Titania's Dream: three choreographic 'Midsummer Night's Dreams' of the twentieth century

A Midsummer Night's Dream is by far William Shakespeare's most frequently adapted comedy on ballet stages worldwide. Several of its themes and situations are particularly well suited for a choreographic transposition, such as the wide range of depicted emotions and the triple wedding at the end. In fact, the play includes more dancing than any other work by Shakespeare,[1] and Peter Holland even compares its entire action to a dance.[2]

This paper analyzes three significant ballet adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by George Balanchine (New York City Ballet, 1962), Frederick Ashton (Royal Ballet, 1965) and John Neumeier (Hamburg Ballet, 1977). It argues that the first two works are deeply rooted in the structures and storytelling devices of nineteenth-century ballets, whereas the third work is an example of a new genre of ballet which profoundly engages with, and comments on, the literary source.[3] Although in any non-verbal adaptation of a literary text some aspects of the source will be lost or simplified, other elements are added which can shed new light on the text. The use of dance and music allows choreographers to reveal and emphasize different underlying elements of the source play. It is Neumeier in particular who, by going beyond nineteenth-century storytelling modes, manages to transpose the complexity of Shakespeare's play into his own medium even as he reimagines some of its characters and situations.

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[1] Cf. Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance* (London, 1993), p. 25.

[2] Peter Holland, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Oxford, 1994), p. 65.

[3] In my Ph.D. thesis, I have defined this genre at length and called it 'literature ballet'. Cf. Iris Julia Bührle, *Literatur und Tanz: Die choreographische Adaptation literarischer Werke in Deutschland und Frankreich vom 18. Jahrhundert bis heute* (Würzburg, 2014).

One lens through which these differences can be examined is that of the representation of female protagonists. All three choreographers place particular emphasis on Titania and offer new perspectives on the gender relations in the source. Each choreographer's approach to Shakespeare's play is revealed in the way Titania – and to a lesser extent Hippolyta – corresponds to or deviates from the heroines of nineteenth-century ballets. By examining the different interpretations and placing the three works in their wider ballet historic context, this paper will broaden the perspective of Laura Levine's discussion of Balanchine's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In her article, Levine argues that the choreographer deliberately erased the history of violence against women which leads to the seemingly harmonious couplings in the end, as well as the theme of sexual coercion in the play. She also points out that ballet has the power to create associations with figures who do not actually appear on stage by purely visual means.[4] This paper will demonstrate that the elision of that particular history and the play's darker sides as well as the association of Titania and Hippolyta with powerful female figures from the history of dance and other arts is common to all three ballets studied here, and even to most ballet versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. An analysis of the gender dynamics in each ballet will be combined with a broader reflection on each choreographer's transposition of the source. This will reveal how a closer reading of the play, and the creation of individualized figures and new storytelling modes, allow choreographers not only to subtly transpose a very complex text into a visual medium, but also to open up new possibilities for the interpretation of the source.

The play form of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features various examples of female resistance to male domination, but also the crushing of this resistance. On the one hand, Helena and

[4] Thus, Balanchine's Hippolyta and Titania evoke representations of Venus and Diana in Botticelli's paintings and in earlier ballets. Cf. Laura Levine, 'Balanchine and Titania: love and the elision of history in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare Survey 65* (2012), 110-20.

Hermia successfully fight to obtain the husband they want, overruling both the will of Hermia's father and, with the help of Puck's flower, that of Demetrius.[5] On the other hand, the play starts with the announcement of a marriage that was brought about by force, and Oberon eventually humiliates Titania, and puts down her rebellion. In spite of the apparent harmony of the weddings and fairy dance in Act 5, the final concord is only achieved by the breaking of both Hippolyta's and Titania's resistance. Skiles Howard has questioned the equality in the concluding dance of the fairy sovereigns in which, according to her, Oberon asserts his 'masculine surveillance and control'.[6] By manipulating the actions and affections of his wife and the human lovers in the wood, and winning the quarrel over the Indian boy, Oberon quickly overcomes his initial defeat and regains his superior position in the fairy realm. As for Theseus, his authority over Athenian society is never questioned in the play.

Ballet versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have painted a rather different picture, and most of them focus on the fairy world. In ballets, this realm is usually dominated by female fairies, and the fairy queen often plays a more important role than her husband. It is no coincidence that the first known adaptation of the play by Marius Petipa was a one-act ballet called *Titania* (Saint Petersburg, 1866).[7] In the nineteenth century, female dancers had

[5] The fact that Demetrius is forced to love a person that previously repelled him usually receives less attention than the violation of Titania's will – one might argue that it is not only female characters who are being manipulated in this play. Worse still, Demetrius remains under the influence of the magic flower and has to marry the maid he so vigorously rejected earlier.

