EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

The Complexity of Dance in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Claire Gwendoline Hansen
University of Sydney
claire.hansen@sydney.edu.au

Dance is a vehicle for interaction, communication, and transformation within Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595-1596). In exhibiting these complex behavioural patterns, dance falls under the purview of complexity theory, which is interested in how systems are created and changed through the interaction of different parts. The aim of this essay is to use the lens of complexity theory to reconsider the role of dance in three key passages of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[1] This analysis will demonstrate that dance does not simply reinforce a sense of harmony or, conversely, social disorder, but instead Shakespeare uses dance to create and negotiate moments of crisis or 'bounded instability'. These are the moments which shape the characters, their social relationships, and their environments. In this way, dance is a complex mode of discourse that derails the linear movement of a narrative's 'straight Aristotelean lines'.[2] As a vehicle for communication and for change, dance accomplishes two critical actions. First, it provides an alternative avenue for (often turbulent) interactions and dialogue. Second, it destabilises and changes the social relationships and environmental landscapes of the play.

Complexity theory is not simply a framework transferred from the sciences into the humanities. It is a 'way of seeing the world' that is flourishing in a variety of different

[1] These dances take place in 2.1.81-92, 4.1.84-91, and 5.1.353-413. All references to the play are to the Oxford World's Classics edition, ed. by Peter Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] Thomas M. Greene, 'Labyrinth Dances in the French and English Renaissance', *Renaissance Quarterly* 54. 4 (2001), 1403-66 (pp. 1419-1420).

disciplines in both the sciences and the arts.[3] Joseph Dodds refers to '[t]he new nomadic sciences of complexity' for just this reason; they are applicable in various fields.[4] It has already made a brief foray into the analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, via Bruce Clarke's article[5] and Henry Turner's monograph, in which he argues that:

> Shakespeare uses mythic symbols to describe the 'complexity' of natural forces, in the sense that modern science gives the term – the way in which many local factors quickly combine to produce effects that are impossible to anticipate and very difficult to model – with a clarity that would astonish a modern ecologist.[6]

Even in fields where complexity theory is not explicitly used, it is often implicitly present:

> A few decades ago, it was still being described as the 'new paradigm' and an 'emerging worldview.' Now virtually all research in the physical sciences is implicitly complexivist – and one would be hard pressed to find research in the social sciences and humanities that is not deeply committed to such notions as co-participations, complex entanglements, decentralised structures, co-adaptive dynamics, self-determination, and non-linear unfoldings.[7]

A methodology that complements current and developing ways of understanding the world, complexity theory can be seen as a compatible addition to the scholar's toolset, not a replacement. As Amy Cook contends in her use of cognitive science, '[t]here is room in Shakespeare studies for the contributions of various approaches.'[8]

Complexity theory helps us to understand how the world works. It identifies systems in our natural and social worlds that exhibit certain behavioural patterns and aims to

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[3] Michael Patrick Gillespie, 'Reading on the edge of chaos: *Finnegans Wake* and the Burden of Linearity', *Journal of Modern Literature* 22. 2 (1999), 359-71 (p. 361).

[4] Joseph Dodds, *Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos: Complexity Theory, Deleuze/Guattari and Psychoanalysis for a Climate in Crisis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 183.

[5] Bruce Clarke, 'Paradox and the form of metamorphosis: systems theory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Intertexts* 8. 2 (2004), 173-87.

[6] Henry S. Turner, *Shakespeare's Double Helix*, (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 34.

[7] Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara, 'Fitting Teacher Education in/to/for an Increasingly Complex World', *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* 9. 1 (2012), 30-40 (p. 30).

[8] Amy Cook, *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance through Cognitive Science* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 14.

understand how they operate.[9] Complexity is interested in complex systems – these are dynamic, self-organising, evolving systems that operate without any central control. These systems can be found in excitingly diverse fields: from the 'aggregation of the slime mold' to the creation of life, from the organisation of corporate bodies to the reshuffling of carbon atoms in a sea urchin embryo.[10] From a human brain, to an ant colony, a city, a rainforest, climate change, even the cosmos itself.

These systems, while incredibly diverse, all share certain core behaviours.[11] They are created and maintained by the ongoing interactions of their parts – not by a 'central controller' or leader.[12] This is called 'self-organisation'. The phenomena that emerge[13] from these interactions enable the system to continue changing and developing. Such emergent phenomena create two types of feedback into the system: positive feedback (which amplifies change and alters the status quo) and negative feedback (which limits change and stabilises the status quo). In oscillating between states of more or less stability and instability, a system can reach critical crisis points of heightened disorder,

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[9] Complexity theory's use of 'system' differs from the generic understanding of systems as predictable, controlled, artificial and mechanistic. In complexity theory the word refers to open, natural systems that are often biological or social. The stable systems of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may include patriarchal and political systems, the environmental and agricultural system, and the Athenian system of government. Further, it is also important to remember that complexity theory does not claim that everything is complex. Some systems are simple, and some are simply 'complicated'. This is an important distinction as it aids in clarifying what is meant by 'complex'. A machine may be complicated, but it is never more than the sum of its parts. It is closed and predictable, and can be disassembled and re-assembled into the same machine. In contrast, a weather system cannot be understood by the sum of its parts, but is created by the *interaction* of its various elements. This makes it complex, not complicated.

[10] F. Eugene Yates et al. (eds.), *Self-Organising Systems: The Emergence of Order* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1987), p. 2.

[11] Van Geert believes that complexity theory is so widely applicable because 'dynamic principles apply to systems, irrespective of those systems' actual form or nature. What matters are the relationships, not the content matter.' See: Paul L. C. Van Geert, 'Fish, foxes, and talking in the classroom: introducing dynamic systems concepts and approaches', in *Identity and Emotion: Development through Self-Organisation*, ed. by Harke A Bosma and E. Saskia Kunnen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 64-88 (p. 64).

[12] Neil Johnson, *Simply Complexity: A Clear Guide to Complexity Theory* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p. 67.

