

Elastic Comic Space: Puck, the Changeling, and Topological Form in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Building on spatial approaches to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this article proposes elastic topology as a literary framework for examining how comic structures accommodate transformation while preserving relational continuity. Adapting topological concepts for literary analysis, the study develops a four-part model comprising elastic space, invariant, agent of deformation, and elastic recovery. Close reading shows that the forest enables reversible relational deformation, the changeling functions as a relational invariant, Puck mediates deformation, and the ending produces a renewed rather than restored equilibrium. By reconceptualizing Shakespearean comedy as a resilient system of continuous deformation rather than a simple movement from disorder to restored order, this study offers a potentially transferable vocabulary for examining spatial organisation, comic structure, and relational continuity in Shakespearean drama.

Keywords: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare, literary topology, spatial criticism, comic structure, Puck, changeling boy, heterotopia

Introduction

Topology, first formalised by J. B. Listing¹ in the 19th century, investigates those properties of forms that persist under continuous deformation by stretching, bending, and twisting without rupture. As Pirouz Nourian observes, topology “defines a notion of connectedness, mathematically: the connectedness that lets one traverse, visit the in-betweens and explore a space” (Nourian, 2020, p. 6). Within this topological emphasis on continuity, elasticity offers a vocabulary for literary structures that undergo transformation without losing their underlying coherence.

This analysis also extends the project of literary topology as a whole, a field still in its formative stages. As Luo and Liu observe, “Literary topology is a new type of criticism. It has no systematic theoretical framework and methodological essentials and guidelines which can be used for reference” (2021, p. 72). The value of literary topology for studying Shakespeare has already been demonstrated by scholars such as Li Xinmei (2022) on topological changes in *The Merchant of Venice* and Chen Xiaofeng (2022) in her research on the spatial structure

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¹ Johann Benedict Listing (1808-1882), a German mathematician, first introduced the term *Topologie* in his 1847 essay *Vorstudien zur Topologie* (Preliminary Studies in Topology).

in “*Cymbeline*”. These examples illustrate the possibility of applying topology to Shakespeare, but they do not develop a theory that explains the distinctive spatial logic of Shakespearean comedy. In this article, I propose a theory of elastic topology as a model of Shakespearean comedy. This theory is based on the premise that reversible deformation plays a key role in the process of comic action.

Habermann and Witen consider Shakespearean theatre to be both relational and topological and not just geographic. On this basis, and by further developing the concept of space, this study aims to examine the possibility of comedy as an elastic topological structure. Fatima (2026) has recently argued for a genre-sensitive literary topology by distinguishing the recoverable structures of romances from the irreversible ruptures of tragedy. Her study shows that topological interpretation does not operate uniformly across all genres of drama, but it does not consider comedy as a separate topological genre.

A Midsummer Night's Dream provides a suitable example because its forest continually reshapes identities, desires, and hierarchies without undermining their essential relationships. The analysis takes the forest to be elastic space, the changeling as a relational invariant, and Puck as an agent of deformation. It is only after that that the analysis proceeds to discuss the way comic restoration creates a reordered, rather than merely restored, order.

Conceptual Framework: Elastic Topology as a Literary Method

From Mathematical Topology to Literary Topology

Topology is the study of qualities that remain unchanged under continuous transformations. It was formally introduced by Johann Benedict Listing in the 19th century and focuses on properties that remain the same under bending, stretching, or twisting without breaking. The familiar example of a coffee mug and a doughnut illustrates this principle: Their shapes differ greatly; they share the same topological quality. Thus, topology places continuity, connectedness, and invariance before fixed form. When applied in the field of the humanities, topology has helped shift focus towards relational qualities. Topology has been used to describe relations in psychology and experience by Kurt Lewin (1936); the role of boundaries and spaces in generating literary meanings has been explored by Yuri Lotman (1974; 1990); Michel Serres (1977) used topology to speak of connectedness, folds, intermediacy, and transformation. All this makes topology a useful approach for analyzing literary works whose structures remain coherent despite change. This relational approach has already been used in Shakespearean spatial criticism (Habermann & Witen, 2016; Li, 2022; Chen, 2022).

