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### EDITORS

The *Shakespeare Seminar* is published under the auspices of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, Weimar, and edited by:

Dr. Kirsten Sandrock, Georg-August Universität Göttingen, Seminar für Englische Philologie, Käte-Hamburger Weg 3, D-37073 Göttingen (ksandro@uni-goettingen.de)

Dr. Lukas Lammers, Freie Universität Berlin, Institut für Englische Philologie, Habelschwerdter Allee 45, 14195 Berlin (l.lammers@fu-berlin.de)

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# VISUAL CULTURE AND GENDERED HISTORIES: DANCING FAIRIES AND BALLET ADAPTATIONS OF *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

BY

JULIA HOYDIS

The most visually alluring and ‘danciest’ among Shakespeare’s works, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* introduces a fully-fledged artistic realisation of the fairy kingdom and benevolent, mischievous fairies of diminutive size and supernatural powers. In his *Dream*, Shakespeare did not invent fairies but drew on their popularity in early modern folklore, where they occur in male, female or gender-neutral forms and in different sizes. While the play’s print version contains little specification of the fairies’ outward appearance, creating room for ambivalence, stage productions of the play, and ballet adaptations in particular, cannot escape the physicality of the human body and its visual markers of identity. The *Dream* and its many afterlives have established a particular iconography of dancing fairy figures, perpetuated through cultural history and performance as bodily practice. Focussing on the female, ethereal fairy which has emerged as a lasting image formula, this article analyses two particularly successful ballets based on Shakespeare’s comedy, George Balanchine’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Frederick Ashton’s *The Dream* as case studies. Engaging with recent criticism of these adaptations (Bührle 2018; Rodgers 2019), I argue that they can be understood as “crossmappings” (Bronfen 2018) of the play and its performance history, the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic ballet, and music and visual art, especially Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s musical score and Victorian fairy painting.

Rival only to *Romeo and Juliet* as the most popular ballet based on a Shakespeare play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has seen well over a hundred dance adaptations, most of which have not survived, including versions by famous choreographers such as Marius Petipa (in 1876) and Michel Fokine (in 1906).<sup>1</sup> Among the Shakespearean comedies, it has certainly attracted the most choreographies. In the early 1960s, within the span of a couple of years, two ballet adaptations of the *Dream* appeared which are now considered canonical: Balanchine’s first full-length American production for New York City Ballet, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1962), and Frederick Ashton’s one-act *The Dream* (1964), part of the Royal Ballet’s triple bill in honour of the Shakespeare quatercentenary. Both rely on another great genius besides Shakespeare – Mendelssohn’s overture written in 1813 and the incidental music, written in 1843 for a theatre production of the play in Potsdam commissioned by the German King Friedrich, based on August Wilhelm von Schlegel’s translation and directed by Ludwig Tieck. We are thus confronted with ballets inspired by a musical adaptation first written for a

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical survey of versions of the ballet see Edgecombe (201-202), Ostlere (54), and Hiscock (56-57). Later ballets of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have been choreographed by Heinz Spoerli (for Basel Ballet, 1975), John Neumeier (for Hamburg Ballet, 1977), and Christopher Wheeldon (for Colorado Ballet, 1997).

theatrical staging of Shakespeare's play in translation, which, while steeped in German Romanticism, has since taken on a life of its own and become part of both 'world' music and literature.

After an outline of the conceptual approach, I will sketch the historical evolution of the *Dream*'s fairies and their reflection in dance, music and visual art, followed by a comparison of the two ballet versions with regards to choreographic structure, setting and design. I take them as examples to address a pressing conceptual issue underlying all debates of literature and dance adaptation studies. How can these art works be grasped, studied (and taught in higher education settings) *as* adaptations – transcending vexed questions of textual 'fidelity' and allowing for different reception contexts and audience knowledge, especially about dance history? Focussing on the *Dream*'s gendered 'fairy formula' in visual culture and performance history reveals that the dance adaptations are at least equally, if not more shaped by the structure and atmosphere suggested by Mendelssohn's musical score, the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic ballet, and the iconography of fairy painting which reached popular heights during the Victorian age, than by the Elizabethan play.

