Theatre Academy

"They willfully themselves exile from light":
Exile in Space, Stage and Metatheatre in
William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

"Işıktan kaçıp bile isteye sürgün ederler kendilerini":
William Shakespeare'in *Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası*'nda
Mekânda, Sahnede ve Metatiyatroda Sürgün

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Abstract

Exile runs throughout William Shakespeare's A *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Transformed characters are exiled from the human world when they change shapes. Others are forced to leave their countries and worlds to enter magical ones. Personalities and feelings shift because of magic. Examining the dichotomy between Athens and the forest and the theatrical transformations shows that exile is geographical, emotional and spatial. Exile is also endowed with a transmigrant dimension. The study of metatheatre in the play corroborates the presence of an exilic dimension. Finally, the application of Nathaniel C. Leonard's and Robert Weimann's fundamental notions of *platea*, *locus*, *meta-platea*, and *meta-locus* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* enables us to reach the finding that the Spectrum of Dramatic Layering hosts exilic manifestations. The research merges semantic investigations with the semiotics of theatre. Dealing with the matter of exile both from the lenses of literary and theatrical studies offers broader perspectives to understand the play's nuances and complexities.

Keywords: Metatheatre, Exile, Transformation, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare, Mise En Abyme, Spectrum of Dramatic Layering

Öz

Sürgün, William Shakespeare'in *Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası* adlı oyununun bütününde karşımıza çıkar. Dönüşen karakterler şekil değiştirdiklerinde insan dünyasından sürgün edilirler. Diğerleri ise büyülü dünyalara girmek için kendi ülkelerini ve dünyalarını terk etmek zorunda kalırlar. Kişilikler ve duygular büyü sayesinde değişir. Atina ile orman arasındaki ikilemi ve teatral dönüşümleri incelemek sürgünün coğrafi, duygusal ve mekânsal olduğunu gösterir. Sürgün aynı zamanda göçebe bir boyuta sahiptir. Oyundaki metatiyatronun incelenmesi, sürgün boyutunun varlığını desteklemektedir. Son olarak, Nathaniel C. Leonard ve Robert Weimann'ın platea, locus, meta-platea ve meta-locus gibi temel kavramlarının *Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası*'na uygulanması, Dramatik Katmanlama Spektrumu'nun sürgün tezahürlerini barındırdığı sonucuna ulaşmamızı sağlar. Bu araştırma, semantik incelemeleri tiyatro göstergebilimi ile birleştirmektedir. Sürgün meselesini hem edebiyat hem de tiyatro çalışmalarının merceğinden ele almak, oyunun ayrıntılarını ve karmaşıklıklarını anlamak için daha geniş perspektifler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Metatiyatro, Sürgün, Dönüşüm, *Bir Yaz Gecesi Rüyası*, Shakespeare, Mise En Abyme, Dramatik Katmanlama Spektrumu

Introduction

Exile refers to being forced or choosing to live away from one's native country, often due to political, social, or religious reasons or as a punishment. It involves being banished or deported from one's homeland and living voluntarily or involuntarily in a foreign land or country. Exile can be a harrowing experience, as it often involves leaving behind loved ones, cultural ties, and familiar surroundings. It can also affect psychologies and balance, resulting in a loss of identity and a sense of displacement. Exile has always been a central concern for numerous significant writers. The theme was always present in ancient Greek and Roman literature. For example, Homer dwelled on the exile of Odysseus in his famous epic poem, *The Odyssey*. As for the Roman poet Ovid, he did relate his experience as a victim of exile through his famous poem *Tristia*. Exile remains today a central concern. Many Contemporary critics, philosophers, directors, and writers tackled the issue of exile in their works. One can mention Edward Said in his *Reflections on Exile* (2002) and the Italian philosopher and political theorist Antonio Negri, who has written extensively about exile and politics.[1]

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[1] See Cadel, Francesca (2006). "Exile: Interview with Toni Negri." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 353–66.

From another perspective, exile is intrinsically connected to theatricality and theatre-making, as both involve the idea of displacement and the creation of new identities, new stages, and new theatrical spaces. In theatre, actors take on roles often different from their own identities and create characters that exist in fictional worlds. Similarly, in exile, individuals are forced to leave their homes, constantly creating new identities and living in unfamiliar places. Thematically, the experience of exile is a rich source of inspiration for playwrights. Many plays have been written about the experiences of exiles and refugees, including works by Bertolt Brecht[2], Samuel Beckett[3], and Athol Fugard[4]. These writers, among others, explore themes of displacement and identity; they offer a powerful reflection on the human experience of exile.

Exile runs throughout William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600/2016). Transformed characters are exiled from the human world when they change shapes. Others are forced to leave their countries and worlds to enter magical ones. Personalities and feelings change because of magic. The play explores the idea of banishment and separation from one's home or community. Various forms of exile are theatricalised, including individuals' physical and emotional displacement and the consequences of such separation. Roles, spaces and stages are multiple; they are sometimes homely but, in many cases, exilic.