Elasticity as Comic Topology

Elasticity extends the idea of topology by describing a structure's ability to accommodate disruption while maintaining continuity. Since literary works are not bound by physical rules, the principle of elasticity can help us understand better dramatic systems where identities, relationships, and hierarchies become destabilised but are not destroyed entirely. In literary terms, elasticity thus refers to the ability of the structure of a work to absorb disruption and reorganise it without destroying continuity. This distinction follows recent arguments that literary topology needs to be adjusted to literary genre. According to Fatima (2026), romance is particularly compatible with topological continuity through delay, suspension, and return. Tragedy, on the other hand, demonstrates the limitations of topology because of terminal loss and rupture. Comedy, however, takes on yet another position: It continually destabilises desire, identity, authority, and social hierarchy without making those disruptions irreparable. Elastic recovery thus should not be understood simply as restoration. Shakespearean comedies rarely

restore characters to their exact previous state. Instead, relationships and social hierarchies are adjusted, providing a new equilibrium marked by signs of previous disruption.

Analytical Framework

The concept of elastic topology is operationalized by means of four inter-related elements. Elastic space is a dramatic environment where normal social and relational restrictions are made temporarily pliable, allowing for new arrangements while preserving the continuity of the dramatic world. The invariant is the element of structure whose relational function remains unchanged despite transformations around it and thus ensures the continuity of the dramatic world. The agent of deformation is the one that instigates and guides transformation by altering the relationship, identity, or position in space of the dramatic world. Elastic recovery refers to renewed stability achieved through reorganization rather than a return to the original configuration.

Table 1

Analytical Framework of Elastic Topology for the Interpretation of Shakespearean Comedy

Component	Topological function	Literary function	Application in <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
elastic space	Environment permitting reversible deformation	Suspends ordinary social constraints	The enchanted forest
Invariant	Structural constant preserving continuity	Anchors the dramatic system	The changeling boy
Agent of deformation	Generates and redirects transformation	Reorganises identities and relationships	Puck
Elastic recovery	Re-establishes continuity after transformation	Produces comic resolution	The final reconciliation

The four components should not be understood as isolated correspondences but as parts of a relational process. Elastic space makes deformation possible; the invariant prevents transformation from becoming structural dissolution; the agent of deformation redistributes positions within the system; and elastic recovery converts those altered relations into a workable configuration. The value of the model therefore lies less in assigning a topological label to individual characters or places than in tracing how continuity is produced through change. In this sense, the framework is heuristic rather than mathematical: it borrows topology's emphasis on relation, connectedness, and invariance in order to describe the behaviour of comic action.

Analysis

The Forest as Elastic Space

The enchanted forest represents the most significant elastic site in the play where identity, desire, and power relationships can become flexible without breaking away from Athens. Hence, entering the forest is not just a spatial but also a topological move as it signals a shift from regulated deformations to fluid relationships. Egeus claims:

"As she is mine, I may dispose of her." (1.1.43)

Theseus then describes Hermia as:

"To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted, and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it." (1.1.50-2)

More precisely, Athens is not a place without deformation; rather, the authority to deform is controlled by patriarchal law. Egeus appeals to the "ancient privilege of Athens" and claims that since Hermia is his daughter, he has the "right to dispose of her", by giving her away to Demetrius or subjecting her to the penalty of death. Theseus expresses this claim of legal possession in strikingly material terms. The language is particularly suitable for a topological reading. Hermia is presented as a deformable form, but the deformation in Athens is coercive and unidirectional rather than reciprocal or self-directed. When Hermia wishes her father might see through her eyes, Theseus insists instead that her eyes must look through his judgment. The authority of Athens thus attempts not only to organize bodies and marriages but also the very conditions of perception. The forest differs from Athens in that it disrupts the control of Athens and disperses the power to organize relations, while at the same time other authorities, especially Oberon's, continue to operate.