### **Translation, Transposition, Crossmapping**

Proposing to see the ballet as a "translation rather than an adaptation" (Rodgers 328), Amy Rodgers begins her analysis of Balanchine's *Dream* with the most complicated issue at stake when dealing with literary dance adaptations: fidelity to an 'original'. She argues that linguistic translation demands this to a higher degree than kinaesthetic translation (327), followed by the claim that choreographers (such as Balanchine) who undertake such translations feel no "responsibility" to the dramatist but are instead "constrained" by the score of the composer (Rodgers 327-28). This echoes Balanchine's own assessment of his general creative process – and his particular inspiration for the *Dream*<sup>2</sup>: he takes music as "the controlling image" (Balanchine 82). The constraint is thus a deliberate choice, as Balanchine's almost mathematical process of making music visible through meticulously following the score, for example by transferring motifs, repetitions, or even the number of instruments into dance, is well documented (see Taper 257). He specifically employs a metaphor for choreography that links it to visual imagery rather than narrative, explaining how "the importance of the story itself becomes reduced to being the frame for the picture I want to paint" (Balanchine 82). Taking the cue from this, a concept that allows for emphasis on visual cultures, such as Bronfen's crossmapping, appears well suited to capture the interdisciplinary complexity of literary dance adaptations.

In her study of a wide array of examples from visual culture, Bronfen defines crossmapping as "a practice in reading, in which theoretical and aesthetic apprehensions of our cultural imaginary prove to be mutually implicated" (Bronfen 3). Drawing on Aby Warburg's notion of affective "pathos formulas" and Stephen Greenblatt's notion of the "exchange of cultural energies" (Greenblatt 19; 12), she argues that the cultural

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<sup>2</sup> "What has really interested me more than Shakespeare's words [...] has been the music that Mendelssohn wrote [...] the ballet was inspired by the score" (Balanchine cited in Rogoff 122).

“afterlife” of past images and thought formulas shapes contemporary refigurations, through the recurrence of patterns and impressions. Greenblatt borrows the term *energeia* in Greek rhetorics – meaning to cause “a stir to the mind” – in order to describe the “continual aesthetic power of a Shakespeare play” (Greenblatt 6) palpable in its performance. Though produced by historical circumstances far removed in time, and with no direct connection to contemporary affective experiences, this energy is passed on in refigurations of a work as a belated effect, a “trace that this intensity has left in our cultural memory” (4). These traces apply equally, for example to romantic stagings of the *Dream*, the original play script, or the structure of romantic fairy ballets. Crossmapping advances the notion of intertextuality and intermediality and interrogates what “can be gleaned from appropriations and refigurations that attest to the cultural afterlife of a given pathos formula or thought figure” (Bronfen 6; see Hoydis 2020). The concept makes visible the overlap of different formulas, image and thought figures, or, as we might also call them, different *maps* which constitute and await deciphering in the adaptations.

To sustain the argument for the value of cross-mapping for conceptualising the relations between play text and choreographic works, a few other approaches are helpful to consider. Rodgers’s distinction between adaptation and translation, defining the first as a process of transference from one medium into another and the second as linguistic project, is one that is easily challenged, for as she admits, “one might well argue that Balanchine’s *Dream* should stay where it clearly belongs – in the unwieldy but endlessly capacious category of adaptation” (328). However, there are clearly parallels between (verbal) language and dance as (non-verbal) linguistic structure based on movement vocabulary. Rodgers’s nuanced analysis understands translation as an interpretative practice that turns textual passages into choreography. Focussing on aspects such as tempo and rhythm, this approach usefully highlights the triangular relationship between text, musical score, and choreography, but neglects any wider historical context and aspects of memory that crucially shape the experience of adaptations. As Linda Hutcheon explains, especially if the adapted work is a canonical one, the reliance on cultural memory, “bred through repetition” (Hutcheon 21), typically overtakes the judgement of the new artwork, or rather it determines the degree of pleasure or frustration in the viewing experience.

In her reading of 20<sup>th</sup>-century adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, including Balanchine and Ashton’s, Iris Julia Bührle (2018) traces the roots of both works to the structure and storytelling devices of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ballet and details the associations to ballet history created by both works. As far as adaptation theory is concerned, Bührle only briefly refers to “each choreographer’s *transposition* of the source” (176; my emphasis), without delineating the advantage the term ‘transposition’ offers over ‘adaptation’. In music theory, transposition refers to a unidirectional process of moving a melody – or a musical *gestalt* – up or down in pitch by a constant interval. As such, it captures the element of moving ‘across’, but still suggests the existence of a binary of ‘source/new version’, rather than a plurality of influences or dialogic exchange.