The present research proposes to study the concept of exile in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from a plethora of perspectives. The first part of the analysis examines space and geographical locations as exile sites and alienation areas. A scrutiny of the dichotomy between Athens and the forest is displayed to study the manifestations of exile. Additionally, the present research investigates some cases of theatrical transformations to draw the correlation between physical and emotional transmigrant identities and exile. From another perspective, the article tries to detect and corroborate the presence of an exilic dimension within metatheatrical sequences in the play. The last part of the article applies Nathaniel C. Leonard's and Robert Weimann's

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[2] Johannes F. Evelein (2021) specifies a book chapter analysing the concept of exile in Brecht's literature. His "Brecht and Exile." *Bertolt Brecht in Context*, edited by Stephen Brockmann, portrays Brecht's exile as it manifests itself in his written works, from his letters and journal entries to his poems, which provide incisive insights into the trajectory of the exile.

[3] See Wheatley, David (2012). *Samuel Beckett: Exile and Experiment*. Oxford University Press.

[4] See Krueger, Anton. (2011). "A White Man in Exile: The Failure of Masculinity in Athol Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicings*." *South African Theatre Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 119–28.

fundamental notions of *platea, locus, meta-platea*, and *meta-locus* on the Shakespearean play to prove that the Spectrum of Dramatic Layering in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* represents exilic spaces.

Space as a Form of Exile

Exile in its relation to locations is intrinsically linked to different forms of isolation. When characters are forced to move to remote spaces far away from their homes or communities, their isolation is bodily. Physical alienation could affect characters' emotions, psychology, and behaviours. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has two different settings: The prosperous walled Athens and the forest, a space beyond the city's walls. Theatrically, the Elizabethan audiences are presented with two physical stages and three theatrical ones. Athens represents the main scene; meanwhile, the forest represents the stage beyond and the space of exile. These two dichotomic settings are thematically and theatrically significant because Athens is commonly known as a place of culture, strict rules, and justice. At the same time, the forest is portrayed as a place of banishment, wilderness, lawlessness, mayhem, and anarchy.

In the time of Shakespeare, the forest had a complex set of connotations that varied depending on the context and the audience[5]. The contemporaries of Shakespeare considered the forest as a place of mystery, legends, darkness, and ambiguity where social standards and strict order were overturned. It was a place of dusk where travellers could quickly become lost and where robbers, outlaws, and other criminals were known to lurk and cause harm. At the same time, the forest was also associated with magic, mystery, and the supernatural. In Shakespeare's plays, the forest often serves as a symbolic space where the characters can undergo transformation or self-discovery. Apart from the play under study, in As *You Like It* (1600/2019), the forest of Arden is a space where the characters escape from the constraints of courtly life and discover a simpler and more natural way of living. Moreover, the forest is often associated with the idea of the wild or the uncivilised, contrasting with the city or court's more orderly and civilised world. This contrast is explored in many of Shakespeare's plays, including *The Tempest* (1611/2016), where,

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[5] See Barton, Anne. (1972). *The Shakespearean Forest*. Cambridge University Press, 2017, Theis, Jeffrey S. *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation*. Duquesne University Press, 2009, and Young, David. *The Heart's Forest: A Study of Shakespeare's Pastoral Plays*. Yale University Press.

according to specific readings, the character of Caliban could represent the untamed nature, and in *Macbeth*, where the Witches gather in a dark and mysterious heath to plot their schemes.

The play accentuates the contrast between the city as a place of justice and the forest as a space of flight and banishment; it juxtaposes the logical world of Athens with the dream world of the woods. The opening scene involves an Athenian citizen, Egeus, rendering a legal dispute before his leader, the Duke of Athens, who is responsible for ensuring the city's supremacy of order and laws. Theseus calls for the respect of customary laws whether they are practised or not. His insistence on Hermia's marriage to Demetrius instead of Lysander stems from his belief that the city must strictly adhere to the law. In contrast, the forest is a space where no laws are written and where the social norms of the city break down. The forest is the space of fairies that use tricks and practise mischief. As a space of exile, the forest affects characters, changes their attitudes, and forces their transformation. For example, the Athenian lovers Titania and Nick Bottom are affected by the chaos and confusion afflicting the forest[6].

However, the exilic space offers release and helps restore order. At the same time, order rhymes with punishment. Theseus' severe threats to Hermia are disproportionate to her act of loving Lysander, which is taken as a crime according to Athenian law. Egeus and the patriarchal rule he represents can be seen as cruel and absurd. In contrast, despite its chaos, the forest offers a space of release; it restores proper order among the young lovers and ensures their safe return to Athens. Thus, while Athens represents law and order, the forest ultimately succeeds where Athenian law fails.

Transformation and Exile

Character transformation through theatrical artifice is a form of exile. It involves displacing the self and creating a new transcendent and transmigrant[7] identity, whether

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[6] Titania, the Queen of the Fairies, is ensnared in the chaos caused by her dispute with Oberon, the Fairy King; their quarrel has led to a mix-up of lovers. Titania becomes infatuated with Bottom, a comical weaver transformed into a donkey-headed creature by Puck, Oberon's mischievous servant. This chaotic spell distorts Titania's perception of reality, leading her to form an unconventional romantic attachment to Bottom.