Shakespeare skillfully paves the way for this transition before bringing any character on stage in the forest. Confronted by the rigid law of the Athenians, Lysander suggests that they run away to avoid it:

"And to that place the sharp Athenian law
Cannot pursue us. If thou lovest me, then
Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night,
And in the wood a league without the town
There will I stay for thee." (1.1.164-70)

Lysander's phrase "sharp Athenian law" gives this spatial difference: To enter the wood is to be out of the reach of Athens legally, and thus to enter a context where the existing relations might be put together differently. It is in the description by Titania of the consequences of her fight with Oberon that the full elasticity of the forest is seen:

"The spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world
By their increase now knows not which is which." (2.1.114-7)

This particular excerpt forms an integral part of the play's topological imagination. Instead of talking about the disappearance of the seasons or of nature, Shakespeare says that they have just "changed their liveries" and that the boundaries have become confused. Here change denotes transformation and not disappearance, and "wonted" refers to the temporary suspension of the order and not its destruction. What is even more interesting is the use of "the mazèd world/... knows not which is which", where the classification is present, but the relation between the classifications is lacking. The identity is not cancelled out; rather, it becomes reclassified in an interconnected system. Titania continues with the metaphor of distortion through a series of environmental disruptions that plague all levels of nature. Streams burst from their banks, crops rot before maturation, and familiar landscape lose their recognizable form. It is especially pertinent to highlight her statement that:

"And the quaint mazes in the wanton green,
For lack of tread, are undistinguishable." (2.1.102-3)

In the image of the mazes becoming "undistinguishable", Shakespeare offers one of his clearest depictions of elastic space. The maze itself is a form of space defined by its pathways and directions. In this instance, though,

the pathways have not ceased to exist; rather, they have lost their legibility through neglect and change. The use of the word “undistinguishable” by Shakespeare is especially telling since it shows that the relationship between the paths has become difficult to discern, and not that the paths themselves no longer exist. Thus, the space continues to exist, but its configuration is temporarily altered.

This distinction also prevents the forest and Athens from becoming a simple opposition between freedom and constraint. Both spaces organise relations, but they do so according to different degrees of pliability. Athens attempts to stabilise identity through law, paternal authority, and prescribed marriage, whereas the forest permits those relations to be redistributed through desire, magic, misrecognition, and movement. The comic importance of the forest therefore lies not in the absence of structure but in the temporary loosening of structure. Characters remain connected to the Athenian world even while its rules lose force. The forest can consequently deform the social arrangement without creating an entirely separate reality, which is precisely what makes reintegration possible. In Foucaultian discourse (Foucault, 1986), the forest is like a heterotopic counter-space where the set rules become contingent. Elasticity of topology, however, adds a temporal dimension because not only does the forest bring in an alternative order, it allows for the reversibility of deformation. The forest is thus the space of deformation but also, the forest being unstable itself brings about another problem—what is the principle of continuity amidst changing relations?

The Changeling as Invariant

In terms of elastic topology, the changeling boy functions as the principal invariant that maintains the structural stability of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the field of topology, an invariant does not refer to visibility or action but refers to the ability of an element to preserve its structure during any other transformations. The changeling boy in the works of Shakespeare is a perfect example of such a concept. Even though he does not utter a single word, act on stage, or even appear on stage at all, his presence regulates the relationship network between the fairy realm and the magic forest.

The play introduces the changeling through the conflict between Oberon and Titania. Oberon declares:

“I do but beg a little changeling boy
To be my henchman.” (2.1.123-4)
Titania immediately refuses:
“The Fairyland buys not the child of me.” (2.1.126)

It is the conflict involving the boy that causes Oberon to interfere with Titania and creates the magical situations in which the story of the lovers becomes woven into the story of the fairies. It is in the context of a chain of events that is triggered by the conflict between the fairy monarchs that Oberon uses the love potion, Titania becomes enchanted, Puck gives Bottom an ass's head, and the lovers' affections become confused.