[6] Howard associates Titania and her communal round with an equitable 'popular tradition', Oberon with 'elite culture' and courtly dances in which the gentleman guides and dominates the lady. She argues that Oberon eventually restores 'the hierarchy and authority of the cosmic dance'. Cf. Skiles Howard, *The Politics of courtly dancing in Early Modern England* (Amherst, 1998), pp. 71-79.

[7] There was an earlier Italian ballet by Giovanni Casati entitled *Shakespeare, ovvero il Sogno di una notte d'estate* which Rodney Stenning Edgecombe mentions in *The Edinburgh Companion to Shakespeare and the*

definitely overthrown the male supremacy that dated from the days of the court ballet. Due to the evolution of ballet technique and costumes, which had traditionally been long and heavy for women, female dancers acquired a new freedom of movement. The development of the pointe shoe and of flying devices allowed them to literally hover above both the floor and their male colleagues. In the so-called 'Romantic' ballet, the ballerina became the unchallenged centre of attention, and ballets were often named after their heroines.
Many 'Romantic' ballets featured long symmetrical passages danced by a female corps de ballet which often represented supernatural creatures. These nearly plotless ensemble scenes reappeared in the ballets that Marius Petipa authored and co-authored at the Russian court in the late nineteenth century, such as *La Bayadère*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake*. Petipa also choreographed a *Midsummer Night's Dream* ballet in 1876. In the early twentieth century, the renowned Ballets Russes choreographer Michel Fokine created both a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a plotless ballet entitled *Les Elfes* (New York, 1924), which focused exclusively on the fairies.

Fokine's *Les Sylphides*, a neo-Romantic ballet circling around female spirits in white gauze skirts and one male 'poet' (Paris, 1909), was one of the first plotless ballets of the twentieth century. This genre was brought to a peak with the works of George Balanchine. The Russian-born choreographer, who had danced in Petipa's ballets in Saint Petersburg and created works for the Ballets Russes, subsequently became the co-founder of the New York City Ballet.

Arts. He states that 'next to nothing is known' about it and that '[e]ven its title offers no guarantee of fidelity to its source'. In fact, this ballet was not based on Shakespeare's comedy but on a comic opera entitled *Le Songe d'une nuit d'ete* by Ambroise Thomas (libretto by Joseph-Bernard Rosier and Adolphe de Leuven, premiered at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in 1850). The opera and ballet represented a fictional anecdote from Shakespeare's life which included the playwright himself, Queen Elisabeth, and a character called Falstaff. Cf. Giovanni Casati, *Shakespeare, ovvero il Sogno di una notte d'estate, ballo in quattro parti* (Naples, 1855).

Among the extensive corpus of Balanchine's creations, most of which were plotless ballets, his *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a rare example of a ballet based on a literary source. Balanchine claimed that the main inspiration for his ballet was the incidental music which Felix Mendelssohn wrote for a production of the play in 1843 before the King of Prussia, and which included the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture Mendelssohn had composed in 1826.[8] The availability of this music, which features in most ballet versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is doubtlessly a major reason why a large number of choreographers have chosen to adapt this play. Since the incidental score is not sufficient to accompany a full-length ballet, Balanchine added more music by Mendelssohn which was not written for the play.

In his score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mendelssohn focused chiefly on the fairy world, and so did Balanchine. The first half of the ballet is set in the fairy wood, the second half in a pavilion erected in that same wood. The choreographer cut the first act of the play, which takes place in Theseus's palace, and begins directly with the opening scene in the wood, followed by Oberon and Titania's quarrel over the Indian boy in Act 2, Scene 1 of the play. Unlike in the play, the boy is visible, but the motives behind the struggle and Titania's unwillingness to part with him are not. Since ballet knows no reported actions, it is rather complicated to represent past events – such as Titania's friendship with the dead mother of the Indian boy – in this genre.[9] In Balanchine's quarrel scene, the quick gestures of the fairy sovereigns are based on traditional ballet mime. Oberon and Titania remain graceful and dignified, and they strike various majestic poses. After a brief interruption by three of the mechanicals, the same scene is repeated in even faster motion. The repetition, acceleration and stylization of the mime scene create an alienation effect which sets the spirits apart from the human lovers.

[8] Cf. www.nycballet.com/Ballets/M/A-Midsummer-Night%E2%80%99s-Dream.aspx, viewed 9 August 2016.

[9] Cf. Levine, 'Balanchine and Titania', p. 114.

