unclear exactly where the alternative to the real world, the fairy land of the play is located. It seems to be a part of the wood in Athens, but also somewhere in India. It contains features like

those of an English wood. One critic has suggested that the woods outside Athens in *Dream* can be viewed as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense of the term.³⁴ If the woods do function to some extent as a kind of through-the-looking-glass counterpart to the many different social sites of the play's Athens, or even to various sites in Shakespeare's historical world, they do so also as a heterotopia in the much simpler sense of representing many places at once. Shakespeare's Oberon, in his compassing of the globe and his multi-regional associations, exploits the power of being tied to no place suggested by the Oberon of *The Scottish History*.

This sense of Oberon's detachment from a particular place partly suggests what R. W. Desai, in his criticism of what he sees as Margo Hendricks' over-reliance on a post-imperialist view of India in *Dream*, calls an era 'when Elfin, king of the fairies, ruled three dominions – India, Britain, and America – with equal justice and impartiality'.³⁵ This is not to say that many of the issues that Hendricks raises – race, exoticism, otherness – play no part in the references to India in *Dream*, but that, rather than setting up a dynamic based on imperial power or a direct struggle between East and West, the play creates a realm in which both East and West exist within the same sphere. It is uncertain where the power over this global, overlapping realm lies. It is a place continually explored by the wandering fairies but never fully defined or controlled. Just as Oberon is from both every place and no place, he exerts his power over both every

³³ In light of the way he refuses to describe himself as a 'wanderer', Oberon's response to Puck defining them as 'spirits of another sort' could be read as partly a defensive distancing from the ghosts 'wand'ring here and there' that Puck describes (3.2.382–9).

³⁴ Laurel Moffatt, 'The Woods as Heterotopia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 76 (2004), 182–7. Moffatt quotes Foucault's definition of heterotopias as real places that function 'like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.

³⁵ Desai, 'England, the Indian Boy', p. 142.

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LAURA AYDELOTTE

place in the shadows of the night and, with the rising of the sun, no place at all.

In comparing the fairy realm of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* with the *Huon de Bordeaux* romance and others, Michael Murrin has suggested that Spenser makes a break from the realm of story to that of allegory when he makes a break with previous romantic tradition by ceasing to make clear how fairyland exists continuously in our world with 'precise itineraries and geographical locations for Eastern adventures'. Time and space become vague and he 'drops the normal world from his plot'.³⁶ It is, according to Murrin, at least partly due to this vagueness of time and space and discontinuity with the geography of the real world that Spenser's poem can become an allegorical mirror for Spenser's England and the West and which led to Coleridge's equation of 'fairyland with mental space independent of all particular space and time'.³⁷ Shakespeare does not go quite so far as Spenser in dropping the 'normal world', which is still a marked part of the play in the world of the court at Athens, but he does isolate his fairy king from any direct interaction with the 'real' world of the play, placing him in a geographically indeterminate space constantly in flux between East and West, as he and Titania themselves seem to be in their nightly circling of the globe.

We have now seen the way Shakespeare shaped and altered his sources in *Huon de Bordeaux* and related texts with regard to both Oberon's character and his geographic location. In both cases Shakespeare has multiplied what was present in the original. The single character of the fairy king becomes a partnership between Oberon and Puck, while the single and readily identifiable habitation of that fairy king in the East becomes an amorphous amalgam of Athens, England, India and the hard-to-define fairy realm. However, these changes are each to different effect. The reattribution of some of Oberon's attributes in the source texts to Puck unbraids some of the complexity and contradictions of the earlier fairy kings and allocates Oberon's positions as merry trickster and potent authority to two different figures. The multiplying of places, on the other hand, creates

increased complexity. Shakespeare's changes create a more manageable, streamlined set of characters but a more uncontrolled sense of place.

Why did Shakespeare go to the trouble of unravelling and repositioning the different strands that made up the earlier Au/Oberon? Why would the playwright have chosen to increase the stability of Oberon as a character by assigning his mischievous parts to his sidekick Puck? Why would he transform his Oberon into a more unstable global figure perpetually on the go rather than simply assign him a home in an eastern city like the Auberon of the romance? There are many possible ways of answering these questions. One straightforward answer to the last question is that Shakespeare wanted *Dream* to be, at least in the fairy portion, an international play, one that encompassed a range of places and brought together all the various associations attending on those places. As such, there might be fruitful future avenues of inquiry into the way an international *Dream* could be compared with other plays, such as *The Tempest* in which the play's location also evokes a range of potential geographic locales, from the Americas to Africa to India.

Within *Dream* itself one potential way to read the decision to separate and distil the parts of Au/Oberon's character into the Oberon/Puck pair while at the same time emphasizing the global and wandering nature of the fairies is in terms of how this allows the play to make a subtle statement about worldly power. As we have seen, the deflection of the fairy king's trickster nature and less seemly and dignified characteristics onto the character Puck, allows the Oberon of *Dream* to maintain control over his self-presentation as both a noble and potent figure. The changes from the source texts allow Shakespeare to present an Oberon who can preserve a stable and firm presence as the mastermind who ensures that everything comes out right in the end while using a second character to stir things up and cause the mishaps that help propel the play's plot. The addition of the Puck character also lends

³⁶ Michael Murrin, 'Fairyland', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto, 1990), pp. 296–8.

³⁷ Murrin, 'Fairyland', p. 298.