Any transformation of the changeling character is withheld while all the other relations are allowed to be transformed: Oberon and Titania go from strife to harmony, the young men swap their objects of desire, and Bottom physically changes. It is thus structurally necessary for the boy to remain silent and invisible. He does not have to be at the centre of the play in order to organise it; his invisible presence remains a relational anchor for the competition of conflicting claims. The Indian background of the changeling boy has been central to important

postcolonial readings of race and imperialism in Shakespeare's drama (Hendricks, 1996); the present analysis shifts attention instead to the structural significance of his absence.

"But she, being mortal, of that boy did die,
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him." (2.1.140-42)

Titania's repetition of "for her sake" gives this relationship a memorial as well as relational dimension. The affection of Titania is not based on her biological possession of the child or on her power as a fairy, but it is a kind of duty that exceeds the death of the mother. It is because of the child that the dead mother is able to affect the fairy community continuously; the child becomes a means for her to maintain that relationship. It becomes the relational constant that does not depend on the actual custody of the changeling, which can be contested or changed at a later date.

"I then did ask of her changeling child,
Which straight she gave me, and her fairy sent
To bear him to my bower in Fairyland.
And now I have the boy, I will undo
This hateful imperfection of her eyes." (4.1.60-64)

The eventual transfer of the child complicates the apparent symmetry of comic reconciliation. Oberon reports that Titania 'straight' gives the child to him, explicitly linking his acquisition of the boy with the removal of the spell from her eyes. Thus, recovery becomes conditional and not disinterested. Oberon restores Titania's sight only once he obtains the boy as an object of their discord. It should be stressed that the changeling thus retains the continuity of his function not through the permanence in one place or under one sovereign's power but because he structures the stages of the conflict in such a way: Rejection results in deformation, transfer leads to restoration, and absence hides the price paid for the resolution.

His later disappearance can thus be seen as in keeping with the structural role. Since his removal allows for the conflict between the fairies to be restructured, he does not need to appear directly in the narrative, as he only matters in terms of his relations. The changeling also shows how comic elasticity has its limits. While the lovers, the fairy rulers and Bottom are incorporated into the renewed comic order, they are not all restored to an original state; most notably, Demetrius remains enchanted. It seems that the wishes of the changeling were never taken into consideration nor was he restored to his original position. Hence, comic elasticity is indeed asymmetrical in its nature. It succeeds in reorganizing the dramatic system but not in restoring everyone's relationships. The changeling thus remains a residual trace of deformation that comic harmony cannot fully absorb.

Seen in this way, the changeling's invariance is not ethically neutral. His structural constancy allows the comic system to remain intelligible, yet it also reveals that continuity may be purchased through unequal forms of exchange. The boy links Titania's memory of his mother, Oberon's desire for possession, the disruption of the fairy marriage, and the eventual reconciliation of the rulers. Because these relations converge upon him while his perspective remains unavailable, he becomes both an anchor and a limit of comic elasticity. The system can reorganise itself around the transfer of the child, but it cannot demonstrate that such reorganisation is just from every position within the system. The invariant therefore preserves continuity while simultaneously exposing the cost of the continuity it preserves.

Puck as Agent of Deformation

Whereas the changeling boy serves as the structural continuity of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck's character serves as the dynamical engine of deformation, continually reshaping the relational structure of the play. From the standpoint of the theory of elastic topology, Puck becomes the main source of deformation of the play. Contrary to the changeling who is structurally constant despite all changes around him, Puck creates changes on his own and makes transformations without destroying the dramatic system. Shakespeare introduces Puck as a figure whose defining characteristic is perpetual movement:

“Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire;
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere.” (2.1.2-7)

Right from the start, Puck emerges as a character who repeatedly crosses spatial boundaries. It is worth noting that the prepositions used by Shakespeare in the above phrase, “over” and “thorough”, provide a vocabulary of movement rather than spatial stability. In other words, Puck cannot be assigned any specific location because he serves the purpose of linking together those locations which remain separate at all times. The forest thus acquires the quality of elasticity not because of the presence of magical beings in it, but because of the constant movement of Puck across its relational borders.

