A Midsummer Night's Dream Study Guide

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Widely recognized as a comic masterpiece, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's most popular works. The play has inspired numerous adaptations, including Felix Mendelssohn's acclaimed musical score for a nineteenth-century production. Written about 1595, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is considered Shakespeare's first mature comedy. By blending motifs from various classical works, such as the first-century Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the second century Roman orator Apuleius's *Golden Ass,* the playwright successfully balanced a variety of narrative styles and dramatic procedures to create an unforgettable artistic effect. The plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Shakespeare's own, however: he did not follow his usual practice of adapting an older story. This account of the tribulations of a love quadrangle during a night of madness imaginatively combines ambiguous allusions, wordplay, sinister hints, fragments of noble poetry, and profound meditations on the nature of art and love. The brilliant characterization, richness of language, and compositional complexity of this play have provided critics and commentators with material for much theorizing. As for the general reader and theater-goer, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* remains a timeless and limitless source of aesthetic pleasure.

Plot Summary

In Athens, as Theseus and Hippolyta prepare for their wedding, Egeus approaches the Duke to complain about Hennia's unwillingness to marry Demetrius. Theseus tells Hennia that the punishment for her obstinacy is either death or life imprisonment in a cloister, Undaunted, Hermia decides to seek refuge from Athenian law by escaping , with Lysander into the forest. But Helena, in whom Hermia has confided, betrays her friend to Demetrius, hopingto win his favor. Unbeknownst to the aristocratic characters, Bottom and Quince decide to produce a play in honor of Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

A Midsummer Night's Dream begins in Athens at the palace of Theseus. Theseus enters with Hippolyta, Philostrate and their attendants. Theseus and Hippolyta are to be married in four days, and they eagerly await their wedding. Theseus sends Philostrate into the city to encourage the young citizens to celebrate the happy event. Although Theseus won Hippolyta in war, he intends to wed her with revelry and joy.

Egeus enters with Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus wishes his daughter, Hermia, to marry Demetrius, but she has refused and insists that she loves Lysander. Egeus blames the situation on Lysander, who has stolen Hermia's affections. Exasperated, Egeus has brought his complaint to Theseus and hopes that he will settle the matter by forcing Hermia to either marry Demetrius or be executed according to Athenian Law.

Theseus confirms that if Hermia does not agree to marry Demetrius, she must either be executed or retire to a convent for the rest of her life. Hermia remains adamant that she prefers a convent to a marriage against her preference. Theseus gives her until his own wedding with Hippolyta to consider her choice.

Demetrius, Lysander and Egeus begin to argue. Demetrius wants Lysander to give Hermia up. Lysander asks Egeus to consider his suit, since he has as much fortune as Demetrius. Additionally, Demetrius has been wooing Helena, and she is deeply in love with him. Theseus tells Demetrius and Egeus that he wishes to speak with them in private about the matter. In parting, Theseus repeats his warning to Hermia of the consequences should she continue to defy her father's will. Everyone exits save for Hermia and Lysander.

Alone together, Lysander and Hermia lament that "the course of true love never did run smooth." Lysander has a wealthy aunt who lives outside of Athens and would be willing to take him in as her son. He asks Hermia to meet him tomorrow night in the woods, and together they will flee. Hermia agrees with the plan and promises to be there. Their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of Helena.

Helena is miserable because Demetrius has left her for Hermia. Hermia insists that she has shown no favor to Demetrius, but he pursues her anyway. She tells Helena of Lysander's plan for them to meet in the woods and flee. The two lovers exit, as Helena muses over how happy their situation is compared to her own. Although Helena is attractive, Demetrius has shifted his affections to Hermia, leaving Helena to pursue him hopelessly.

Helena blames the foolishness of love, which "...looks not with the eyes but with the mind; And therefore is winged cupid painted blind..." for her wrongs. Although it is a

betrayal of her friend, Hermia, Helena resolves to tell Demetrius of Lysander and Hermia's plan to escape. She knows that Demetrius will follow the pair into the woods, and she herself will follow Demetrius in the hopes of regaining his attention.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play about love and its relationship to the natural order of the world. The primary theme, that love is blind, is introduced in Act 1, Scene 1 and reinforced throughout the play.

Theseus, a character drawn from Greek mythology, is preparing to marry Hippolyta, the Amazon queen, another Greek character. The two have been at war, but now that they have fallen in love, they are preparing to marry with feasting and merriment throughout the city. Their love has reversed the nature of the world around them, making strife into concord. When love runs smoothly, nature follows suit and brings peace and happiness.