[13] The concept of emergence is the reason why complexity theory privileges the interactions of a system's elements, as it is not in the individuals but in their relationships that emergence is produced. For Cilliers, these emergent properties are one of the most defining characteristics of a complex system; they 'cannot simply be reduced to properties of components in the system.' (See Paul Cilliers, 'The value of complexity: a response to Elizabeth Mowat & Brent Davis', *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* 7. 1 (2010), 39-42 (p. 40); and Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism: Understanding complex systems* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).).

moments of 'bounded instability.'[14] Ralph D. Stacey defines this as 'an essentially paradoxical space of simultaneous stability and instability.'[15] At such a point, the system's instability is barely contained by its existing order. This state is also referred to as 'the edge of chaos':

> All these complex systems have somehow acquired the ability to bring order and chaos into a special kind of balance. This balance point – often called *the edge of chaos* – is where the components of a system never quite lock into place, and yet never dissolve into turbulence, either. The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life. The edge of chaos is where new ideas and innovative genotypes are forever nibbling away at the edges of the status quo, and where even the most entrenched old guard will eventually be overthrown.[16]

At this point, a system is likely to produce new, creative elements and behaviours that may drastically change the system or parts of it. As a culmination of tension between established system order and chaotic novelty, bounded instability requires a different way of conceptualising 'order' and 'chaos': rather than binary oppositions, these concepts are complementary and necessary states. As Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers argue in their seminal work, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*, '[i]n many cases it is difficult to disentangle the meaning of words such as "order" and "chaos."'[17] Complex systems require both for their survival. Dodds points to the paradoxical truth that 'chaos is far from the opposite of order and structure' because 'the nonlinear processes of chaos give rise to stability by allowing the system to creatively adapt to environmental change'.[18] Stacey points to the importance of bounded instability in his work on complexity theory in organisations:

> The key discovery complexity scientists have made about complex adaptive systems is that they are creative only when they operate in what might be called

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[14] Ralph D. Stacey, *Complexity and Creativity in Organisations* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996), p. 95.

[15] Ibid, p. 97.

[16] M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: the Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 12.

[17] Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (London: New Science Library, 1984), p. 169.

[18] Dodds, p. 161.

a space for novelty. This is a phase transition on the edge of chaos, that is, at the edge of system disintegration.[19]

Bounded instability is a critical and invaluable state because it enables a complex system to change and to develop. This essay will argue that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the dances create or respond to moments of bounded instability. Dance both generates turbulent interactions and communications (creating bounded instability), and it changes the social and environmental landscapes in response to this turbulence (negotiating bounded instability). Thus, dance enables essential change and development of the systems in which it takes place.

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Dance is traditionally considered one of the oldest forms of art.[20] However, as an ephemeral, nonverbal, embodied, and culturally specific movement, dance – whether historical or contemporary – is by nature difficult to describe. Sixteenth-century directions (explicit or embedded) for dance found within early modern play-texts like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* compound these challenges: we must explore unseen dances based on often ambiguous directives which rely on assumed knowledge that we may not have access to.[21] As David Bevington and Peter Holbrook point out, 'deciphering clues as to the exact nature of the dance [in court masques] is notoriously difficult.'[22] Christopher Marsh adds that:

> [T]he historian must execute an ambitious leap of the imagination in order to understand the prominent and often controversial place occupied by dance within early modern culture.[23]

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[19] Stacey, p. 97.

[20] Helen Thomas, *Dance, Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 8. Also see Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's chapter on dance as one of the oldest art forms: '"Man Has Always Danced": Forays into an Art Largely Forgotten by Philosophers', in Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Corporeal Turn: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009), 306-27.

[21] This essay does not attempt to engage with the early modern staging practicalities of dance in London's public theatres, but focuses instead on the role of dance within the fictional playworld.

[22] David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (eds.), *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 14.

[23] Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 328.

In this essay, such an ambitious leap will be made through conceptualising dance within early modern discourse, modern dance theory, and complexity theory. These three frameworks are essential for constructing a well-rounded understanding of dance as both a literal act of artistic expression and a metaphor for system behaviour.

Extant early modern discourse on dancing demonstrates that the practice was linked to tensions around social order and disorder. This discourse can appear polarised along two main arguments: one which saw dancing as 'an important means of social and individual control', the other which argued that 'dancing was the practice that drove society *out of* control, and that needed *to be controlled.*'[24] Dancing was sometimes envisaged as a benevolent imitation of the celestial motions which reinforced patriarchal and dominant societal values and order. According to E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, the Elizabethans visualised the universe as 'one perpetual dance' comprising 'many lesser dancers.'[25] Tillyard argues that 'the cosmic dance [was] reproduced in the body politic, thus completing the series of dances in macrocosm body politic and microcosm.'[26] In aligning the behavioural patterns of the macrocosmic and microcosmic, the cosmic dance motif is strikingly similar to complexity theory. Gabriel Egan has astutely pointed this out in his identification of the similarities between the early modern Chain of Being and complexity theory.[27] Dance was thus both an early modern metaphor for the universe and a way for humans to embody and manifest correspondence between the microcosm (humankind) and macrocosm (cosmos). As Skiles Howard reiterates:

> Our understanding of the dances in Shakespeare's plays has long been informed by the image of the cosmic dance, a commonplace of elite culture that was invoked to dignify the social dancing of the courts as an imitation of heavenly motions.[28]

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[24] Skiles Howard, *The Politics of Courtly Dancing in Early Modern England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 53. For more information on antidance tracts, see Mary Pennino-Baskerville, 'Terpsichore Reviled: Antidance Tracts in Elizabethan England', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22. 3 (1991), 473-93. Christopher Marsh also provides a list of key antidance works (2010, p. 357). Some early modern publications that incorporated favourable views on dancing include: Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531); Sir John Davies' poem, *Orchestra* (1596); and William Kemp's *Kemp's Nine Daies Wonder* (1600).

[25] E.M.W Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), pp. 101, 104.

[26] Ibid., p. 106.

[27] Gabriel Egan, 'Gaia and the Great Chain of Being,' in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ed. by Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 57-69 (p. 69).

[28] Skiles Howard, 'Hands, Feet, and Bottoms: Decentering the Cosmic Dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44. 3 (1993), 325-42 (p. 325).

An opposing viewpoint, however, emphasised 'dance's more carnal associations'.[29] In this light, dance was an endangerment to the dancer's spiritual welfare.[30] These incongruous understandings of early modern dance reinforce the correlation between dance and the concept of bounded instability. As a practice that could invoke such polarised responses, dance appears to have occupied an ambiguous place between chaotic behaviour and social order in early modern English culture.