[7] Zied Ben Amor (2020) explores concepts like transmigration and the transmigratory nature of the dramatic text in his articles "Mapping Sight and Blindness in *King Lear* (s) of William Shakespeare and

theatrical or mental. Through cross-dressing or roles-within-roles, characters undergo a transformation that alters their appearance, personality, or circumstances, often leading to a sense of dislocation and a loss of initial identity. Cross-dressing, disguise, gender, and species transformation are common devices in Shakespearean theatre. To give but one example, in Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* (1602/2004), the character Viola disguises herself as a man to enter the service of Duke Orsino. Through her transformation, Viola, who becomes Cesario, adopts a new identity, name, clothing, and behaviour. This transformation can be seen as a form of exile, as Viola is displaced from her original identity and forced to navigate a new world.

In the play, magic love potions are theatrical devices that enhance confusion via transformations. The transformation of the comic character of Bottom into an ass by the mischievous fairy Puck is a form of banishment and a manifestation of exile. This physical metamorphosis results in Bottom being separated from his community and, thus, exiled from his former identity. As an animal, he cannot communicate appropriately with those around him. This form of exile represents the loss of individual identity and the disorientation resulting from such separation. Before his transformation, Bottom is a member of the Mechanicals, a group of amateur actors preparing to perform a play for the duke's wedding.

As soon as the playful Puck uses an enchantment to turn Bottom's head into an animal's, fright and disorder break out. Exile can cause various psychological and emotional effects, including fear and disorder. The experience of exile can be traumatic, unpredictable, and isolating, leading to disorientation and distress. Even though Bottom tries to keep cheerful by singing and insinuates that his companions try to frighten him, he feels frightened and bewildered: "I will walk up and down here, and will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid." (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 3. 1.120).

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* substantially inspired Shakespeare in his treatment of transformation. However, the play draws heavily on the intrinsic transformative qualities proper to the theatre. In his article "Transformational Processes:

Roberto Ciulli: Towards a Poly-optic Reading" and "'Santiago Matamoros' or Saint James the Moor Killer: Who Wants to Kill the Moor in William Shakespeare's *Othello*?".

Production/Reception", Jean Alter explains how transformation is intrinsic to the theatrical operation. He claims that any

> public performance constitutes the central manifestation of theatre, associating actors and spectators in a single event. However, for most types of theatre, it forms only one stage in a complex process that involves a series of production and reception sequences. A semiotic theory that views theatre as a total process must no doubt first focus on the performance, as I have done here, establishing its nature, its referential and performant functions, and its use of signs (Alter, 1990, p. 149).

In another article entitled "Playwrights, Directors, Actors, and Their Work", Jean Alter explains that transformations define theatre. For him, theatre is a process with interlinked stages such as convention and text productions (Alter, 1990, p. 213). From the convention to the production, Alter believes in "transformational activities" (Alter, 1990, p. 231) that echo the personal experience of playmakers about life and art. He also acknowledges the weight of ideology within this process (Alter, 1990, p. 231). What is essential in the ideas of Jean Alter is the acknowledgement of this transformative process. My focus on the transformation process goes a step further than Jean Alter's views since it is crucial to believe that the idea of transformation is not only experiential but also inherent to the dramatic text and the essence of theatre.

Enchantment is one of the tools of transformation. Although it references traditional mythology, Bottom's transformation is the product of fairy magic, leading to his friends' amusing misinterpretation of the occurrence as a demonic curse and Quince's desire to bestow blessings. It is, most importantly, the product of the inherently theatrical motif of transformation.

> [Snout] O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?
> [Bottom] What do you see? You see an ass head of your own, do you?
> [Quince] Bless thee, Bottom; bless thee. Thou art translated. (Shakespeare, 1600/2016 3. 1. 11-113)

The above quotation includes a syntactic register and a choice of lexemes like "changed" and "translated", which are indicators of an exilic transformation, a form of banishment that exiles Bottom from a human to a non-human to the point that Quince invokes heavenly blessings to stop such a metamorphosis. During his time as an ass, Bottom is reunited with his fellow actors preparing for their play. Initially, they are terrified of him but soon recognise him and begin to mock him. As an exiled

transformed creature, Bottom's fellows see him as an outsider in their environment. Despite his new appearance, Bottom remains cheerful and excited to participate in the play, even though he knows he is an ass. Bottom's transformation into an ass is a humorous subplot in the play, and it serves to highlight the magical and unpredictable nature of the fairy world. While his time as an ass is undoubtedly strange and surreal, Bottom remains a beloved character throughout the play, and his transformation adds to the story's whimsical tone.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, exilic transformation is not only physical; it is also emotional and psychological. The emotional toll of being separated from one's lover is as intense as being exiled from homeland and community. Emotional distress heightens due to the uncertainty and the instability of changing situations. Helena becomes emotionally exiled from her love interest, Demetrius, who has abandoned her for Hermia. Demetrius' rejection deeply hurts Helena; it heightens her feeling of alienation and accentuates her isolation in her unrequited love. Similarly, Hermia's refusal to marry the man her father has chosen for her leads to her exile from her family and community.