The ballet's structure, which consists of brief mime scenes and long non-narrative dance passages, remains close to the way nineteenth-century ballets are presented today (although the mime passages were originally much longer).[10] Challenging soli and dances for two, three or four dancers alternate with predominantly female, mostly symmetrical corps de ballet (ensemble) scenes. If it were not for the children, the fluttering arms and the wings in the first act that identify the dancers as fairies or insects, these scenes could be parts of Balanchine's plotless works. The soloists' displays of bravura technique are only vaguely related to the characters that perform them – if they are identified at all. Various unnamed figures, such as Titania's 'Cavalier', appear out of nowhere and seem to have no other function than to carry a woman or perform an elaborate pas de deux. The second act is a long divertissement which is very loosely linked to the first act. In the opening scene, the three ballerinas and the women in the corps de ballet are dressed almost identically in tutus; the plot context is eclipsed. The main pas de deux, which supposedly embodies 'ideal, untroubled love',[11] is executed by an unidentified couple. Apart from the brief final scene in the wood, the second act, which resembles Balanchine's own plotless ballets, could stand on its own as a work of 'pure' dance.

[10] Marian Smith has argued, for example, that around half of the Paris Opera's 1841 ballet *Giselle* consisted of mime passages. Cf. Marian Smith, *Ballet and Opera in the age of 'Giselle'* (Princeton, 2000), p. 175.

[11] http://balanchine.com/a-midsummer-nights-dream/, viewed 22 December 2016. 'Ideal' probably means remote from too literal human feelings, and free from any link to the play's named characters, since the first pas de deux between Hermia and Lysander expresses harmonious human love in a more emotional way. Robert Garis discusses some of Balanchine's pas de deux 'deeper inside the idiom of classical ballet, in which the male dancer makes no expressive gestures toward the ballerina but is virtually invisible. He appears to be – and Balanchine has said as much – only the instrument by means of which the woman can dance on a larger scale than she could by herself. Yet these abstract pas de deux generate great emotional power in Balanchine's hands, and they are the locus of his highest art.' Robert Garis, *Following Balanchine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 45. For Garis, the second act pas de deux of *Midsummer Night's Dream* is an example of this type; the other examples he mentions are taken from plotless ballets. The emotion created by the beauty of these pieces of choreography is unrelated to action or character.

It has been stated that it is precisely this lack of narrative logic which constitutes Balanchine's genius as a choreographer of story ballets,[12] and that his *Midsummer Night's Dream* is 'possibly the greatest narrative ballet of all time'.[13] This seems questionable considering how little Balanchine engaged with the themes or even the action of Shakespeare's play, which he greatly simplified. Rodney Edgecombe states: 'Balanchine lets the exigencies of dance triumph over plot. What on earth is one to make of the ad hoc cavalier who steps into Oberon's slippers after the quarrel beyond the fact that Balanchine hasn't properly understood the play and needs a partner, come hell or high water, for his *pas de deux*?'[14] For Balanchine, the architecture of his danced scenes was doubtlessly more important than the coherence of the action. Like many nineteenth-century choreographers, he bent the play to his choreographic needs and habits instead of creating a structure and choreography that spring from the play's protagonists and situations. This approach informs the way the characters are represented and relate to each other in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Balanchine seems little interested in giving depth to his protagonists, most of whom remain close to ballet stereotypes. The Amazon Queen Hippolyta, for instance, darts through the woods with soaring *grand jetés* (jumps) and turns series of *fouettés* (pirouettes) in a way which recalls ballet classics such as *Sylvia* and the *Diana and Actaeon* pas de deux. Her hounds make menacing bull-like gestures and rather resemble the fighting mice in *The*

[12] Anita Finkel proclaims that the pas de deux of the two unnamed figures in the second act 'represents the harmonious and complete reconciliation of all the lovers […]. Everything that was disjunction in the other couplings – height, spirit, nobility, devotion – is clarified and corrected here. Not only are the ballerina and her partner enlightened, they have never been confused.' Anita Finkel, '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *Reading dance*, ed. Robert Gottlieb (New York, 2008), p. 172. Nothing, however, distinguishes this pas de deux from numerous others in Balanchine's plotless works.

[13] Finkel, '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*', p. 168.

[14] Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, 'Shakespeare, Ballet and Dance', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Shakespeare and the Arts*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett, Adrian Streete and Ramona Wray (Oxford, 2011), p. 212.

Nutcracker. Both Titania and Hippolyta evoke the dominant but non-individualized ballerina figures in nineteenth-century ballets. Oberon and Titania do not dance a pas de deux together and their changing emotions are expressed through basic traditional ballet mime; their dance style remains lofty and controlled throughout the ballet. Oberon sends Puck off to fetch the flower, but it only occurs to him when he has it in his hands that he could use it to punish Titania (he taps his finger against his temple, which means 'idea' in traditional ballet mime). The relationships between the humans are sketched in broad brushstrokes, with fairly conventional gestures of sadness, despair, love, rejection, and confusion. The mechanicals get only as much stage time as necessary to introduce Bottom and make him disappear when he is no longer needed. The lovers are identified through the colours of their costumes which reveal from the beginning who should be together. We do not get any insight into the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta: their only contribution to the action consists of two short appearances in the first act. Theseus briefly witnesses the initial dispute of the four lovers, which here takes place in the wood, and leaves with a gesture of impatience. At the end of the act, he blesses the reconciled lovers, has an idea (as his finger tapping at his temple indicates), falls on his knees and proposes to Hippolyta. Unlike in the play, the wedding is not planned from the beginning, but it suddenly occurs to Theseus that if everyone else wants to marry, he should maybe do the same. All three couples appear in the second act as interchangeable leads of the divertissement.