While these extreme stances provide a very neat binary by which to approach early modern dance, we should also keep in mind, as Marsh notes, that most of the population probably occupied more of a middle ground in relation to these viewpoints.[31] Furthermore, this understanding of dance relies upon an imprecise dichotomy of order/disorder. This is evident in Alan Brissenden's important work, *Shakespeare and the Dance,* where the function of dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is defined rather equivocally as to 'comment on and affect the major pattern of order and disorder in the action.'[32] Further clarity and specificity can be gained through more precise analysis of these exact manifestations of order and disorder: if dance is an enactment of stability, what is it enacting against? How precisely does it embody, represent, or engage with forms of equilibrium and disequilibrium in the play? Martin Butler, in his work on court masques, has noted an equivalent tendency to define masque politics in too formulaic a way, citing the example of a scholarly focus on 'the relentless and rather repetitive routing of "disorder" by "order"' regardless of specific contextual complications.[33] Arguing against what he views as a tendency to delimit the court masque as nothing more than 'courtly narcissism', Butler states that the court masques 'did not reiterate a predetermined kingly absolutism but participated creatively in the to and fro of practical political life'.[34]

This indicates a similarly sophisticated process of meaning and function at work in both the Stuart court masques and in the dances of Shakespeare. This essay does not wish to either elide the distinctions between court masque and dance on the public stage or segue into a discussion on their points of intersection or disconnection. However, Butler's work in relation to problematising interpretations of the Stuart court masque

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[29] Douglas Lanier, 'Fertile Visions: Jacobean Revels and the Erotics of Occasion', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 39. 2 (1999), 327-56 (p. 331).

[30] Marsh, pp. 357-360.

[31] Ibid, pp. 380-381.

[32] Alan Brissenden, *Shakespeare and the Dance* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 327.

[33] Martin Butler, *The Stuart Court Masque and Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 12.

[34] Ibid., p. 18.

provides an important precedent for an analysis of dance in Shakespeare. Similar complexities need to be taken into account in this exploration of the dances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If courtly dance was not purely to align with the heavens, just as court masques were not purely to celebrate the king's authority, then the dances in Shakespeare's plays deserve more attention and investigation for their complicated production of meanings.

Dance theory and complexity theory offer a means by which to clarify the precise role of dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[35] In modern dance theory, dance is envisaged not as an enactment of harmony or disorder, but rather as an efficacious, transformative act. Although acknowledging the difficulties in defining dance, Helen Thomas refers to dance as 'an encoded system which inheres particular stylistic qualities' and is characterised by 'transformative' movement.[36] Early twentieth-century dancer Isadora Duncan defined dance as 'not only the art that gives expression to the human soul through movement, but also the foundation of a complete conception of life'.[37] For Duncan, dancing was more than a physical activity:

> It was not simply a matter of what dance should be, but what it should do – what it should accomplish within the social sphere. […] [I]t was the self's means of creating beyond itself.[38]

Sondra Fraleigh comes to a similar definition of dance:

> [A]s art, dance is movement that has undergone some meaningful transformation. It is thus that it holds the transformational power to move us beyond self and beyond the ordinary.[39]

She argues that 'we create ourselves in our dance and experience ourselves in the dance of others'.[40] For both Duncan and Fraleigh, dance is a means of transformation through

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[35] Charges of anachronism may be levelled at the use of these contemporary theories to understand early modern dance. This research is informed by a presentist approach, which negates such an argument, as any interaction with historical texts is inevitably informed by our own contexts. (See Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, (eds.), *Presentist Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).) Furthermore, as a description of social and biological behaviour, complexity theory is directly relevant for the social and theatrical systems explored here.

[36] Thomas, p. 28.

[37] Isadora Duncan in Ann Daly, 'Isadora Duncan's Dance Theory', *Dance Research Journal* 26. 2 (1994), 24-31 (p. 26).

[38] Ibid, 26.

[39] Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), p. 140.

interaction, of movement that recreates not only the dancer but that which is 'beyond' them. In keeping with the transformative potential of dance emphasised here, recent research describes the action of dancers and choreographers as '"mediating structures" which transform their cognitive tasks and processes.'[41]

While these dance theorists define dance as a transformative interaction, complexity theorists use the metaphor of dance to describe a system's interactions. In his discussion of self-organisation, biologist Stuart Kauffman refers to 'coupled dancing landscapes' and dancing 'partners' to describe the interaction between system parts.[42] Complexivist biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela also use choreography figuratively to depict the structural behaviour of complex processes:

> Whatever we do in every domain, whether concrete (walking) or abstract (philosophical reflection), involves us totally in the body, for it takes place through our structural dynamics and through our structural interactions. Everything we do is a structural dance in the choreography of coexistence.[43]

Here, dance is envisaged as a means of self-making through interaction, where our dance steps (concrete or abstract) constitute our continued existence. In their work on complex pedagogy, Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara also adopt the metaphor of 'structural dance', describing it as a valuable way of visualising how complex systems work, and how learners engage with the world.[44] For Davis and Sumara, structural dance is a useful conceptualisation of learning processes because of its focus on how the parts affect each other. They use it as an alternative to what they define as more 'linear cause-effect mentalities'.[45] In their work with cognitive science, Evelyn Tribble and John Sutton note a similar usage of the metaphor of dance: 'Performance theorists may be pleasantly surprised to find dance thus in place as a guiding metaphor for certain approaches in cognitive science.'[46]

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[40] Ibid., p. 251.

[41] John Sutton and Evelyn Tribble, 'Introduction: Interdisciplinarity and Cognitive Approaches to Performance,' in *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being*, ed. by Nicole Shaughnessy (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), pp. 27-37, (p. 35).

[42] Stuart Kauffman, *The Origins of Order: Self-Organisation and Selection in Evolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 243-244.

[43] Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, trans. by Robert Paolucci (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), p. 248.

[44] Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara, *Complexity and Education: Inquiries into Learning, Teaching, and Research* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), pp. 15-16. They do not explicitly reference Maturana and Varela's use of the term.

[45] Ibid., p. 100.

[46] Sutton and Tribble, p. 35.

Dance, then, in both dance theory and complexity theory, is configured as a self-making movement that can transform both the dancers and that which is beyond them. For the purposes of this essay, then, dance can be described as a form of self-making interaction which produces change in the dancers and their wider (social or environmental) systems. Instigated as a reaction to a disturbance in the system, dance is constituted by the interaction of two or more partners. This interaction is a form of communication which produces change in both the dancers and their wider (social or environmental) systems. The dance may act as positive feedback, destabilising and transforming the system, creating or exacerbating the state of bounded instability, or it may create negative feedback, limiting system transformation and moving the system away from bounded instability. The change produced by the dance can transform the state of the dancers and the systems to which they belong.

This transformative quality of dance is mirrored more broadly in what Peter Holland describes as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s endless fascination with 'the possibilities of transformation and translation within its action and by its metamorphoses of its materials'.[47] Shakespeare uses dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to create and negotiate turbulent communications and to transform the social and environmental systems and their various parts. As a complexivist term and in Shakespeare, dance is an efficacious mode of artistic expression, a recurring metaphor for conceptualising how people interact, and a useful way of understanding the interactions of a complex system.