With Ashton and Balanchine’s *Dreams* we are, in fact, dealing with two ballet adaptations which fuse British Renaissance drama, German Romantic music, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian/European ballet and visual art, the *Dream*’s theatrical history, and

influences of post-war 20<sup>th</sup>-century American and British ballet. Thus, confronted with the complexity of transcultural adaptation across time and media, I argue that Bronfen's conception of crossmapping allows us to grasp these *Dreams* as adaptations. It also allows for different readings, depending which angle of comparison or which maps are chosen. Seeing the ballet adaptations as crossmapping places the emphasis on visual culture and memory, rather than textuality, and reveals the function of the cultural imaginary "as a domain in which the real of history can be read through the inscription of its effects" (Bronfen 13) – in other words, how an Elizabethan comedy is 'crossmapped', i.e., refigured and grafted, upon 20<sup>th</sup>-century ballet. The concept of crossmapping has potential for adaptation studies across media,<sup>3</sup> but especially for dance as visual culture. The approach facilitates comparative study in interdisciplinary contexts and diachronic and transmedial analysis; it is also particularly suited for teaching contexts (rather than scholarly expert studies), because it allows for critical foci on obvious transfers, citations and parallels, and more implicit references that require decoding. It highlights instances of continuities of gendered image formulas such as the *Dream*'s fairies and their signification in different contexts.

### Dance, Music, Art, and the *Dream*

From its theatrical beginnings, performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, supposedly written in 1595/96 for a noble wedding, have featured dance. Yet aside from including more dance than any other of the bard's plays, the *Dream* has several characteristics which make it suitable for expression through dance; agreement persists that it is in many ways Shakespeare's most balletic play and the one most frequently adapted into dance (see Klett 14; Sanders 61). Reasons are the play's inherent lyricism and rhythmical language, its features of a wedding play and the fact that dance is central to the dramatic action, rendering it "an essential part of the plot, a summarising action and a universal symbol instead of merely leaving it the delectable embellishment it might have been" (Brissenden 1981, 43; 2; Brooks li; liii). In particular the creation of the separate realm of the fairy world, ruled over by Titania and Oberon and their entourage of miniature fairies, and dialogues full of references to song and dance, suggest a natural fit with ballet. According to Rodney Edgecombe, Titania's speech in Act III contains the play's "Romantic Ur-plot" (Edgecombe 209) in a nutshell:

TITANIA. Out of this wood do not desire to go:  
 Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.  
 I am a spirit of no common rate;  
 The summer still doth tend upon my state;  
 And I do love thee: therefore, go with me;  
 I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee,  
 [...]  
 And I will purge thy mortal grossness so  
 That thou shalt like an airy spirit go. (3.1.134-43)

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<sup>3</sup> Menzel (2019) also employs crossmapping in her study of adaptations of *Richard II* in a recent issue of *SSO*.

Airy spirits, nocturnal wanderings and sleepwalking, the mix-up of lovers, and the transformation of Bottom, are all easily (if not best) conveyed through the vehicle of dance. Dealing “with young love, magic and the elemental” (Macaulay n.p.), the *Dream* does indeed feature base elements of “the tropes of the Romantic repertoire” (Edgecombe 209) and several of the stock elements later associated with romantic and classical ballet. Among the *Dream*’s “proto-balletic elements” (Edgecombe 203; see Barnes et al. 214), aside from moonlight settings and ‘airy spirits’, are furthermore the grouping and age-range of the original characters (the eternally young, agile fairies; human characters all of marrying age or younger, and mostly couples) which make it suitable for showing off a ballet company’s talent and a variety of styles of dancing. The *Dream* offers opportunity for both ensemble scenes and pas de deux, for distinct characteristic movements, either virtuous, airy, courtly, or burlesque. These correspond to the four groups of characters in the play, three of which are also clearly distinguished by musical motifs in Mendelssohn’s score: the four young lovers (Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius), Oberon and Titania and their fairy attendants Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed, and the rustics performing the “Pyramus and Thisbe” play-in-the-play. As the incidental music focuses exclusively on the fairy realm and does not include music for Theseus and Hippolyta, many choreographic versions, such as Ashton’s, opt to omit the Athens court scene or these two characters altogether. This aspect alone renders a debate of ‘faithful’ textuality in the ballet adaptations redundant from the onset.