The ballet concludes with a short scene in the wood where harmony seems restored and which echoes the opening scene. After Oberon and Titania's exit at opposite sides of the stage, Puck sweeps the floor – as in the play, where he explains: 'I am sent with broom before/ To sweep the dust behind the door' (5.2.19-20)[15] – and flies away.[16] Thus, special emphasis is placed on Puck, who opens and closes the ballet.[17]

[15] Shakespeare's works are quoted from William Shakespeare, *The complete works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd edition (Oxford, 2005).

Balanchine does not explore the darker sides of the play, and his work is as well behaved as a nineteenth-century ballet or Victorian productions of the play in the theatre. He eliminates the potential eroticism of Titania's affair with Bottom: the ass-headed young man, who remains rather cute as he follows Titania on all fours, is more interested in a handful of ferns than in the fairy queen. After making him dance with her, she eventually goes to bed alone while Bottom sits on the floor. The conflicts between the generations and the sexes are hardly visible. After Titania wakes up and quickly pushes Bottom away, she immediately hands the boy over to Oberon, who does not even seem to ask for him. Hippolyta delightedly accepts Theseus's spontaneous marriage proposal – there is no trace of her being 'wooed […] with [his] sword' (1.1.16).[18] In the ballet, the excessive rudeness of the two men towards the unloved women who pursue them and their sudden murderous hatred in the wood are more amusing than threatening. The comedy in Shakespeare's play also finds echoes in Balanchine's portrayal of Bottom and Puck, for whom he creates particularly original movement vocabulary.

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[16] Rodney Edgecombe suggests that in the play, Robin clears the floor for the dance of the fairies, but in the ballet, his sweeping occurs only after the end of the dancing and apparently corresponds to the play's epilogue. Cf. Edgecombe, 'Shakespeare, Ballet and Dance', p. 201.

[17] He is the first named character to appear in the ballet. In Shakespeare's work, he opens the action in the fairy wood and closes the play.

[18] One might argue that in Shakespeare's play, Hippolyta is completely reconciled with her fate by the time the action begins, but since Theseus conquered her by force, his name was linked to the betrayal of numerous women, and their son, Hippolytus, was doomed to die tragically following a curse from his own father, Shakespeare's choice of that mythological couple was probably not supposed to imply cloudless harmony. The unhappy outcome of Theseus's and Hippolyta's marriage jars somewhat with the idea that the play was written for an aristocratic wedding. On the dark elements of the Theseus myth which overshadow the comedy cf. Peter Holland, 'Theseus' shadows in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare Survey 47* (1994), 139-52.

Balanchine's ballet is a sophisticated danced fairytale. The choreographer invented impressive tableaux of the fairy wood and the ducal wedding, but did not try to dig below the surface of Shakespeare's play. Balanchine doubtlessly put most of his creative effort into the long sequences of 'pure' dancing in which he could display his choreographic skill and showcase his dancers' technique. He eliminated numerous elements from Shakespeare's play and related his ballet to other works in the history of dance and art, as Levine has suggested: 'this is one of the tensions of Balanchine, that while the ballets' "stories" may eclipse various elements in their sources, the forms themselves are virtually citational, acknowledging the various traditions they quote.'[19] Balanchine's use of traditional storytelling devices and character constellations influences his depiction of the gender relations in the ballet.

As in the majority of nineteenth-century ballets and Balanchine's own works, the female dancers are very important in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. All the fairies are women and children, and in the second act, the female group dancers outnumber the men. In the pas de deux, the ballerinas are set off by their partners. The all-male scenes between the mechanicals are reduced to a minimum. Therefore, the visual presence of women is far greater than in Shakespeare's play. Titania is never really humiliated or subdued, and the scenes in her bower are key passages of the first act.[20] Oberon's dancing is almost limited to one scene in the wood in which he performs a number of short, highly virtuosic soli among a group of female butterflies and children. Theseus only appears very briefly in the first act and he does not dance. Hippolyta is shown triumphant in the woods, even though she is later integrated into the symmetrical male-female pattern of the courtly divertissement: instead of soaring independently among her hounds, she now relies on the support of Theseus. However, her

[19] Cf. Levine, 'Balanchine and Titania', p. 119.