II

One of the most intriguing and unheeded moments of dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is referred to retrospectively, and centres on the relation between dance and a loss of equilibrium in the play's social and natural systems. Titania recounts past dances,[48] declaring:

> These are the forgeries of jealousy,
> And never since the middle summer's spring
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,
> By pavèd fountain or by rushy brook,

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[47] Holland, p. 109.

[48] In describing a past offstage dance, Titania provides a rare counter-example to Erika T. Lin's argument that '[i]n order to represent a dance taking place within the imaginary world of a play, actors had to actually dance in the real-life playhouse.' (Erika T. Lin, 'A Witch in the Morris: Hobbyhorse Tricks and Early Modern Erotic Transformations', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater*, ed. by Nadine George-Graves (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015), pp. 335-361 (p. 336).

> Or in the beachèd margin of the sea
> To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
> But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.
> Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge have sucked up from the sea
> Contagious fogs which, falling in the land,
> Hath every pelting river made so proud
> That they have overborne their continents. (2.1.81-92)

Shakespeare envisages two types of dance here: the first is Titania's, the repercussions of its interruption implying that it is an efficacious process of negative feedback performed to celebrate and ensure the stability of the fairy and natural systems. The second is Oberon's unexpected, chaotic intrusion, an example of positive feedback that causes bounded instability and disorders and 'disturbs' the regular system patterns.

Titania accuses Oberon of disturbing the dancing of her ringlets – circular dances – with his brawls, which Holland describes as 'more boisterous, circular dances' (2.1.87n). Brissenden elaborates more specifically on this, offering two definitions for the brawl (beyond the pun on brawl as a quarrel) as both a 'rocking' step in the *basse* dance where weight is shifted from one foot to another, and also as a '[l]inked dance' in which the dancers move sideways, not forwards.[49] It is thus possible to imagine Oberon's 'brawl' as intruding upon Titania's ringlets by entering the circle sideways, placing weighted feet down to break up the fairy queen's dancers. The language in this passage highlights the conflict between the dancing: the lighter, chiming, flowing harmonies of the alliterative 'whistling wind' (2.1.86) contrast to the abrupt stops and plosives of the following line with its hard 'B' and 'T' sounds (2.1.87).

Titania specifically cites Oberon's interruption of her 'sport' (2.1.87) as the primary reason for the winds' anger. The wind is characterised ambiguously as audience, dancer, and 'piping' musical accompanist, making a partnership of sound and motion. Simon Palfrey wonders, 'Does the dance produce the wind, both its energy and its sound?'[50] This spontaneously choreographed conflict between the ringlet and brawl acts as positive feedback or turbulence, pushing the ringlets out of equilibrium and out of sync with the winds. This creates a system brought to bounded instability, or as Titania describes it, 'distemperature' (2.1.106). As Douglas Lanier acknowledges:

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[49] Brissenden, p. 112.

[50] Simon Palfrey, *Doing Shakespeare*, (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 40.

> [I]t is important to recognise that the effective cause of this blight is Oberon's disruption of their mutual fairy dance, a dance apparently necessary to preserve the fertility of the kingdom.[51]

Oberon's dance here embodies complexivist Edgar Morin's definition of a complex action, which, as soon as it is begun, 'starts to escape from its creators' intentions'.[52] Morin argues that such action 'enters into a sphere of *inter*actions and is finally grasped by the environment in a way that may be contrary to the initial intention'.[53] In this case, although the purpose of the brawl was to vent his frustration on Titania's withholding the Indian boy, the dance does not produce the child but rather engenders unintended and disproportionate environmental bounded instability, represented through the flood. Oberon's dance is both a response to conflict and a creator of conflict: the friction between Oberon's and Titania's dances causes bounded instability, transforming the relationship between Titania and the natural forces, which in turn transforms the environmental system.

This reinforces the power of Titania's dances: their successful performance ensures the continuation of natural equilibrium. This relationship is also expressed in C.L. Barber's claim that in Shakespeare's comedy, '[t]he way nature is felt is shaped…by the things that are done in encountering it.'[54] Here, nature is encountered and shaped through dance. This complex interaction between dancers and nature can be better understood through Duncan's aesthetic and social dance theory, which posited that '[t]hrough dance, as either dancer or spectator, each "soul" could partake in divine unity with "Nature"'.[55] But this relationship makes the practice of dance simultaneously dangerous, because if the dancer's actions escape their intentions or an unexpected element intrudes, as occurs here, the system becomes highly unpredictable. This is demonstrated in the inversion of temporality as '[t]he seasons alter' (2.1.107). The

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[51] Lanier, pp. 333-334. He does not, however, pursue the point, arguing instead that the disruption of the seasonal cycle is due to Oberon's desire for the Indian boy. While this is the source of Oberon's disruptive positive feedback, it is not what the environment responds to – that is only Oberon's argument. The fairy king claims that Titania can 'amend' the environmental disruption, as the responsibility 'lies' in her (2.1.118). His reasoning that she can resolve the calamity by giving him what he wants is disingenuous, as the environmental disorder is a result of Oberon's interruption of Titania's ringlet, not her withholding the child.

[52] Edgar Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, trans. Nidra Poller (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1999), p. 45.

[53] Ibid, p. 45.

[54] C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 132.

[55] Daly, p. 27.

passage does not suggest that the environmental system is made infertile, but rather that nature's reproductive potential has been perverted. The system has not been utterly destroyed but has undergone chaotic change. It is a scene not of violent destruction, but of needless waste: the ox 'hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain' (2.1.93), the green corn rots prematurely (2.1.94-95), and the crows grow fat 'with the murrain flock' (2.1.97). The seasons do not collapse but 'change/Their wonted liveries' (2.1.112-13), so that it is on winter's head that '[a]n odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds/Is, as in mock'ry, set.' (2.1.110-111) Oberon's brawling has turned the natural system topsy-turvy, or in Puck's phrase, made it act 'prepost'rously' (3.2.121).

The role of dance as a nonlinear, disruptive, and transformative act is further highlighted by the connection of the dance-induced flood with labyrinthine imagery:

> The nine men's morris is filled up with mud,
> And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
> For lack of tread are undistinguishable. (2.1.98-100)

Titania here describes a maze overrun by a flooded river, with the reference to 'morris' further highlighting the connection between Titania's imagery and her dances.[56] The river and maze images share a refusal to follow linear 'Aristotelean' lines, with neither pursuing a straight path from beginning to end. Greene describes this 'controlled confusion' as 'the Meander effect', a term referring to a pattern or process that is distinctly nonlinear, and which confuses end and beginning in the 'sinuosities' of its movement.[57] This concept of controlled confusion strongly resembles complexity theory's bounded instability.[58] Thus, Shakespeare's pointed interweaving of the three images (dances, rivers, mazes) makes clear that the fairies' turbulent dances have

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[56] As well as grasping the link between 'morris' (2.1.98) as a turf maze *and* an infamous dance, early modern spectators and readers could also easily make a connection between the dancing described by Titania and the phenomenon of labyrinth dancing. Shakespeare here refers to an early modern cultural connection between dance and garden design. As Jennifer Nevile has argued, 'dance shared similar design principles with garden design and architecture.' ('Order, Proportion, and Geometric Forms: The Cosmic Structure of Dance, Grand Gardens, and Architecture during the Renaissance', *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250-1750* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 308.)