Mendelssohn’s score appears to be a main reason for the popularity of ballet adaptations of the *Dream* today. For, as Alastair Macaulay notes, “Only when the right music is found does a Shakespeare ballet have a chance of surviving” (Macaulay n.p.). Recognized as one of the great composers of German Romanticism, Mendelssohn first wrote the overture for concert performance, the “Incidental Music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*” (1843) was added later for a full-length performance with the play. While this score has long been seen as “one of the finest musical realizations of a literary fairy tale” (Zipes 316), neither piece was originally commissioned for ballet. Consequently, the overture makes no attempt to follow the plot of the play. Instead, it introduces and repeats motifs referencing the different character groups in the play – most famously the opening chords played by woodwind instruments attributed to the fairies. The incidental music incorporates motifs from the overture and consists of the wedding March (a piece of music that has acquired ubiquitous presence in popular culture), music between acts and other scenes and songs, two of which are compositions for text from the play.<sup>4</sup> As a whole, the composition has a brisk, flighty tempo (*allegro di molto*) and the score begins with the fairies’ entrance in act II, omitting the play’s first act. Mendelssohn composed music for a four-act translation of the play by Schlegel, which Tieck then compressed into three acts, all set in the forest, in his light-romantic rather than Elizabethan staging. As Gary Willams argues, the 1843 Tieck-Mendelssohn

<sup>4</sup> These are the first songs of Titania, preparing for sleep in Act II: “Come, now a roundel and fairy song [...]” (II, 2, 1-8); and the finale of Act VI, 1: OBERON: “Through the house give glimmering light./[...] Sing and dance it trippingly” (403-408); TITANIA: “First rehearse your song by rote,/To each word a warbling note./Hand in hand with fairy grace/Will we sing and bless this place” (409-412).



production is in fact “one of the most prominent occasions of the *German appropriation* of Shakespeare as cultural capital” (Williams 104; my emphasis), although music and Shakespeare scholars alike still commonly take it as “the ultimate musical realization of Shakespeare’s intentions” (Williams 104).

Both mid-20th century ballet versions are thus close to a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century German drama adaptation that first used Mendelssohn’s incidental music. They also contributed to a lasting revival of a score that went out of fashion in theatrical productions after the 1950s, which began to turn away from Victorian traditions, along with a “scenic vocabulary for the play that romantic ideology and the aspirations of empire had constructed” (Williams 109; 195). The latter found a prolonged life especially through Ashton’s *The Dream*. We can see the composition of Mendelssohn’s score as a watershed moment with a lasting impact on productions and adaptations of the *Dream*, which from then on guided audience expectations towards Mendelssohn’s music and ballet, triggered by “a steady stream of productions with singing fairies and otherworldly ballerinas in white” (Homans 2015; see also Halio 7). Mendelssohn’s music also cemented the authoritative dominance of the fairies and impacted both visually and structurally on all following transmedial adaptations. Music historian R. Larry Todd explains:

When Robert Schumann reviewed an 1844 performance, he thought that perhaps Felix had overstated the ‘fairy parts’ (*Feenparthien*) [...]. But Felix viewed play and overture as interdependent, and the incidental music as organically connected – its characteristic thematicism and coloration derive from the elves. [...] The originality of his portrayal of fairy life has become typical; all later composers have [...] followed in his footsteps. (Todd 463)

Affirming the major role of Mendelssohn’s musical adaptation and ballet sequences in the play’s performance history from the 19th century onwards, Julie Sanders emphasises that especially in Victorian Britain audiences came to expect “gauzy winged fairies, invariably played by child actors” (Sanders 62).<sup>5</sup> While the romanticized interpretations of the *Dream* encouraged by these stagings remained popular for over a century and the only “surprise” (Sanders 62), as Sanders puts it, was that a full-length ballet production came rather late, the highly pictorialized image formula of the beautiful, miniaturized, and typically female fairy also found reflection in and was perpetuated through literature and visual art.

From the late 18<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fairies and goblins had a renewed strong presence in poetry (for example in Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* or Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*) and painting. Victorian fairy painting was regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy and the artists mostly took inspiration from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, enriched with details from folklore, mythology, or from the poetry of Milton and Spenser. Examples include Henry Fuseli’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (ca. 1790s),

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<sup>5</sup> In the Elizabethan stagings of the play, the fairies were played by adult male actors, as the Shakespeare company’s four male child actors would typically take on the roles of the female leads. The fairies on stage resembled the actors that represented them, thus exhibiting the instabilities of sex and gender identity that characterize English fairy lore (see Simons 48; 34; and Fuller 2017). In the play script, Bottom addresses one of the fairy attendants as “Master Mustardseed” (III, 1, 199); Puck is also clearly depicted as male.