[20] According to Nancy Dalva, the description of Titania's bower was one of Balanchine's favourite passages of the play. Cf. Nancy Dalva, 'We can dream, can't we?' *danceviewtimes*, 4.17 (1 May 2006), on http://archives.danceviewtimes.com/2006/Spring/05/nycb1.html, viewed 15 November 2016.

husband kneels before her and lifts her, thus allowing her to attain even greater heights in her jumps, a symbol of a harmonic marriage or ballet partnership in which the woman sparkles by using the strength of a self-effacing man. This is a constellation which, if it may not apply to Hippolyta's marriage in the play, is echoed in various couples in Shakespeare's comedies, perhaps including the relationship of Demetrius and Lysander with their strong-willed brides.

Three years after Balanchine, Frederick Ashton created his ballet *The Dream* for the celebration of Shakespeare's 400th birthday in 1964. Ashton was inspired by Tyrone Guthrie's 1937 production of the play at the Old Vic, which featured the dancer/choreographer/actor Robert Helpmann as Oberon, Vivien Leigh as Titania, and choreography by Ninette de Valois, the founder of the Royal Ballet. *The Dream* evokes Victorian productions of the play, in which the fairies often appeared as 'a full-scale female *corps de ballet* dressed in white',[21] and nineteenth-century fairy drawings. Ashton focused even more on the fairy world than Balanchine: he condensed Shakespeare's play into one act which is set in the wood, using only the incidental music which Mendelssohn wrote for the play. He eliminated Theseus and Hippolyta and just kept the four lovers from the human sphere. Ashton's fairies are exclusively female, like the spirits in many Romantic ballets.

Like Balanchine, Ashton starts with a brief corps de ballet scene, followed by Titania and Oberon's quarrel over the Indian boy. If Balanchine's fairy king and queen remain aloof and show little emotional interest in the boy – Oberon wants him as a cape-carrier that will allow him to appear even more regal – Ashton's couple looks like a pair of human parents fighting over their child. They physically struggle over the boy, whom Titania embraces like a protective mother, and both try to draw him to their side until he falls on the floor and cries. Ashton's scene is less stylized and more choreographed than Balanchine's: the fairy sovereigns kick their legs in the air and confront each other with opposed *arabesques* (a pose

[21] Peter Holland, 'Introduction', in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, p. 25.

in which the dancer stands on one leg and lifts the other up behind him or her) and *battements* (the dancer stands on one leg and kicks the other forward) while they shift forwards and backwards, which visualizes their changing position in the argument. The passage is a mixture of dancing and specifically composed mime. Ashton repeatedly uses mime, for instance when Oberon puts his hands to his heart to comment on Hermia and Lysander's love or when Puck imagines the bull or 'meddling monkey' (2.1.181) Titania might fall in love with.

Ashton's work, which contains various divertissements, is anchored in the tradition of nineteenth-century ballet. The symmetrical corps de ballet scenes of fairies recall the second acts of *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841), as well as Petipa's female ensembles. Ashton also quotes a pose from Jules Perrot's 1845 *Pas de quatre*. However, Ashton places special emphasis on the characterization of his figures, especially Oberon and Titania. If Balanchine chooses not to give a pas de deux to his fairy sovereigns, Ashton's duet for them becomes the centrepiece of the ballet. It has been suggested that this passage marks the reconciliation of the fairy sovereigns through Titania's submission,[22] but it rather expresses harmony and companionship, as becomes apparent in the parallel and mirrored movements. On the one hand, the fairy queen repeatedly affirms her independence: she strives and bends in the opposite direction, ducks away from Oberon in a supported arabesque or hops away from him, obliging him to follow her. On the other hand, Titania sinks into Oberon's arms and lays her head on his shoulder, but he also lifts her high above his head. Supported by Oberon, Titania draws perfect circles on the floor with her foot, which might allude to her association with communal round-dances and to the link between circular forms and harmony in the play.[23] In one of the most emblematic poses of the pas de deux, they execute an *arabesque penchée* (both dancers stand on one leg and lean forward, lifting the other leg up high behind

[22] Cf. David Vaughan, *Frederick Ashton and his ballets* (London, 1999), p. 341.

[23] Thus, for instance, the fairy queen invites Oberon to 'patiently dance in our round' (2.1.140).

them) in which they rely on each other for their precarious balance. They hold hands in this position, which evokes Titania's suggestion that they bless the wedded couples 'Hand in hand with fairy grace' (5.2.29) – in the ballet, however, their own relationship is the centre of attention. In the final moments of the duo, Oberon, who previously disturbed Titania's slumber, cradles and protects his sleeping wife. The ballet ends with the fairy sovereigns' tender embrace.