[57] Greene, 1419.

[58] The Meander effect appears to be a description of complex phenomena. It shares the same core features, including decentralisation and self-organisation, the idea of 'controlled confusion' or bounded instability, complete nonlinearity, and a lack of predetermined objectives (it is non-deterministic and nonlinear).

caused a distinct break with stable, linear system patterns.[59] The dances have upset the status quo and created 'controlled confusion' or 'bounded instability', which transforms – but does not destroy – the system.

In his 1596 poem, *Orchestra*, Sir John Davies makes a similar connection between dancing and rivers:

> Of all their wayes I loue *Meanders* path,
> Which to the tunes of dying Swans doth daunce,
> Such winding sleights, such turnes and tricks he hath,
> Such Creekes, such wrenches, and such daliaunce,
> That whether it be hap or heedlesse chaunce,
> In his indented course and wringling play
> He seemes to daunce a perfect cunning Hay.[60]

In this stanza, Davies explicitly highlights the unpredictable and nonlinear nature of dance through the river image which, in its windings and dalliances, 'turnes and trickes' and moves in such a way that he cannot tell if it is directed 'by hap or heedlesse chaunce'. The evocation of dance in Davies' description echoes the definition of the hay dance as '[a] country dance having a winding or serpentine movement, or being of the nature of a reel.'[61] In precisely this unpredictable and sinuous choreography, the river performs a 'perfect' hay. Dance then, for Davies, does not always move towards a predetermined end; it can instead be a winding, complicated set of movements that are unknown until they unfold.

In act two of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dance is similarly unpredictable and emergent: it both causes and responds to bounded instability, providing an embodied language to negotiate this turbulent state. Shakespeare uses dance as a means to embody, explore, and negotiate the effects of local turbulence upon the play's broader social, political, and environmental systems. Dance here performs two functions: it communicates turbulence, and it transforms and reshapes the dancers' environmental systems.

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[59] See Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* for a passage also linking dance and the 'labyrinth or maze'.

[60] Sir John Davies, 'Orchestra or a Poeme of Dauncing. Iudicially proouing the true obseruation of time and measure, in the Authenticall and laudable vse of Dauncing' (London: I. Robarts for N. Ling, 1596), stanza 53.

[61] *Oxford English Dictionary*, '*hay | hey, n.4*' (Oxford University Press).

In contrast to the offstage dances described in their first appearance, the fairy couple's dance in the fourth act is perhaps one of the most well-recognised in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon commands:

> Sound music.
> [*The music changes*]
>   Come, my queen, take hands with me,
> And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be.
> *Oberon and Titania dance*
> Now thou and I are new in amity,
> And will tomorrow midnight solemnly
> Dance in Duke Theseus' house, triumphantly,
> And bless it to all fair prosperity.
> There shall the pairs of faithful lovers be
> Wedded with Theseus, all in jollity. (4.1.84-91)

The stage directions for music and dance here are not in the Quarto or Folio editions of the play; however, Oberon and Titania's requests for music (4.1.80; 82; 84), and that he and Titania 'take hands' and 'rock the ground', strongly imply the presence of a dance.

Titania and Oberon's dance here is typically seen as metonymic of the reconciliation and harmonisation of the play's conclusion, with Harold F. Brooks, Brissenden and Holland offering such an interpretation.[62] Brissenden writes:

> [T]he dance clearly has two purposes. One is to ensure that the lovers and Bottom sleep well and wake refreshed – the dancers will 'rock the ground' as a mother rocks a cradle. The second, wider, meaning is to confirm the reconciliation of Titania and Oberon, and re-establish their domestic harmony.[63]

According to Holland,

> The dance moves the play powerfully towards a new movement of reunion and reconciliation, symbolising the newly orthodox harmony and hierarchy between

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[62] See Howard (1993) for an overview of these approaches to the text.
[63] Brissenden, p. 44.

Oberon and Titania, husband and wife, king and queen. … As usual the orthodoxy of female compliance in the pattern of order is emphasised.[64]

Howard goes some way towards complicating these conclusions, and while suggesting that dancing in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not naturalise order but instead 'has revealed it to be provisional and man-made', she focuses on gender and class binaries associated with dancing as a replication of patriarchal custom.[65] This resituates dancing as a reinforcement of social order.

Certainly, there is a clear sense of reconciliation in this scene, as the dance marks a change of system state from turbulence to stability. It thus operates as negative feedback, reducing the couple's turbulent conflict. This dance not only symbolises but also *enacts* the couple's structural reunification. Further, it does more than revert the couple to an earlier state of unity: in reuniting they are not the same but, as Oberon says, 'are new' (4.1.86) versions of themselves. This is emphasised by the fact that the play-text does not provide an initial glimpse of the united couple; the audience only ever knows them at war. In a ritual sense, the performance becomes an efficacious one whereby symbolic dance translates to actual unification, and in the process, re-makes the couple. However, while it is evident that this dance is aligned with the reunification of the royal fairy couple – thus negotiating the state of bounded instability – there are two important qualifications to make here: first, that such a reading of dance as a unifying force should not be generically expanded out to any consideration of dance as this unnecessarily denies other interpretive possibilities for its wider purpose and effect; and second, dance plays a more complicated role here than has thus far been attributed to it.

Although Oberon's use of single end-rhyme sound (4.1.84-91) in this passage does blatantly appear to accentuate a sense of reunification and concord, it is simply too excessive. The superfluous nouns and adjectives – 'amity', 'solemnly', 'triumphantly', 'prosperity', 'jollity' (4.1.86-89; 91) – are almost comically overindulgent and extreme. The rhyming here is intense, even when contrasted to the AABB rhyme scheme that Oberon and Titania adopt immediately following this dance (see 4.1.94-101). The potential parody of Oberon's rhyming becomes a force for positive feedback, ironically creating a latent turbulence through the inordinate harmony of the rhyme and undermining the authenticity of this reconciliation.

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[64] Holland, p. 219.