The play also touches upon themes of displacement and dislocation through magical transformations. The fairy queen Titania, for instance, is emotionally exiled from her husband, Oberon, when they disagree about the custody of a changeling child. As a result of their conflict, Oberon sends his servant Puck to use a magical potion on Titania that causes her to fall in love with an ass-headed character, Bottom. This emotional exile causes Titania to be displaced from her normal emotional state, leading her to act uncharacteristically. The ongoing conflict between the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, is exilic. Their separation creates a rift in the natural world, leading to disruptions in the balance of nature and the behaviour of the mortal characters. This form of exile demonstrates the broader implications of individual conflict and separation.

One can talk about psychological or emotional exile related to departures from societal norms and expectations. As a female, Hermia is an evident example of a woman subjected to physical exile from her community due to her refusal to subdue and marry the man her father has chosen for her. As a victim of the patriarchal hegemonic realm, she is forced to flee to the forest to escape the consequences of her

disobedience. Her escape is, thus, a form of banishment from her societal role as a meek daughter and potentially submissive wife. Exile, in this case, is both a punishment and a release.

Metatheatre as Exile

One of the primary purposes of theatricality and on-stage games is to entertain audiences. As a continuation of certain performance traditions, such as the troubadours and the performances of the Middle Ages, Early Modern England theatre kept the tradition of theatrical merriment. The performances of Shakespeare and his contemporaries included singing, music, dancing, and all other sorts of entertainment known as the Elizabethan theatrical mirth[8]. The idea of mirth and merriment goes beyond the classical on-stage slapstick comic sequences and puns to inject humour, direct contact with the audience, and all activities of amusement before, during, and after the performances. The stages of the period resonated with witty and cryptic exchanges, slapstick comedy, puns, dumbshows, masques, pageantry, and wordplay. These elements were used to engage the audience and to provide a momentary escape from the daily struggles of life. In addition to humour, Elizabethan theatre often featured music, dancing, elaborate costumes, and stage design, contributing to the theatre's overall festive and joyful atmosphere.

Within such an atmosphere, metatheatre[9] emerged as an essential concept and technique in Early Modern English theatre during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This period saw the rise of Shakespeare and other prominent playwrights who used metatheatre to challenge audience expectations and explore the nature of theatre itself. One of the most common devices used in metatheatre during this period was the play-within-a-play, which allowed playwrights to draw attention to the artificiality of theatre and explore the relationship between art and reality. Early Metatheatre also includes self-referentiality since characters in performance refer to other plays or to the theatre itself. Metatheatre refers to the theatrical devices and techniques that draw attention to the fact that the play is a performance, not reality. It

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[8] See Lin, Erika T. (1989). "Popular Festivity and the Early Modern Stage: The Case of *George a Greene*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2009, pp. 271–97, and MacLean, Sally-Beth. "Drama and Ceremony in Early Modern England: The REED Project." *Urban History Yearbook*, vol. [16], pp. 38–46.
[9] For a detailed definition of metatheatre, Ben Amor, Zied. (2003). "When Doctor Faustus Fails, Irony Prevails: The Spectacle of Blindness in Christopher Marlowe's The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus."

consequently creates an exilic space that goes beyond the conventional theatrical one. In the same way, the theme of exile highlights the play's exploration of the boundary between reality and fantasy; metatheatre explores the boundary between the theatrical and the illusory since it suggests that theatre is a performance and not reality.

Metatheatre can be described as a mode, a convention of theatrical performance, and a writing technique. As a mode, metatheatre refers to how a play draws attention to its theatricality, breaking down the illusion of reality and reminding the audience that they are watching a performance. As a convention, metatheatre involves specific devices or techniques used to achieve this mode. Examples include play-within-a-play, self-referentiality, direct address to the audience, and breaking the fourth wall. As a writing technique, metatheatre deliberately uses these devices to create a self-referential and self-aware theatrical performance that comments on itself and its relationship to the audience.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries excelled in resorting to various methods for the service of metatheatre merriment exercises, such as the staging of plays-within-plays, where the characters in the main play often become spectators who comment on the action of the play-within-a-play, drawing attention to the fact that they are watching a performance of an illusory nature. Shakespeare's plays often refer to themselves, with characters alluding to other plays or theatre in general. For example, in *Hamlet,* the prince describes actors as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (Shakespeare, 2014/1603, 2.2.522). Other methods are also used, such as directly addressing the audience, where characters directly address the audience, acknowledging that they are watching a performance. By doing so, actors on stage create a sense of intimacy and communion with the audience. One can state that playwrights were aware of the necessity of breaking the fourth wall since actors acknowledge the audience's presence by speaking directly to them or stepping out of the frame of character.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, Puck metatheatrically addresses the audience directly; he refers to the play as a "dream", accentuating, thus, its artificiality. In the play, metatheatre takes different forms[10]. The play-within-the-play is