William Blake's *Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing* (1785; see Figure 1), Francis Danby's *Scene from a Midsummer Night's Dream* (1832), Richard Dadd's *Titania Sleeping* (1841), Edwin Landseer's *Scene from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* (1849), and Robert Huskisson's *The Midsummer Night's Fairies* (1847). While the origins of fairy painting can be traced back to 18<sup>th</sup>-century British art, the genre, Jack Zipes argues, gained new popularity from the 1840s onwards, offering a pictorial escape from the ugliness of industrial society into beautiful pastoral landscapes, with fairy mythology, lost innocent worlds, and erotic nudity thrown in for good measure (see Zipes 535; 73).



**Figure 1:** William Blake's *Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing* (1785), Tate Britain. Photo © Tate.

### Fairies, Shakespeare's Play, and Ballet Tradition

The importance of fairies and their lore in Victorian Britain is well documented (see Zipes xxvii-xxviii). The *Dream*'s original dancing fairies derive from the English folk tradition of the Elizabethan era, another golden age of fairy lore. They present, in fact, a "sanitized" refashioning of different sources and an "unusual mingle-mangle of classical myth and native folklore" (Lamb 93). The figure of the devious house spirit Robin Goodfellow, for example, is reimagined as the benevolent trickster Puck. For his *Dream*, perhaps the most influential fairy play of all times (Zipes 69), Shakespeare changed the fairies' customary character, intentions, and their size and looks. According to Zipes, "it was Shakespeare's depiction of fairies as diminutive and picturesque, with pretty garden names, employed in hanging pearls in cowslips' ears and gathering bats' wings to make elfin coats" (Zipes 69) that captured not just the literary imagination. The *Dream* forged nothing less than the beginning of a new aesthetic and imagery – a normative iconography of fairies that is still valid today (see Edgecombe 208; Brooks lxxii). According to Harold Brooks, historical interdisciplinary research sustains the argument that Shakespeare refigured existing fairy lore to create a new kind of miniaturized, benevolent fairies fitting for a wedding play. Toning down their

association with ill-omens and practical jokes for this occasion, all later appearances of fairies in stage contexts “derive ultimately from him” (Brooks lxxi; lxxxiv).

Though one might doubt the “single genius”-thesis inherent in Brook’s argument, the scaling-down of the anthropomorphised fairies adorned with gauzy insect wings and, above all, their association with flighty, airy movement suggests the inspirational parallels to the sylphs, the characteristic roles for ballerina and all-female corps de ballet in romantic ballet. Female dancers were transformed into supernatural beings, dressed in white tulle skirts with tight bodices with little wings attached, while the invention of the point shoe by Italian ballet master Filippo Taglioni's for his daughter Marie (see Figure 2), allowed an ethereal hovering above the ground and aided the illusion of flight. Alan Brissenden sums up this connection, explaining how

[...] dancing was one of the main occupations of Elizabethan fairies. [...] It was their principal means of getting from one place to another. Shakespeare’s fairies do not walk or run. Such constant lightness of movement is possible because of the fairies’ weightlessness; [...] It was just this effect of airy delicacy that the nineteenth-century romantic ballet tried to achieve when its dancers began using point shoes for the first time. (Brissenden *Shakespeare*, 42-43)



**Figure 2:** Marie Taglioni as Flora in Didelot’s *Zéphire et Flore*. 1831, Lithograph by Chalon and Lane. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The genre of the fairy-dramas shows a strong affinity with dance, opera and musical theatre from the origins in 17<sup>th</sup>-century theatre onwards. With more and more fairy tales and plays appearing in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the genre became more established, and, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it began to differentiate and expand also into the realm of ballet. It is noteworthy, however, that although the Romantic movement brought a general turn to Shakespearean themes which “seemed to have something special to say

to the romantic spirit” (Barnes et al. 212), 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic ballet did not turn to Shakespeare adaptations – but it did turn to fairy tales. The fundamental affinity between ballet and fairy tales as art forms containing elements of fantasy and the supernatural reveals itself in particular in the ballets drawing on the fairy bride motif that dominate the romantic period.<sup>6</sup> Established by Filippo Taglioni’s *La Sylphide* (1832), it is taken up in *Giselle* (1842), while classical ballets in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also turn to folk and literary fairy tales (*The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century sees an abstraction of the sylph-tableaux in non-narrative *ballet blanc* such as Fokine’s *Les Sylphides* (1909) and a steady decline of fairytale ballets, until their revival in the post-war period (see Zipes 37).