[65] Howard, *The Politics of Courtly Dancing*, p. 81.

This excessiveness is heightened by the realisation that the content of Oberon's speech here concerns *another* dance. There is a purpose to this dance beyond an amicable reunion – Oberon wants to ensure that he and Titania are able to dance the blessing to Theseus and his house. Like act two's dances, this dance is conceptually doubled up; in both scenes multiple dances occur or are discussed. This pattern of doubled dances continues in the final act: not only do multiple dances occur (including the players' bergamask and the fairies' final dance), but Barber has argued that the fairies' concluding dance is actually made up of two dances itself.[66] This heightens not just the interconnection of the dances but their centrality to the interactions of various systems: one dance in fairyland enables another dance in Athens. These overlapping, multiple dances also decentralise any sense of concentrated authority across the narrative. The dances and dancers can be seen as interactive parts of the play's broader social systems. Sarah Smitherman further explores the relationship between the dancers and their greater context, arguing that:

> A dance is an example of a structural, self-making experience that is mutually negotiated between parts of the whole. The network of relations that occur within this dance functions in a feedback loop so as to continually move, change, and develop in relation to an even greater context (or whole).[67]

This definition of complex dance clarifies the mutually constitutive relationship of dances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The linking of this royal dance with the final dances emphasises dance's embodiment of a 'network of relations'. Shakespeare's renewal of the fairy couple affects the individuals taking part in the dance directly (the network of relations within the dance), as well as other dancers and system parts related to them, from the fairies to the mortals (the greater context or whole). Through their interactions the dances negotiate moments of crisis and reshape the relationships of the system parts.

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[66] Barber suggests that:

> There were probably two dance evolutions also, the first a processional dance led by the king and the second a round led by the queen: Oberon's lines direct the fairies to dance and sing 'through the house,' 'by the fire,' 'after me'; Titania seems to start a circling dance with 'First rehearse your song by rote'; by contrast with Oberon's 'after me,' she calls for 'hand in hand' (p. 138).

The potential lack of unity implied by multiple dances complicates the closing of the play, and decentralises its narrative direction.

[67] Sarah Smitherman, 'Chaos and Complexity Theories: Wholes and Holes in Curriculum' in *Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum and Culture*, ed. by William E. Doll et al, (New York: Lang, 2005), pp. 153-80 (p. 171).

The excessive rhyme scheme and the multiplication of interconnecting dances may imply that this dance represents Oberon's attempt to re-establish control lost by the turbulent instability of the second act dances. Howard suggests that early modern dancing could function as a means by which to demonstrate the illusion of power and control:

> [I]n a time of uncertainty…dancing was a kinetic talisman, a physical training that materialised the illusion of social control – whatever his place in the hierarchy, the dancer might reassure himself that his exertions would improve his social position as certainly as his posture.[68]

This reading is problematised by its reliance on the dancer's objective aligning with the interpretation of onlookers, as well as the potential for a performance to escape the dancer's intentions, as witnessed earlier. But despite these qualifications, it is possible that Howard's argument can shed light on this dance. Oberon's decision to 'take hands' with Titania (4.1.84) in a dance of 'amity' (4.1.86) can be seen as a smokescreen to conceal his questionable tactics thus far. In sealing their reunion through dance before Titania is fully aware of what has transpired, Oberon can materialise 'the illusion of social control', *performing* rather than *proving* his control over the situation, even if that control is illusory. Oberon's earlier dance revealed the limitations of the Fairy King's control over his wife and the play's systems. In failing to achieve what his earlier brawl attempted, Oberon inadvertently displayed a weakness, suggesting that while dance may be used to *contain* bounded instability, it is just as capable of *causing* it. Here, Oberon again attempts to use dance politically to exert his power, but it is equally possible that the complexity of the systems in which he operates will again complicate this strategy.

If Oberon is using the dance to create an illusion of control, it may not be overwhelmingly successful: Titania's seeming-compliance in this scene comes with her own demand for an explanation – their new-found 'amity' does not dissolve her desire for Oberon to '[t]ell [her] how' the night's events have come about (4.1.99). The query undermines both Oberon's control and any sense of permanent reunion, and could arguably imply future discord. Furthermore, in restoring order, this dance can be seen as turbulent in its system-altering effects: it disrupts the previous system state, even though that previous state was one of discord. It restores Oberon's idea of order at the cost of Titania's independence. The dance can be both a harmonious reconciliation and a discordant power grab that destabilises the previous system state generated by Titania's

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[68] Howard, *The Politics of Courtly Dancing*, p. 31.

possession of the Indian boy. What is system harmony for Oberon may be a state of bounded instability for his queen.

The ambiguity and volatility of the fairy couple's relationship implies that stasis is never permanently achieved. The harmony of the fourth act dance may be short-lived, but this oscillation between states of stability and conflict is necessary for the system's longevity. In Maturana and Varela's biological terminology, Oberon and Titania can be thought of as a 'structural coupling', which occurs when two autopoietic (self-making) unities – here, individuals – have a history of recurrent interactions leading to the structural congruence between their two systems.[69] Titania and Oberon undergo coupled ontogenies – the history of structural change in their two unities without loss of organisation in either unity – because their interactions are *recurrent*. In other words, these dances represent ongoing interactions that remake and transform the couple in necessary and productive ways. Change is never over, the dance is continuous, and so a resolution is never permanently reached, because 'the ontogenic transformation of a unity ceases only with its disintegration'.[70] This 'recurrent coupling' may help 'the stabilisation and strengthening of these forms', as 'recurrence takes place when experiences cannot be brought to a completely satisfying completion, which leads to unresolved intentions and blocked-off actions.'[71] Titania and Oberon's recurrent conflict is as essential as their reunification; just as the chaos inflicted upon the lovers is required for their eventual harmonious unions. Permanent stability is undesirable, which makes the play's concluding harmony questionable and open-ended. As Louis Montrose writes in his discussion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> It is usually the case that the end of the play serves to reaffirm the dominant positions; nevertheless, the prior action may have opened up challenges and alternatives that subsequent attempts at closure cannot wholly efface.[72]

To survive, complex systems must continue to change and develop through moments of bounded instability. These moments provide enough disorder to produce change but retain enough structure to prevent system disintegration. Thus, different relationships are negotiated through the perturbations and structural changes of dance, but there is no

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[69] Maturana and Varela, p. 75.

[70] Ibid., p. 74.

[71] E. Saskia Kunnen, Harke A Bosma, Cor P. M. Van Halen, and Matty Van der Meulen, 'A Self-Organisational Approach to Identity and Emotions: An Overview and Implications' in *Identity and Emotion: Development through Self-Organisation*, ed. by Harke A Bosma and E. Saskia Kunnen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 202-30 (p. 221).