The portrayal and confusion of the lovers in Ashton's *Dream* is highly comical and spiced with parodies of conventional ballet mime, for instance Lysander's gesture of despair when Hermia forbids him to lie down next to her. Unlike Balanchine, who merely sends his Lysander offstage to pick flowers for his beloved, Ashton takes up the implicit threat for Hermia's chastity in this scene, but he transforms it into an innocuous and funny moment. As in the play, the humans and their quarrels are a spectacle for the fairies, who watch their surprising behaviour with amazement.

The brief appearance of the mechanicals with their ungraceful jumps and running movements in the fairy wood is a welcome entertainment for Puck, even though there is no sign that they are rehearsing a play. Ashton makes his transformed Bottom dance on pointe, an idea which according to Alan Brissenden inspired Peter Brook to put his Bottom into rather clunky hoof-like boots with flat tips in his seminal 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play.[24] Ashton's Bottom performs a pounding solo which puts ballet conventions of light-

[24] Cf. Alan Brissenden, 'Shakespeare and dance: dissolving boundaries' in *Shakespeare without boundaries: essays in honor of Dieter Mehl*, ed. Christa Jansohn, Lena Cowen Orlin and Stanley Wells (Newark, 2011), p. 102. A recording of the production in the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon reveals that Bottom did indeed tap, hop and stamp around in his shoes in a way which rather evokes Widow Simone's clog dance in Ashton's *La Fille mal gardée* (1960), a role that was also created for a man. Brook's Bottom walks with his feet turned outward like a ballet dancer, but never attempts to rise 'on point'.

footed nineteenth-century sylphs on their head. He also dances a pas de deux with Titania which comically juxtaposes her daintiness and his clumsiness. The fairies adorn him with flowers under Oberon's amused gaze; however, Bottom seems little interested in Titania's charms. Puck, who is characterized by his airy jumps, is both comic himself, for instance when he imitates the foolish humans, and he creates comic confusion, which, as in Balanchine, is punished by a kick in the pants from Oberon.

Like Balanchine, Ashton establishes a strong visual presence of women in the exclusively female ensemble scenes and in the bower scene, which lends itself perfectly to a balletic transposition. Titania's relationship with Oberon is at the centre of the ballet, and they both have extensive danced passages, first individually or with other protagonists and then together. In their final pas de deux, Oberon uses partnering techniques that evolved from the nineteenth century onwards in order to lift Titania and make her fly. This evokes her kinship with the female spirits dominating so-called 'Romantic' ballets who hovered weightlessly across the stage, hardly seeming to touch the floor with the tips of their toes.

In 1977, John Neumeier chose a different approach to the source in his *Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Hamburg Ballet. Neumeier's two-act ballet represents almost the entire action of Shakespeare's play, thus giving more weight to its human protagonists. The ballet is set in two places – Theseus's court and the fairy wood – which are peopled by courtiers, fairies and the mechanicals. For each group, Neumeier created specific movement styles, and the spheres are further differentiated through the sets, costumes, lighting and music. This corresponds to the different linguistic styles of the groups in the play. The court scenes take place in the nineteenth century to Mendelssohn's incidental music. The passages in the fairy wood, with their glittering silver costumes, stylized sets and music by György Ligeti, have a more modern aspect. The mechanicals appear both in the aristocratic and the supernatural sphere, accompanied by their down-to-earth street organ. Possibly inspired by Peter Brook, Neumeier

doubled Hippolyta and Titania, Theseus and Oberon, and Philostrate and Puck. Thus, the choreographer emphasized the parallels between the different worlds which are implicit in the play.

Like Balanchine's and Ashton's adaptations, Neumeier's work evokes nineteenth-century ballet history, especially in the wedding divertissement. However, the grotesque antimasque of the mechanicals breaks the solemn atmosphere of the Petipa-like *grand pas* (a number of dances that showcase the technical skill of the main performers). Unlike in Balanchine, Neumeier's three couples retain their individuality, and their diverse personalities remain clearly recognizable in this scene. The fairies are no sylphs clad in fluttering gauze skirts, and there are no children. They are adult men and women wearing skin-tight overalls and caps that recall Ashton's *Monotones* (1965), and they quote a pose from Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928). The cross-dressed Thisbe resembles the women in Vaslav Nijinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* (1913).

If the nineteenth century belonged to the women, the twentieth century saw a new rise of the male dancers, a development that began with celebrities like Vaslav Nijinsky. Moreover, Brook's 1970 production of the play set a precedent for introducing androgynous fairies of both sexes. In Neumeier's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the gender imbalance in the ensemble scenes of the earlier ballets is reduced: his fairies are danced by men and women, and he gives ample space to the scenes at Theseus's court and among the mechanicals. However, Neumeier was also influenced by the works of choreographers such as John Cranko who, in his innovative 'literature ballets', focused on the psyche and the evolution of the characters, especially the female protagonists.[25] Neumeier's *Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of a large number of psychological 'literature ballets' he has created in the course of his career.