### Balanchine and Ashton’s *Dreams*

Like Mendelssohn’s music, which both choreographers used for their adaptations, Balanchine’s and Ashton’s versions are inseparably tied to the performance history of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Sanders 70) and function as a kind of visual archive, premising the image formula of the fairy.<sup>7</sup> Dividing his ballet into two acts Balanchine condenses acts 1-4 of the play into the first act, doing away with the rustic’s production of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ and the court scene with Theseus and Hippolyta. True to his choreographic method and style, Balanchine focusses most of his ballet on the central ballerina – in this case, Titania. With regard to the play text, this can be interpreted as a softening of “Shakespeare’s darkly cynical portrayal of romantic love” (Naughtin 280), or, as a toning down of the depiction of patriarchal domination and “threats of sexual violence which Shakespeare sounds throughout the play” (Levine 116). Either way, the choreographer is loyal to the musical score, also adding music from five other works by Mendelssohn for Act 2.<sup>8</sup>

Following the structure of the incidental music, Act 1 opens in the forest with the fairies and Oberon and Titania’s quarrelling over the changeling boy,<sup>9</sup> followed by the confusion of the four human lovers. The act’s humorous highlight is the pas de deux of Titania and Bottom with the ass’s head. The choreography in the first act also intersects brief traditional mime scenes and pas de deux and ensemble scenes, with a narrative function. Act 2, set at Theseus’s court, is strictly ceremonial and transcends the narrative context of the play; it features a court procession and a grand wedding celebration arranged as a *divertissement* which showcases the beauty and virtuosity of the female

<sup>6</sup> See Zipes (34). However, as Zipes notes, typically these were not comedies: “The fairy bride legend dramatized a central dilemma of romanticism – the search for the unattainable ideal, and its often tragic outcome” (36).

<sup>7</sup> I’m not limiting the discussion to particular stage productions of each ballet here; depending on casting, stage and costume design the depictions of the fairy may, of course, vary, but not to a degree that challenges the argument.

<sup>8</sup> These are: *Overtures to Athalie*, *Son and Stranger*, *The Fair Melusine*, *Symphony No. 9 for Strings*, and *The First Walpurgis Night*. See Naughtin (280) for details on the musical structure of the ballet.

<sup>9</sup> As Julie Sanders notes, the changeling boy has no presence in the play, but appears on stage in ballet versions; this follows a long ballet tradition of having children on stage (Sanders 64) and can also be seen as an instance of crossmapping in which ballet history takes precedence over the play.



dancers. All these aspects recall 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian ballet conventions and the divertissements which typically follow the so-called ‘white’ acts, dream-like tableaux often set in gardens or forests, such as those in *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *La Bayadère*. Balanchine’s *Dream* thus crossmaps 19<sup>th</sup>-century ballet conventions and Shakespeare’s play, while the music provides the central ‘controlling image’. Considering the fairy costumes, they evoke romantic painting and ballet, but the traditional mid-calf-length full tutu skirts are radically modernized and shortened.<sup>10</sup> Though Balanchine’s version includes fairies and butterflies danced by small children of both sexes, the fairy corps de ballet consists of adult female dancers, as it also does in Ashton’s version.<sup>11</sup>

Ashton’s *Dream* keeps the same structural entry to his ballet as Balanchine, i.e., an exposition of a fairy corps de ballet in the woods, followed by the entrance of Oberon and Titania and the Indian changeling boy, but condenses the play’s plot into a one-act ballet, using only Mendelssohn’s incidental music. Concerning the narrative level, it also eliminates the “Pyramus and Thisbe” play, the court characters, and the play’s first and last acts, placing the focus exclusively on the fairy realm; Ashton also incorporates traditional ballet mime sequences.<sup>12</sup> The ballet narrates the quarrel and reconciliation of Oberon and Titania, the entanglements of the four human lovers and of Titania and Bottom, ending with him on an empty stage – puzzled by memories of his dream.<sup>13</sup> Most apparent is the crossmapping on the level of choreography, stage and costume design. Ashton sets his ballet during the Victorian era, evoking romantic fantasy and referencing the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in setting, costume style and choreography, while adapting the latter to his signature style, which is characterized by musicality, quick footwork and port de bras. In his *Dream*, he employs numerous ballet conventions and cites iconography, movements and formations from specific romantic ballets (see Vaughn 340-41; Klett 27), such as *La Sylphide* and Jules Perrot’s *Pas de quatre* (1845). Examples include the formation of the four fairy dancers in the centre, standing or kneeling pairs of fairies, the corps de ballet lines linked through one arm crossed at the waist (see Figure 4), the