[72] Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 123.

sense that these are the last steps in a dance depicted as an ongoing process of negotiation and transformation.

IV

The final act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* unquestionably features at least two dances. The former is 'a bergamask dance' (5.1.346) which replaces the epilogue of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, when Theseus implores, 'come, your bergamask. Let your epilogue alone.' (5.1.352-3) In the latter, the mortal couples are connected through the fairies' dance:

> Now until the break of day
> Through this house each fairy stray.
> To the best bride bed will we,
> Which by us shall blessèd be,
> And the issue there create
> Ever shall be fortunate.
> So shall all the couples three
> Ever true in loving be,
> And the blots of nature's hand
> Shall not in their issue stand.
> Never mole, harelip, nor scar,
> Nor mark prodigious such as are
> Despisèd in nativity
> Shall upon their children be.
> With this field-dew consecrate
> Every fairy take his gait
> And each several chamber bless
> Through this palace with sweet peace;
> And the owner of it blessed
> Ever shall in safety rest.
> Trip away, make no stay,
> Meet me all by break of day. (5.1.392-413)[73]

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[73] There is some doubt over whether Oberon's final passage was intended to be a song, as suggested by the Folio text (see Holland, 5.1.392-413n, and also Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy,* p. 138). While such speculation falls outside the scope of this essay, whether these lines are meant as lyrics or a speech implies much regarding the role of dance at this point.

This final dance is used as negative feedback to achieve Oberon's objective of maintaining a stable Athenian social order by giving 'their [Theseus and Hippolyta's] bed joy and prosperity' (2.1.73). The dance is designed to prevent future change or disruption (the imagined 'blots of nature's hand') by 'maintaining an internal equilibrium'.[74] Oberon's order that fairies dance through 'each several chamber' (5.1.408) emphasises that the dance is the process of interaction by which the mortal couples are linked. The inhabitants of the house are not blessed indiscriminately but only in their relation to each other as parts of a greater whole – as partners in a structural, self-making dance. The focus on the bridal bed, the issue thereof, the couples, and even the coupling of the couples into a 'three' (5.1.398) suggests an interconnection accomplished by the supernatural dance. Earlier, Oberon explicitly describes this interrelation of the mortal couples, prophesying: 'There shall the pairs of faithful lovers be/Wedded with Theseus, all in jollity' (4.1.90-1). In addition to its primary meaning that the lovers, Theseus and Hippolyta will all be married, the syntax also suggests that Theseus is wedded *to* the lovers by the acts of marriage and dance. The focus is less upon the dance itself and more upon what connections are enabled by the dance.

In addition to the bergamask and the fairy dance, there are two additional dances that may be present in the final act. As Barber has argued (see above), the fairy dance may itself comprise two dances, which further decentralises the authority within the fairy social system and potentially operates as a form of positive feedback. There is also another potential dance referred to in Puck's penultimate speech. Placed between the mortals' final exit and the fairies' final entry, Puck's speech interrupts the dominant narrative flow of both the mortal and fairy systems, dividing the dances of mortals and fairy. [75] Without this speech, the two central dances would occur almost consecutively:[76]

> Now it is the time of night
> That the graves, all gaping wide,
> Every one lets forth his sprite
> In the churchway paths to glide;
> And we fairies that do run
> By the triple Hecate's team
> From the presence of the sun,

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[74] Davis and Sumara, 2006, p. 102.

[75] The contrast of this moment has led some to mark a new scene (5.2) at Puck's entry. See Holland, 5.1.361.1n.

[76] If the same actors performed both dances, this speech – as well as Theseus' closing lines before it (5.1.354-361) – would provide time for any necessary preparations.

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       Following darkness like a dream,[77]
       Now are frolic. (5.1.370-378)

This speech is also more than a division between dances; it itself may refer to dance. Puck's uses of such words as 'glide', 'run', 'following' and 'frolic' (5.1.73-74; 77-78) are not dissimilar to his earlier oblique dancing references, such as his taunting line: 'I'll follow you, I'll lead you about a round' (3.1.101), which both Brissenden and Holland agree relates to dancing. The intrusion of dark imagery (with its gaping graves and churchway paths) jars with the festive dancing which bookends this speech. Puck's night becomes a time not for a dance of celebration, but for something closer to a *danse macabre*. He transforms the church space – site of the ritual by which couples are joined – into a subverted place for nocturnal, supernatural activity.[78] This passage lends a new, darker energy to the enactment of dances and into the imagined church-space, destabilising dominant religious control and thus creating turbulence. Puck's imagined dance produces bounded instability in several ways: first, as a division between the two dominant social systems of Athens and fairyland, Puck is positioned here precisely within that dangerous overlap and thus threatens to transgress the boundaries and cause further disorder; second, in its description of disordered revelry contained only by 'the time of night' (5.1.370) and the absence of the sun (5.1.376), this passage constructs a sense of mischief enabled only within certain limitations – a chaos permitted only because it is contained. Metatheatrically, Puck's speech is a moment of liminal playfulness restricted by its contextualisation between overtly plot-driven action. Puck's turbulent positive feedback interrupts and effectively works against the stabilising effect of negative feedback generated by the harmonious dances: while the legitimate fairy dance aims to ensure 'sweet peace' (5.1.409) and stabilise the Athenian system, Puck's dance 'lets forth' (5.1.372) dark supernatural forces. However, while these forces may affect the tone of the play's conclusion, they are contained or bounded within Puck's soliloquy and within the fictional time and space of churchyard and night. This is most clear in the strange shift in subject matter as Puck suddenly moves from the imagining of the nocturnal 'frolic' to the harmony of the 'hallowed house'(5.1.378-379). He implies, perhaps, that the chaotic darkness of the night will be barred from entry to 'the door' (5.1.381) of Theseus' home, a boundary which is, however, undermined by Puck's presence as both one of the 'fairies that do run/By the triple Hecate's team' (5.1.374-375) and also as the broom-sweeping supernatural aide to Oberon and by extension, to Theseus.

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[77] I have silently deleted the additional 'a' erroneously printed in this line in Holland's edition.

[78] See Puck's similar passage at 3.2.380-387.