[25] During his time as a dancer of the Stuttgart Ballet from 1963 to 1969, Neumeier witnessed the creation of John Cranko's *Onegin* (1965/1967) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1969). In both ballets, the choreographer devotes

Neumeier characterizes his protagonists essentially in choreographic terms. Unlike in Balanchine's version, it is not the dress of the four lovers, but their style of movement which indicates affinities in personality and shows who should be together. Thus, Neumeier questions the assumption of their interchangeability.[26] There is some mild comedy in Neumeier's portrayal of the lovers, especially the bespectacled Helena who desperately tries to charm the stiff Demetrius. All the main couples follow a similar trajectory from confusion and discord to harmony (although the conflict between Lysander and Hermia arises only after Puck's intervention), and their struggles and reconciliation form the centre of the ballet. Neumeier minimizes the mime sequences in his ballet: the Indian boy is not visible, and the quarrel between Titania and Oberon is visualized through kicks and confrontational body language in their first pas de deux. Their reconciliation is expressed in a brief final pas de deux with a harmonious entwined lift.

Neumeier focuses more on Hippolyta's evolution than Shakespeare. He picks up the hint in the source that Hippolyta might not willingly marry Theseus: in the ballet, her attitude towards him seems reserved, and she expresses no joy about her planned wedding. However, Neumeier makes her a very feminine nineteenth-century lady without any of the Amazon's rebellious spirit. She falls asleep in the first act after smelling the magic flower she received as a gift from Theseus. As she wakes up after the events in the fairy wood, she apparently falls in love with him, and they dance a harmonious pas de deux which celebrates their union. Thus, the flower's magic seems to act on her as well, even though nobody sprinkles the juice on her eyelids. Through the doubling, parallels in the movement language, and certain repeated poses, Neumeier makes Titania and Oberon's relationship directly reflect that of

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special attention to the psyche of the female characters. For a definition of the 'literature ballet' see Bührle, *Literatur und Tanz*, pp. 202-03.

[26] Joan Stansbury challenges this widespread view in her article 'Characterization of the four young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare Survey 35* (2007), 57-64.

Hippolyta and Theseus, as if the development of one couple influenced that of the other. His focus lies on Hippolyta and Titania who, unlike their male partners, seem to evolve in the course of the ballet.

By giving a significant place to the mechanicals, Neumeier not only increases the weight of the male characters in comparison to Balanchine and Ashton, but he also engages with some of the play's potential eroticism and comedy that had been neglected by his predecessors. The mechanicals first appear in Theseus's palace, where they submit their play to Philostrate, a scene which is not in the play. This allows Neumeier to stage an encounter between Hippolyta and Bottom during which she looks at him with marked interest, a moment that already foreshadows Bottom and Titania's love affair in the forest. The relationship between the ass-eared Bottom and the fairy queen is depicted as clearly erotic, but even though Oberon laughs at 'this sweet sight' (4.1.45), he does not confront Titania with Bottom after her awakening, and she never seems ashamed.

When the mechanicals irrupt into the fairy wood, their jerky movements form a comic contrast with the fairies' elegant, floating style. As in Ashton's ballet, one of the mechanicals dances in pointe shoes, but the cross-dressed Thisbe is significantly less in command of this emblem of graceful and feminine ballerinas than Ashton's Bottom.

Finally, Neumeier is the only one of the three choreographers to show the unwillingly satirical performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. As in Shakespeare, the grotesque spectacle comments on the previously troubled relationships of the three couples. Neumeier also depicts the dangers for Helena's and Hermia's virtue in the wood – on the one hand, Hermia and Helena have to fight off Lysander who almost assaults Helena while he is under the effect of the magic flower. On the other hand, Helena throws herself at Demetrius's feet after ripping open her bodice, which is opposed to his threat of violence in the play where he says: 'You do impeach your modesty too much,/ To leave the city and commit yourself/ Into the hands of

one that loves you not;/ To trust the opportunity of night,/ And the ill counsel of a desert place,/ With the rich worth of your virginity.' (2.1.214-19). In the ballet, the mood remains comical or even farcical during these scenes.

The lovers' entanglements and the rehearsal of the mechanicals are watched by a delighted Puck, who wears Helena's spectacles like a pair of opera glasses. His enjoyment of their efforts evokes the verses in the play: 'Then will two at once woo one./ That must needs be sport alone;' (3.2.118-19) and 'Shall we their fond pageant see?/ Lord, what fools these mortals be!' (3.2.114-15). Puck, who (mis)employs the magic flower and manipulates the humans, and Puck's alter ego Philostrate, who arranges the wedding divertissement, temporarily assume the role of choreographers of the action. However, Puck's choreography does not suit Oberon's taste, and the fairy king soundly thrashes his mischievous ballet master.