<sup>10</sup> For images of the fairy costumes see photographs from recent productions of Balanchine’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by San Francisco Ballet and Pacific North West Ballet. Available at: <https://www.pnb.org/reperatory/a-midsummer-nights-dream/> and <https://www.sfballet.org/whos-who-in-a-midsummer-nights-dream/>.

<sup>11</sup> Another example of crossmapping that would warrant closer analysis is Botticelli’s painting *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1480s) that arguably inspired the costume and set design in Act II, Titania’s pink seashell throne, and her nude pink costume and flowing hair. Although Balanchine denied that the painting had any influence (see Levine 118) and it precedes Shakespeare’s play, the striking visual parallels offer grounds to explore the tension between the depicted gender hierarchies in both art works.

<sup>12</sup> See Brissenden (2011, 102) and especially Bührlé (180-81) for a detailed analysis of Ashton’s version with regards to ballet history.

<sup>13</sup> The role of Bottom is portrayed by a male demi-character dancer, who dances en pointe when he is transformed into a donkey. Many critics take this episode as an instance of humour bordering on slapstick, the inspiration for which Ashton supposedly ‘borrows’ from Balanchine’s version (cf. Rogoff 124). However, considering the choreographer’s style and his other ballets which include narrative comedy scenes and male dancers en pointe, typically portraying old female roles such as the evil stepmother in *Cinderella* (1948) or the mother in *La fille mal gardée* (1960), it seems more plausible to argue that Ashton borrows from himself.

angle of the titled upper bodies and heads (*épaulement*) and the style of *port de bras*, the precise, brisk *batterie* (foot work, little jumps). But Ashton cites with innovation, rather than resorting to pure mimicry. Julie Kavanagh argues, “fairies flitting intricately round about the stage to Mendelssohn’s buzzing violins may look like a pastiche corps of nineteenth-century sylphs, but Ashton has characterized them and set them free” (Kavanagh 455-56). With choreography and costumes explicitly turning to romantic ballet and Victorian lithographs (such as the one of Marie Taglioni in sylph wings, see Figure 2) for visual inspiration, Ashton acknowledges also Mendelssohn’s admiration of Taglioni, a contemporary dance icon who emblemized the ethereal female fairy.



**Figure 4:** The Royal Ballet in Ashton’s *The Dream*, David H. Koch Theater at the Lincoln Center June 23, 2015. © Photo: Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images.

Structurally and visually, Ashton’s fairy ballet alludes to the time of Mendelssohn and his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Dream* rather than to the Elizabethan play. Reading it as crossmapping captures the layering of allusions from Shakespeare, Romanticism and ballet history on the level of aesthetics, and narrative and gendered iconography. With Balanchine’s version, it shares what Williams describes as “variations on the neoromantic idiom for the play as represented in the mid-1950s, that idiom itself only one remove from the Victorian vocabulary” (Williams 199). This idiom hinges on the fairies as “prototype” (Kavanagh 458) in Ashton, whereas Bührlé argues about Balanchine that his choreography “seems little interested in giving depth to his protagonists, most of whom remain close to ballet stereotypes” (Bührlé 178). Justified as these critical observations are to some extent, reading the ballets primarily as crossmappings allows sidestepping judgement with regard to the ‘fidelity’ of adapting the ambivalence and complexity of the Shakespearean characters in ballet, and highlighting instead the aspect of structural and visual citation and overlay. Undeniably, both ballets show traces of influence “by previous encounters with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in a theatrical context” (Sanders 63), epitomized by the focus on the fairy realm which aligns the play’s performance history with ballet history. The depiction of gender relations in the two choreographies, especially the staging of the central ballerina roles,

Titania (Ashton, Balanchine) and Hippolyta (Balanchine) as powerful female figures can also be seen as a reflection of ballet conventions rather than of Shakespeare's play.<sup>14</sup> Overall, "the visual presence of women is far greater" (Bührle 180). In contrast to the play, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century fairy world is characterized by female supremacy, embodied in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century ballet by the leading ballerinas and an all-female corps de ballet, typically dressed in white tutus with fairy wings, representing supernatural, posthuman creatures such as bird-women (*Swan Lake*), dead brides (*Giselle*), sylphs (*La Sylphide*).