Oberon instructs Puck to apply the love potion to Demetrius, but Puck mistakenly applies it to Lysander. Such a mistake has not broken the network of relations between the lovers but has resulted in a shift of positions in the network. Bottom's transformation follows a similar pattern: Puck gives him an ass's head while leaving his speech and memory intact. When Oberon confronts him, Puck admits:

“Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook.
Did not you tell me I should know the man
By the Athenian garments he had on?” (3.2.368-70)

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to equate Puck's role as a deforming agent with unqualified control over the deformed. This mistake has both a topological and comic dimension: Puck identifies the right category, an Athenian male, although he maps Oberon's instructions incorrectly upon the member of this category. Clothes make similar things indistinguishable enough so that one relational position becomes confused with another.

Puck then turns the forest into a space of manipulated pathways:

“Up and down, up and down,
I will lead them up and down.” (3.2.418-9)

Even the fixing of the mistake on the part of Puck is spatially oriented as opposed to being purely psychological. The frequent repetition by Puck makes the wood a malleable system of paths, sounds, and deceptive locations. By impersonating Demetrius for Lysander and vice versa, he divides voice from body and leads each of them to occupy the position of the occupant who has moved elsewhere. He distorts the connection between sound, identity, and place. As he completes the lovers' nocturnal rearrangement, Puck declares:

"Jack shall have Jill;
Naught shall go ill." (3.2.490-91)

Through this metaphor, correction becomes the process of realignment in terms of relationality, wherein the displaced elements are rearranged to form a functioning comic structure. Thus, Puck serves as the mediator of the deformations that take place in the play in terms of spatial, physical, and emotional dimensions without having complete control over them. Puck's function also clarifies why deformation in comedy need not be deliberate in order to be structurally productive. His mistake with Lysander is not external to the comic mechanism; it intensifies the instability that the play must later absorb. What matters is that the error remains recoverable because the relations among the lovers are displaced rather than annihilated. Puck therefore operates less as an omnipotent controller than as a mobile mediator who repeatedly alters connections and then helps redirect them. His agency demonstrates that elastic form can incorporate accident, misrecognition, and partial knowledge, provided that the dramatic network retains enough continuity for those disturbances to be reorganised.

Elastic Recovery and Residual Deformation

The conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* should be more accurately regarded as a process of elastic restoration rather than restoration proper. The coherence of the dramatic system is restored, but it does not mean that the new configuration is the same as the old configuration. Comedy creates order by reshuffling the consequences of deformation. Recovery starts when Oberon orders Puck to lift the spell on Lysander and to reunite the four lovers in their proper order. Recovery thus is asymmetrical from the very beginning, because while Lysander is restored to his true love Hermia, Demetrius is still under the spell of the flower. While such a recovery is indeed consistent, it cannot be described as a return to an earlier state of things, because the lovers wake up unable to discern between reality and dreams. This ambiguity is most clearly expressed when Demetrius explains the permanence of his renewed affection:

"My love to Hermia,
Melted as the snow, seems to me now
As the remembrance of an idle gaud
Which in my childhood I did dote upon;
And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,
The object and the pleasure of mine eye,
Is only Helena." (4.1.172-8)

Demetrius does not return to the emotional position with which the play began. His love for Hermia has "melted as the snow", while Helena appears to him as his recovered object of desire; yet the audience knows that the enchantment placed upon Demetrius has not been removed. This coupling is socially plausible, yet it retains its basis in magical deformation. The process of elastic recovery generates coherence without destroying the process by which coherence was attained. Theseus says:

"Egeus, I will overbear your will,
For in the temple by and by, with us,
These couples shall eternally be knit." (4.1.186-8)