In Neumeier's ballet, characters repeatedly fall asleep on stage and wake up in a world in which nothing is as it was before. There are several distancing frames: Hippolyta awakes just before her wedding, and Titania arises at the very end of the ballet. The parallel world could therefore be a dream of either Hippolyta or Titania, or the sovereigns might lead a double life. Neumeier's innovative work demonstrates his intense interest in literary sources and his desire to interpret them and shed new light on them through his literature ballets. Although he adjusts the gender imbalance in the previous versions, he places special emphasis on Titania and Hippolyta's psyche, and he choreographically visualizes and accentuates the connections between the two worlds which are implied in the play.

Balanchine, Ashton and Neumeier had different priorities in creating their ballets, and these become obvious in their adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. None of the three choreographers goes very far in the depiction of the play's darker sides, such as the cruel

choice Egeus gives his daughter to either marry a man she does not love, or die, or the gender conflict which is resolved, in Theseus's case, by the sword, and in Oberon's case, by dubious means.

All three choreographers focus on the main female character(s), and evoke nineteenth-century ballet structures, but they deal with these traditions in very diverse ways. Balanchine remains fairly close to the storytelling devices and character types of late-nineteenth-century ballets. He shows Titania and Hippolyta triumphant, even though the latter is eventually transformed from a solitary and powerful Amazon into a leading participant in a mixed-gender divertissement. As in nineteenth-century ballets, the ballerinas dance more than the men and are showcased like jewels.

Ashton's fairies evoke the all-female ensembles in mid-nineteenth-century ballets and Victorian productions of the play. The choreographer humanizes and individualizes his figures and creates specific mime to characterize them, especially Oberon and Titania whose relationship is at the centre of the ballet. Nonetheless, he was certainly more interested in exploring the possibilities of choreography than in interpreting the source.[27] For both Balanchine and Ashton, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an inspiration which defines the atmosphere, the settings, the characters, the action and the music of their ballet, and starting from these elements, they let their choreographic imagination soar freely.

[27] Ashton once stated: 'Consciously, all through my career, I have been working to make the ballet independent of literary and pictorial motives... […] it is the dance that must be paramount.' He also declared: 'It's always the music that starts me off. The story doesn't count at all'. Ashton doubted that very complex stories should be translated into dance. Cf. Ashton in Zoë Dominic and John Selwyn Gilbert, *Frederick Ashton* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 164 and 168, and Vaughan, *Frederick Ashton*, p. 427. Alastair Macaulay even claims that Ashton began an 'overt struggle against "literary" ballets' in the 1940s. Alastair Macaulay, 'Frederick Ashton's *Illuminations*: dance and literature as parallel universes' in *Sur quel pied danser? Danse et littérature*, ed. Hélène Stafford and Edward Nye (Amsterdam, 2005), p. 251.

Neumeier quotes nineteenth-century ballet structures such as the *grand pas* in Petipa's ballets, but goes beyond them in his aim to choreograph between the lines[28] in order to reveal underlying elements in the play. Neumeier's *Midsummer Night's Dream* blurs the boundaries between the different worlds, and between dream and reality, even more than the play does. Like Balanchine and Ashton, he is particularly interested in Titania, but he also emphasizes her kinship with Hippolyta and opens up the possibility that the whole ballet could be Titania's dream.

If the fairy world in Shakespeare's play might seem as a mirror of the patriarchal Athenian sphere,[29] this is not the case in the ballets discussed here. Another indicator would be Puck, who plays an important role in all three ballets. With his airy jumps and comic potential, he almost steals the show from the authoritarian Oberon. As a commentator, he comes close to the narrator figure which ballet does not normally have. By the (mis)use of his magic powers, he 'choreographs' parts of the action. Although he serves the fairy king, he often acts contrary to his orders and delights in the confusion he creates, thus eroding Oberon's authority. By focusing more on the play's most balletic figures – both of whom are not patriarchal rulers –[30] the three choreographers shift the power balance in the play and show a parallel world that the characters in Shakespeare's comedy can only dream of, a sphere in which the Athenian law is suspended and in which the lightest foot sometimes has the greatest weight.

Dr Iris Julia Bührle

University of Oxford

[28] Cf. John Neumeier, *In Bewegung* (Munich, 2008), p. 79.

[29] Cf. Levine, 'Balanchine and Titania', p. 112.

[30] Puck's lightness brings him close to female dancers: in Balanchine's work, he flies away by using stage machinery like a nineteenth-century sylph; in Neumeier's ballet, he is repeatedly lifted by Oberon.