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[10] Shakespeare displays many examples of metatheatre in the play. The space of the forest itself is metatheatrical since it is a dreamy mirror of the world of Athens, where the fairies become metatheatrical

the most evident token of metatheatrical manifestations. *Pyramus and Thisbe* is a parody of a tragic love story and a comical performance by a group of amateur actors known as the Mechanicals. The performance is conceived as part of the wedding festivities for the characters Theseus and Hippolyta. Six Mechanicals: Peter Quince, Nick Bottom, Francis Flute, Tom Snout, Snug, and Robin Starveling become parodic figures who perform the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, two lovers forbidden from being together by their families. Bottom plays the role of Pyramus, and Flute plays the role of Thisbe. The other Mechanicals play various supporting roles, such as the Wall, the Moon, and the Lion. The play is filled with intentional and unintentional humour as the Mechanicals struggle to remember their lines, deliver their utterances with the proper inflexion, and perform their roles convincingly. The audience, including the main plot characters, reacts with laughter and ridicule during the performance. The play-within-the-play reaches its climax when Pyramus discovers what he believes to be the dead body of Thisbe and commits suicide. Thisbe then awakens, finding Pyramus dead, and she, too, commits suicide. The play concludes with the characters from the main plot reacting to the performance with amusement and appreciation despite its shortcomings. The space allowed to the play-within-the-play, which serves as a comedic interlude in the larger plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is a space of *mise en abyme*. It is as if the theatrical performance becomes a space located between two mirrors. The reduplicated stage and characters belong to a space of banishment; they are, thus, exilic par excellence.

What reinforces these sub-divisions is also semantic. Indeed, the Mechanicals' performance highlights the play's theme: the transformative power of love and the irrationality of human behaviour. During this parodic performance, characters comment on the nature of theatre and the role of the performer:

> A play there is, my Lord, some ten words long,
> Which is as brief as I have known a play;
> But by ten words, my Lord, it is too long (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 5.1.82-85).

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representatives of the Athenians. Apart from the example of the play-within-the-play, one can observe the breaking of the fourth wall from the fact that characters, such as Bottom and Puck, directly address the audience, reminding them that they are watching a play. Also, the use of elaborate props and costumes, especially while dealing with the fairy world, draws attention to the artifice of the performance and the actor's role in creating an illusion. The play's use of magic and illusions alters the characters' perceptions and emotions, highlights love's arbitrary and deceptive nature, and further contributes to the play's metatheatrical quality.

It is worth noting how the comment shows awareness of different spatial dimensions, such as words on pages, performance time, and stage qualities. Not only do characters comment on how to act and conceive a play, but they also add humour and self-awareness to the overall story. Self-reflexivity permeates since characters break the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly and acknowledging their presence. Indeed, metatheatre emphasises the idea of performance and the relationship between the actor and the audience. It allows the characters to comment on the nature of theatre and the role of the performer.

Metatheatre in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is of an exilic dimension. The metatheatrical space departs from the original Shakespearean text and the initial stage performance. The *mise en abyme* creates new exilic stages, such as the forest as a stage of banishment and distanciation[11], and the *Pyramus and Thisbe*'s stage, which is detached from the worlds of Athens and the forest. Even the transformation of Bottom is a metatheatrical allusion to costume change and disguise proper to the making of plays. Props and costumes create a metatheatrical layer to the play by drawing attention to the artifice of the theatrical performance and encouraging the audience to reflect on the actor's role in creating the illusion. Props are theatrical artifices that reinforce the play's overall theme of the playfulness and whimsical nature of love. The illusions they create emphasise the importance of artifice and illusion in shaping our perceptions and experiences. In the play, the use of the flowers with which Puck sprinkles the sleeping Titania accentuates the magic enchantment of the world. The fairies' costumes, such as the gossamer wings and diaphanous clothing, distinguish them from the human characters and create an atmosphere of magic. By using fantastical costumes and props, the play stresses the artificiality of the world and strengthens the actor's role in creating the illusion.

Illusion creates an exilic dimension since it allows the audience to be transported into a different world that is not theirs. Audiences are temporarily removed from their familiar surroundings and immersed in the play's fictional world. The illusory experience is both disorienting and exhilarating as the audiences discover new ideas

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[11] My use of "distanciation" does not correspond to Bertolt Brecht's expression that creates a distance between audiences and drama space through various means such as detached narration, songs, or ironic digressions by actors. The term distanciation here refers to the *stage en abyme* since the forest is a metaphorical parodic stage to Athens.

and perspectives. At the same time, performers themselves experience exile through illusion. Indeed, from the moment they inhabit the characters they portray, performers leave their identities behind and become different personas with different exilic selves. Consequently, performers navigate the emotional and psychological complexities of the characters they endorse while remaining grounded in reality.

The play teems with theatrical devices that distance the audience from events. By drawing attention to the artificiality of the play and the fact that it is a performance, Shakespeare creates a sense of detachment that can be seen as a form of exile from the world of the play. The play-within-a-play is a comic parody that exaggerates the conventions of tragic romance. Similarly, the presence of the fairies and the magical forest creates a sense of unreality that distances the audience from the world of Athens and the social norms that govern it. Exile created by metatheatre can be seen as a way of exploring the limitations of human perception and understanding. By showing the audience that the play's events are a performance, Shakespeare encourages us to question the reality of what we see and experience. In this way, metatheatre can be seen as a way of exploring the ideas of transformation and change central to the play. Through metatheatre, Shakespeare highlights how our perceptions of reality are shaped by the social and cultural norms that govern us. At this level, theatrical devices distance the audience from the events.