The fifth act thus uses dance to both segregate and overlap the Athenian and fairy social systems. The Athenian cohort departs with a bergamask (5.1.353sd), Puck then envisages illicit churchyard dancing in the interim, before the fairies enter for their final dance/s (5.1.381sd). Shakespeare places each of these dances at key points of transition, at liminal moments of transformation from one state to another. It is Puck who straddles this overlap between mortal and fairy dance, and his transgression between spaces implies a moment of bounded instability; with a foot in both worlds, Puck destabilises the boundary but does not break it. Bounded instability is here a fragile balance between chaotic behaviour which pushes but does not transgress basic systemic restrictions of time and space. In fact, Puck draws attention to the temporality of the moment through the anaphoric 'now' (5.1.362, 366, 370, 378), which will later be echoed by Oberon (5.1.392).

The acts of dance are thus particularly concerned with interrogating and destabilising temporal and spatial borders; sites of bounded instability where change is far more likely and the performative space is open for interpretation. This self-conscious concern regarding the legitimate occupation of time and space is also evident when Theseus finally relinquishes the stage to the fairies based on an argument of temporal borders:

> The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.
> Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time.
> I fear we shall outsleep the coming morn
> As much as we this night have overwatched.
> This palpable-gross play hath well beguiled
> The heavy gait of night. Sweet friends, to bed.
> A fortnight hold we this solemnity
> In nightly revels and new jollity.[79] (5.1.354-361)

His parting words are preoccupied with temporal boundaries and moments of intersection: the alliterative 'T' sounds (5.1.354-5) in 'tongue', 'told,' twelve', 'to' and ''tis' pre-empt the emphasis placed on 'time' (5.1.355). Theseus' speech brims with temporal references: both to specific ('midnight', 'twelve' [5.1.354], 'fortnight' [5.1.360], 'nightly' [5.1.361]) and more general times of day ('the coming morn' [5.1.356], 'to bed' [5.1.355, 359] and 'night' [5.1.357, 359]). While keen to maintain a clear distinction between his social world and 'fairy time' (5.1.355), Theseus also acknowledges his fear that such hope is vain: in predicting that the mortals may

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[79] Theseus echoes Oberon's 'jollity' (4.1.91).

'outsleep' as they have 'overwatched' (5.1.356-7) he envisages an overlap between the socio-cultural worlds of fairyland and Athens.

Interestingly, this anxiety regarding legitimate times and spaces for the enactment of dancing is not without precedent in the period. In his discussion of legislation regarding dancing, Marsh writes:

> Legislators were in broad agreement regarding the need to prohibit dancing that either coincided with church services or took place in the sacred space of the church or churchyard. These were fairly common stipulations in visitation articles of the period.[80]

He adds that not only were there prohibitions against dancing in church space, but there were also regulations regarding the legitimate times for dancing. In his overview of cases against dancers from the 1570s to the 1660s, Marsh concludes that:

> Cases took a variety of forms. By far the largest category of dancing deviants comprised those who allegedly indulged themselves at the wrong time. Sometimes, this meant in the middle of the night or at other unseasonable hours. The majority, however, stood accused of dancing when they should have been in church.[81]

In this context, Puck's soliloquy becomes a direct violation of contemporary regulations for dancing, both in terms of place and time. It is therefore possible that Puck's speech and the dances that surround it reflect a contemporary concern with legitimate and illegitimate spaces and times for the enactment of dancing. By operating at the borders of permitted and illicit behaviour, dance negotiates that unstable zone of bounded instability.

Dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* thus highlights and undermines spatial and temporal boundaries. Complexity theory is also interested in reframing the conceptualisation of time. Nigel Thrift argues that complexity metaphors 'are important signs of new senses of time which are more open to possibility.'[82] Complexity theory enables 'a reframing of *space-time*, a series of possible worlds' in which 'the multiplicity of sequences ... lurk[s] at every fork of the present. They are shadow worlds

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[80] Marsh, p. 367.

[81] Ibid, p. 371.

[82] Nigel Thrift, 'The Place of Complexity,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 3 (1999): 31-69 (p. 59). Thrift argues that this complexivist interpretation of time is 'actually simply a continuation of the older time spaces by other means' (pp. 59-60).

about which we can never be certain.'[83] Puck's churchyard dance takes place in just such an uncertain shadow world. If the metaphors of complexity 'make it easier to think about *time* in new ways', then Puck's liminal church-yard dance hints at an understanding of time as 'full of possibility and potentiality', of time as a series of shadow worlds which defy certainty.[84] His nocturnal frolic seems to take place in an overlapping space between fairy and mortal worlds and consequently implies a sense of double-time, as the fairies are simultaneously blessing Theseus' house and gliding in churchway paths. This complexivist reading of the final dances recasts the play's construction of time and space 'as dimensions *open to possibility*'.[85]

Thus, the final dances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are used to negotiate moments of transition and transformation for the characters and their systems at critical moments of change in the performative space. Dance is a vehicle for navigating bounded instability, and it also acts to signal major changes in the fictive space of the play. Dancing becomes a discourse by which to examine our limitations, to question how we interact with each other, with the perceived edges of our systems and that which lies outside them, and in doing so, to transform ourselves and those with whom we dance.

V

All three dances considered here exemplify how local interactions can produce widespread repercussions across interconnecting systems, from agricultural and environmental networks, to marital and political harmony and boundaries of time and space. The performances of dance in this play are not simply about enjoyment or celebration: there are high stakes for Titania and Oberon's relationship, for the fairy kingdom, for mortals, and for the natural environmental system which they all inhabit. This makes dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a geopolitical discourse. It is the vehicle used to create and respond to bounded instability in the political and natural systems of the play. In this way, the literal act of dance is also a political act, and more than this, dance becomes a language to express individual responses to the social landscape and an act to change this landscape.

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[83] Ibid., p. 58. Italics in original.
[84] Ibid., p. 56. Italics in original.
[85] Ibid., p. 59. Italics in original.

The dances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both instigate and respond to bounded instability. Dances – whether enacted or described – take place at moments of major transformation for the play's characters, systems, and environments. Dance both prevents and creates instability and change; it causes and remedies environmental and personal traumas. Frequently, dance occurs when a system and its parts are at the precipice of significant change or development, and its enactment changes both the dancers and the systems they inhabit. By using a complex framework to examine dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it becomes clear that dance is not purely a reflection of the hierarchical order of society and the cosmos, nor the incarnation of disorder and deviancy. Rather, dance creates and negotiates bounded instability, those liminal moments of system crisis when disorder and change are imminent.

Interrogating the moments of dance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shifts the critical gaze: attention is drawn to those moments between actions, to the joins of the narrative's architecture where instability and the threat of chaos hover for a moment, before integrating again with the stable structures of the play. In creating and negotiating bounded instability, dance shapes the characters, their social relationships, and their environments. This analysis undermines the play's concluding harmony, and enables us to reconceptualise the relationship between Titania and Oberon, and between the social and environmental systems of the play.