Regarding the male leads among the fairy characters in both ballets, Puck takes a prominent role as Oberon's comedic sidekick, especially in Balanchine's version in which he is present in the opening and closing scenes. Thus, he comes to resemble a commentator/narrator and therefore takes on a function similar to the one in Shakespeare's play. As there is no such role in traditional ballet, as Bührle notes (see 185), it might be seen as being inspired by the text. We might also read the powerful, playful virtuosity of Puck's character and his choreography (full of spectacular tricks such as speedy turns and jumps) as another crossmapping from ballet history. Puck's comedic bravado appears in contrast to Oberon's noble masculine elegance and evokes the male court jester figure in *Swan Lake* or the slave servant in *La Bayadère* that accompanies the male prince.

## Conclusion

In a recent study of 'Shakespeare choreographies', Elizabeth Klett argues that ballets based on literary sources generally tend to move beyond textuality and that they do so in three ways: by celebrating pure movement and "the dance form itself" rather than the source text; by tapping into visual and affective memory and asserting "the importance of bodily knowledge, rather than literary or linguistic knowledge"; and, lastly, "by acknowledging the important influences of dance, musical, and other performance traditions" (Klett 5). Though both Balanchine and Ashton's ballets were created in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, they reference a specific movement history and vocabulary that stretches back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that of romantic ballet, as well as being 'faithful' to the musical score. In my opinion, the great value of adaptation studies such as Klett's is thus that it undoes traditional hierarchies (still largely intact especially in the field of Shakespeare and dance) and argues for choreography's ability to create "meanings that are worthy of analysis in their own right, not solely in relation to their textual sources" (Klett 7). This echoes Laura Levine's argument about an "alternative history" created "iconographically" (see Levine 111; Klett 18) by choreographers. It challenges the supremacy of the verbal in debates about adaptation.

Undoubtedly, any "study of afterlives and borrowings", as Sanders writes, needs to try to account for complex processes of "cross-fertilization" (Sanders 5; my emphasis) as every artwork and performance is inevitably in a dialogic, intertextual relationship with the history of its own medium (here: dance), as well as music and drama. The two examples show how literary dance adaptations create their own intertexts, which are

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<sup>14</sup> See especially Bührle and Levine's readings.

equally, if not more important than the textual source. Approaching the artworks as crossmappings – rather than as literary adaptations or translations – reveals the cultural afterlife of “aesthetic formalizations” (Bronfen 3) such as the female fairy figure, rather than asking how the source text is transformed. As reading/viewing practice crossmapping reveals how ballets capture cultural history. It allows zooming in on particular entanglements of the “web of multiple traditions”, allusions and citations (Klett 7; my emphasis; see Marcsek-Fuchs 132) that remains perhaps the most crucial metaphor for the study of literature and dance adaptation. Haunted as we might be by the *Dream*’s dancing fairies, it is ultimately the audience’s gaze, conditioned by individual knowledge and cultural history which determines what crossmappings are revealed.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Shakespeares *Ein Sommernachtstraum* und dessen vielfältige Nachleben haben eine Ikonographie tanzender Feenfiguren geprägt, die sich durch die Kultur- und Aufführungsgeschichte des Stückes fortschreibt. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf die dominante Bildformel der weiblichen ätherischen Fee und zieht zwei besonders erfolgreiche Ballette, die auf dem Stück basieren, als Fallstudien heran: Balanchines *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1962) und Ashtons *The Dream* (1964). Aus adaptionstheoretischer Perspektive wird argumentiert, dass diese Werke sich als transkulturelle, transmediale „Crossmappings“ (Bronfen 2018) verstehen lassen. Insbesondere sind sie strukturell wie visuell geprägt von der Auseinandersetzung mit der Tradition des romantischen Balletts und der Musik und Malerei des 19. Jahrhunderts, vor allem Mendelssohn Bartholdys Partitur und viktorianischer Feendarstellungen. Daher lässt sich mit diesen Beispielen auch für eine Auflösung der Hierarchie von Textualität und Visualität in der Analyse von Shakespeare-Balletten plädieren.