Exile appears through the play's exploration of reality and fantasy boundaries. The space of fantasy is a space of exile where imagination triumphs and certitudes are mocked. From that perspective, the play-within-the-play transcends an act of simple burlesque merriment to create a space endowed with imaginative power. The metatheatrical performance becomes an exilic space that mocks audiences and actors and their incapacity to cope with the importance of imagination in theatrical performances and dramatic action. The dialogue between Bottom and his fellow mechanicals reflects their worry, as actors, that their audiences could mix up between the real world, on the one hand, and play-acting, on the other. Ironically speaking, they express their worry that audiences would take the on-stage lion as the real one or that they would believe that Bottom playing the role of Pyramus would really perish. In a metatheatrical outfit, and to avoid any risk, they magnify and overdo their performance to emphasise theatricality and heighten the audience's disbelief. This self-reflexivity creates a new metatheatrical space, which is a space of banishment and exile.

Shakespeare attributes this power to mix play-acting, fictional performance, and reality to the metaphorically exiled characters. The mechanicals, characters in transformation, are different from both audiences and performers since they do not abide by the stage conventions and the need to be naturalistic. Their performance is, consequently, remote from homely presentations. It is situated at a level of a stage beyond a new theatrical space that echoes the forest as a space of exile. As a result, the over-explanations and the digressions given by Quince prove that the metatheatrical stage is far away from the homely stage: "Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show/But wonder on, till truth make all things plain". (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 5.1.131-132).

The metatheatrical stage becomes a space of exile where imagination becomes a powerful theatrical instrument, another magic trick that prevents the audience from taking the play's space as a real one. Metatheatre becomes a space of exile, which is present to theatricalise events once audiences suspend their belief in theatre as real.

Stages Beyond and Exile: The Layers of Metatheatre

The metatheatrical as an entity is situated at a level beyond. Metatheatre can occur on several different levels. One can introduce different layers of reality varying from a basic primary one moving to a secondary, then a tertiary reality. At the most basic level, there is the primary reality of the play, which refers to the fictional world created by the playwright and brought to life by the actors. The play's overall structure is situated at the level of the primary reality. Precisely, the opening scene describing the rationality of Athens and the world or order stands also for this primary reality.

However, metatheatrical occurrences can also happen on a secondary reality level, in which the actors acknowledge that they are performing in a play and break the fourth wall to address the audience directly. This level of metatheatricality can be used to create a sense of intimacy or connection between the actors and the audience and comment on the artifice of the theatrical performance. Puck's closing monologue in Act 5, Scene 1 is an excellent example of this secondary reality:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended:
> That you have but slumbered here,

While these visions did appear (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 5. Epilogue. 1-4).

In the play, there are some other examples of this secondary level, such as the speech of Peter Quince in the prologue of Act 5, Scene 1[12]. The secondary level brings the first hints of the illusory; it starts to pave the way for creating an exile space embodied by the metatheatrical occurrences.

The idea of the *mise en abyme* could include other layers, such as the tertiary reality one, in which the play comments on its theatricality through self-reflexive devices such as plays-within-plays or characters who comment on the performance itself. This level of metatheatricality can be used to create a sense of irony or self-awareness within the play and comment on the larger cultural or historical context in which the play is being performed. My previous analysis of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play-within-the-play corresponds to this tertiary reality. Those multi-layers and theatrical realities offer new exilic spaces because they create a sense of distance, isolation, and displacement for the characters involved. The unseen represents a physical or emotional rupture. It emphasises the characters' feelings of being removed from their familiar theatrical environment or disconnected from the audience's expectations.

In this vein, Nathaniel C. Leonard builds a theoretical framework for understanding metatheatrical staging in an approach that highlights the various layers of performance existing within a single theatrical production. His approach emphasises how a production can comment on its own theatricality, blurring the lines between the play's fictional world and the audience's real world. In *The Reflexive Scaffold: Metatheatricality, Genre, and Cultural Performance in English Renaissance* (2013) and "All 'Metatheatre' is Not Created Equal: *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Navigation of the Spectrum of Dramatic Representation" (2018), Nathaniel C. Leonard introduces several fundamental notions, including what he calls *audience*, *platea*, *locus*, *meta-platea*, and *meta-locus.* Some of these concepts, such as *locus* and *platea*, have been used by Robert Weimann in

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[12] If we offend, it is with our goodwill
That, you should think: we come not to offend
But with goodwill. To show our simple skill (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 5.1.109-111).

Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function (1987). In this vein, Leonard clarifies that:

> in order to describe this spectrum of dramatic layering, I am appropriating Robert Weimann's concepts of *locus* and *platea*, but I am using them to describe the representational nature of these dramatic layers as opposed to the spatial relationships of those layers (Leonard, 2013, p. 10).