It is Theseus's decision that stops elasticity from being confused with the dissolution of authority. He says to the father of Hermia: "Egeus, I will overbear your will", and commands that the couples be joined together

“eternally” in the temple. The use of the verb “overbear” does not connote the consensual surrender of patriarchal authority; rather, it conveys the transfer of one will from the other. Egeus loses his authority over Hermia, but Hermia herself does not gain any kind of legal authority over the arrangement. What happens is that the sovereign authority of the duke recognizes the new arrangement made in the forest. Thus, comic recovery entails the redistribution of authority. The survival of the Athenian arrangement lies in the ability of Theseus to bend the arrangement, but the power to authorize the new arrangement lies in the duke.

Immediately afterward, Hippolyta observes:

“These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turnèd into clouds.” (4.1.194-5)

The description by Hippolyta of the lovers’ evidence as “undistinguishable” acts as an echo of the previous mention of “undistinguishable” mazes by Titania. In the forest, the word signifies paths whose structural arrangement exists in physical terms but not in interpretative ones, while outside the forest in Athens, the word denotes experiences which are similarly difficult to define. The recurrence implies that the state of deformation is not left entirely in the past. It continues to exist as a distortion of perception and memory, such as mountains that are solid and yet seem to vanish into clouds due to distance. The ending therefore tests the model most fully because recovery has to absorb, rather than erase, the history of deformation. The marriages produce a stable social pattern, but that stability depends upon altered desires, redistributed authority, uncertain memories, and the unresolved status of the changeling. The result is a comic order that works because it can accommodate these residues. From a topological perspective, continuity is preserved not by returning every element to its initial position but by maintaining a viable set of relations after transformation. This distinction is important for comic form: resolution does not cancel the forest but translates its consequences into a social arrangement Athens can recognise. Elastic recovery is best understood as the formal capacity of comedy to convert disruption into renewed coherence without pretending that nothing has changed. This residual imbalance is central to elastic topology comic resolution becomes persuasive not because every disturbance disappears. Addressing the audience, Puck declares:

“If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.” (5.1.440-3)

This Epilogue performs the final act of elastic recovery. Puck invites the audience to interpret the dramatic events as a dream, thereby softening the boundary between illusion and reality while simultaneously restoring it. Shakespeare does not ask spectators to forget what they have witnessed; instead, he offers a new interpretive framework through which the experience may be absorbed into ordinary reality. The theatre itself becomes an elastic space whose temporary deformations conclude in renewed coherence rather than complete erasure.

The changeling nevertheless remains outside this recovery. His continued absence from the final celebrations marks the asymmetry of comic resolution: Coherence is restored to the system without every relation being ethically or politically restored. Elastic recovery therefore produces a viable new order while retaining the perceptual, affective, and political traces of its deformation.

Conclusion

This study has proposed elastic topology as a framework for understanding Shakespearean comedy as a structure of continuous but non-destructive transformation. Rather than treating dramatic space simply as symbolic setting, the model emphasises the relations that persist while identities, desires, and structures of authority are deformed and reorganised. The reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* consequently revises the conventional movement from disorder to restored order. The forest permits relational flexibility; the changeling preserves structural continuity while exposing the unequal terms on which recovery may occur; and Puck mediates transformations that remain contingent and reversible. The ending does not recover an untouched beginning. Demetrius's altered desire, Theseus's redistribution of authority, the lovers' uncertain memories, and the changeling's absence all indicate that comic stability retains traces of what has occurred. Comic order is therefore achieved through reorganisation rather than restoration. Although developed through a single play, elastic topology offers a vocabulary that may be tested across other Shakespearean comedies in which alternative spaces, shifting identities, and eventual reintegration structure comic action. Its broader value lies in treating continuity and transformation not as opposites but as mutually constitutive features of comic form. Shakespearean comedy, on this account, becomes resilient precisely because it can absorb deformation without requiring a complete return to the past.

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