Each concept reveals a level of metatheatricality and how theatrical performances can comment on their artifice and construction. The concept of the *audience* refers to the group of people present at a theatrical performance and engaged in a process of interpretation and meaning-making. The *audience* is an integral part of the theatrical experience, as they bring their perspectives and understandings to the performance and can be influenced by how metatheatrical elements are incorporated into the play. As for *platea*, it refers to the stage or performance space itself and the various theatrical elements that make up the physical environment of the performance. *Platea* also designates the overlap between the real world of the audience and the dramatic action. According to Leonard, platea can always include sets, props, and costumes[13]. *Locus* refers to the fictional world, which is the real world of the play, including the setting, characters, and plot; it is about the ensemble of the play as the audience perceives it. It designates "a self-contained mimetic virtual world" (Leonard, 2013, p. 11). This level of metatheatricality involves how the play comments on its fictional world[14]. One can claim the existence of two *loci* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Athens and the humans represent the first locus; the magical world of the forest and its fairies is the second one. Puck emphasises the dichotomy between these two loci when he declares, "Shall we their fond pageant see? / Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 3.2.116-117). Like Oberon and Puck, actors from the fairy world become spectators and audiences who observe actors from the real world. At the same time, their forest action is a mimicry of the human world. The multiplicity of *loci* suggests that,

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[13] "The *platea*, on the other hand, is the layer of performance that permeates that illusory barrier. Weimann describes it as the "theatrical dimension of the real world", and it is where the action of the play and the audience have direct contact" (Leonard, 2013, p. 10).

[14] "The *locus* is what Weimann sees as the precursor to the realistic dramaturgy of the nineteenth century, characterised by a more distinct separation of the action in the locus from the audience. The locus is characterised by the "element of verisimilitude") and is where "illusion and interpretation first begin to assert themselves" (Leanoard, 2013, p. 10).

in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we have two plays-within-a-play, one performed by the fairies in the forest and the other by the mechanicals on stage.

Meta-platea refers to how the *platea* can become part of the performance, for example, by breaking down the fourth wall and engaging with the audience directly. This level of metatheatricality can create a sense of intimacy and connection between the actors and the audience; it also comments on the artifice of the theatrical performance itself. The *meta-platea* refers explicitly to the stage-within-the-stage that requires an awareness of the audience that the *meta-platea* is a stage beyond. Thus, when Theseus comments on the required exemplary attitude of the audience during the performance of the Mechanicals, we understand that he locates himself on a stage within the initial stage:

> The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
> Our sport shall be to take what they mistake;
> And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
> Takes it in might, not merit (Shakespeare, 1600/2016, 5.1.94-99).

Finally, *meta-locus* refers to how the performance can comment on the larger cultural or historical context in which it is being performed. This level of metatheatricality can address issues such as politics, social norms, and cultural traditions and challenge the audience's assumptions and beliefs.

> *Meta-locus* and *meta-platea* effectively stack a new world of the play within the play's existing structure. Thus, these dramatic layers move from the world of the play (the *locus*) to the space between the play and the world of the play's staging of a cultural performance (the *meta-platea*) to the restaged cultural performance itself (the *meta-locus*) (Leonard, 2013, pp. 11-12).

The *meta-locus*, which mainly operates at the level of the play-within-the-play, is in total harmony with the *meta-platea* since the latter represents this theatricalised stage necessary for the *meta-locus,* which is the ensemble of the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Leonard proposes a diagram that portrays the different layers of the dramatic with what he calls "proximal" and "distal" dimensions[15]. The proximal dimensions can be observed graphically; they pertain to the realm of the verisimilitude; meanwhile, the distal dimensions pertain to the realm of *the mise en*

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[15] See Fig.1 below.

abyme, which means its virtual dimension. As for the *platea*, it refers to the way the audience observes a stage, with its props and all the stagecraft. The *locus* represents the play's plot, action, characters, and dramatic stories. Both *platea* and *locus* are observable and detectable without ambiguity. However, audiences need to reflect on the stage of the play-within-the-play, which is a stage-within-a stage as a *meta-platea* and on the ensemble of the play-within-the-play as a *meta-locus*.
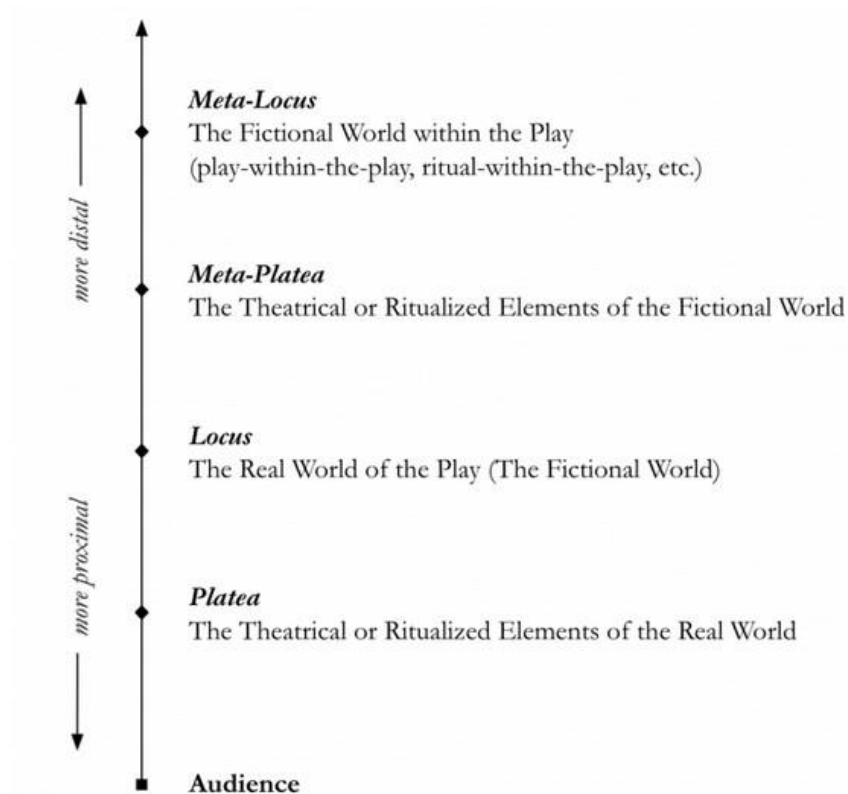

Figure 1: Spectrum of Dramatic Layering. (Leaonard, 2013, p.11)

The application of Leonard's spectrum of dramatic layering in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* proves that metatheatre is multi-layered; it accentuates the legitimacy of considering multi-theatrical spaces. In this vein, Leonard claims, in "All 'Metatheatre' is Not Created Equal: *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Navigation of the Spectrum of Dramatic Representation" (2018), that the Shakespearean play

> uses the parallels between scenes to evoke the metatheatrical, which consistently asks the viewer to re-imagine their relationship to the staged action and to live performance more generally. The "tragical mirth" (Shakespeare 5.1.57) of the play-

within asks the viewer to reevaluate their categorisation of Midsummer as simply a comedy, instead suggesting that a play's position in a genre or between genres has as much to do with its execution in performance as its plot (Leonard, 2018, p.50).

In addition to the multi-layered subdivisions of metatheatrical occurrences suggested by Leonard, the present analysis claims that the above-explained layers are spatial and theatrical dynamics that resonate an exilic dimension. The enchanted forest that makes part of the locus is a space of exile. It serves as a refuge or escape for characters who seek freedom from societal constraints or oppressive situations. Characters like Hermia and Lysander flee to the forest to pursue their love, finding themselves in a realm outside the structured Athenian society, symbolising a temporary exile from societal norms. The play-within-the-play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* represents escapism; it offers a temporary departure from reality. The amateur actors engage in a self-aware performance that allows them to transcend their everyday lives, creating a realm where they can momentarily shun and undermine their mundane existence. They, consequently, step into a different role or identity. In addition, the self-reflexive exchanges between the Mechanicals, who form a distinct group, often ridiculed, underestimated and excluded, are metatheatrical opportunities offered to characters in exile. From another perspective, the interactions between the fairies and the human characters create bridges between different realms and realities. The notion of liminality is a metaphorical representation of being in an exilic state—existing in between worlds, not fully belonging to either the mortal or the magical realm. Finally, the character of Puck, as a mischievous and shape-shifting sprite, embodies this sense of being betwixt and between, often operating in a liminal space. *In A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Leonard's theatrical layers highlight displacement, marginalisation, and the search for alternative spaces.

Conclusion

Exile in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is geographical, emotional, spatial, and metatheatrical. The scrutiny of geographical location shifts shows how behaviour, temper, and moral codes alter. The forest offers a space of exile and banishment as opposed to Athens, the space of order and rules. Exilic manifestations are not only geographical; theatrical transformations show that artifice in theatre creates alienation, isolation and psychological transformations, as is the case for Puck. The analysis traces the typical dynamics between physical and emotional transmigrant identities

and exile. Moreover, the present research has proven the presence of an exilic dimension within metatheatrical sequences in the play. The application of Nathaniel C. Leonard's and Robert Weimann's fundamental notions of *platea*, *locus*, *meta-platea*, and *meta-locus* in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows us to reach the finding that the Spectrum of Dramatic Layering hosts exilic manifestations.

Exile created by metatheatre can be seen as a way of exploring the limitations of human perception and understanding. By showing the audience that the play's events are a performance, Shakespeare encourages us to question the reality of what we see and experience. Negotiating the real from the lens of theatre is a form of exile from our everyday experience, highlighting the gaps between our perception of reality and reality itself. In this way, metatheatre can be seen as a means of exploring the themes of transformation and change central to the play. By drawing attention to the artificiality of the play, Shakespeare creates a sense of exile that allows us to see the world of the play from a different perspective, highlighting how our perceptions of reality are shaped by the social and cultural norms that govern us.

Finally, the illusion created in theatre can be seen as an exilic space in terms of its potential to challenge the dominant cultural narratives of society. Through metaphor, symbolism, and other theatrical devices, plays can subvert traditional power structures and offer alternative perspectives on important issues. Such an experience is liberating for audiences who feel marginalised by mainstream culture, as they can see their own experiences and beliefs reflected back to them in a new and powerful way.

The present research merges semantic investigations with the semiotics of theatre. Dealing with the matter of exile both from the lenses of literary and theatrical studies is challenging. It offers broader perspectives to understand the play's nuances and complexities. It allows for a comprehensive exploration of dramatic texts and performances, enabling a deeper understanding of the interplay between written works and their theatrical realisation. By combining these disciplines, the present study gains a holistic perspective on storytelling, character development, and the artistic elements involved in both literature and theatre. This interdisciplinary approach fosters the present analysis to interpret and engage with the play and prove that exile is not only

detectable in spatial and temporal banishment but also within the multi-layers of theatre.

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