Egeus wants to have his daughter, Hermia, executed or sent to a convent, since she does not love and will not marry the man her father wants her to marry. Hermia's love is so powerful that it has made her relationship with her father unnatural. She cannot obey his wishes as a daughter should. When love is frustrated, the natural state of events is interrupted.

Helena is another example of a frustrated love that wreaks havoc with the world. Helena laments that she is forced to pursue Demetrius, much against her feminine nature. Given the opportunity, she is willing to betray her friend, Hermia, for the sake of gaining Demetrius' notice, if only for a brief time. In order to restore the natural order, Helena must regain Demetrius' love, and she is willing to do so at any cost.

Helena's famous line "love looks not with the eyes but with the mind; And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind" is a summary of one of the themes of the play. Love will never see reason or sense, but it acts entirely on its own. The relationship of love and blindness will be explored later in the play.

Jealousy is also related to love. Although Hermia assures Helena that she has never encouraged Demetrius' affections, Helena is still jealous of Hermia's good fortune. Her jealousy is another problem that arises from her failed love. Jealousy is another force that destroys the natural order of the world. Helena's jealousy of Hermia makes it possible for her to risk their friendship. She blames Hermia for the loss of Demetrius and therefore is willing to betray Hermia to him.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout and Starveling have assembled at Quince's house. They represent all of the men in Athens who are fit to perform an entertainment for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Their play will be the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. Nick Bottom is the first man called. He will be playing Pyramus, the lover. Bottom brags about how good his acting will be, and then he demonstrates by declaiming a short speech.

Francis Flute is called for the role of Thisbe. He isn't pleased about playing a woman, but he accepts since the part will be played in a mask. Bottom suggests that he would also be an excellent Thisbe and attempts to show how well he can play Thisbe's part. Quince is unimpressed and insists that Bottom will play Pyramus.

Quince assigns roles to Starveling and Snout and tells Snug that he will play the lion. The part is nothing but roaring, so Snug will have no trouble learning it. Bottom says that he would like to play the lion too and describes how wonderfully he would roar. Quince suggests that perhaps the roaring would be too much for the ladies in the audience, and hence Bottom must be content with playing Pyramus and only Pyramus. Bottom at last agrees to accept his role in the play. The men agree to meet together tomorrow night in the woods, where they will rehearse their play.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Act 1, Scene 2 introduces the comedians and a new thematic element. Bottom behaves like an ass. He is a braggart and a blowhard who constantly irritates the other players. He imagines himself to be a great actor and bullies the others. Bottom is an ass, but he cannot see it because he is blinded by his pride - his love of self.

The play of Pyramus and Thisbe is a comic treatment of a foiled love that leads to both foolishness and tragedy. Pyramus kills himself, thinking Thisbe is dead, and she in turn kills herself over Pyramus. The story is very similar to another Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*, but in this case, the story is made ridiculous. The love of Pyramus and Thisbe is not tragic but silly.

The rustics are built into the play as a commentary on its themes, rather than active participants within the main action of the play. Their play within a play is analogous to the play within a play in *Hamlet*. In this case, the author himself has chosen to use this device both to enhance the themes of love and foolishness and to provide a comical foil for the serious characters.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

In a wood near Athens, Puck meets with a Fairy. The Fairy is part of the Fairy Queen Titania's retinue and has been wandering over hill and over dale, sprinkling dewdrops. The queen herself will be arriving shortly. Puck warns the Fairy that Oberon, the fairy king, is also on his way and must not meet with Titania because they are quarreling. Titania has stolen an Indian child to be one of her attendants. Oberon wants the child to become a knight of his own train, but Titania has refused to give up the child. Now the pair cannot meet without fighting so vehemently that their attendants are afraid.

The Fairy recognizes Puck as Robin Goodfellow, a mischievous sprite who is known for making trouble in the village. Puck affirms that she is correct and brags about how he entertains Oberon with jests. The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Oberon from one side of stage and Titania from the other.

Titania and Oberon greet each other ungraciously. Oberon reminds Titania that as his wife, she should obey his wishes. She counters that if he is her husband, then he would not pursue other women. Titania wonders if he plans to celebrate the wedding of Hippolyta, his past mistress, to Theseus. Oberon responds by bringing up Titania's past relationship with Theseus. Titania replies that this strife is the result of jealousy. Her fight with Oberon has turned nature upside down, changing the seasons, causing floods, destroying crops and bringing disease.

Oberon reminds Titania that all of the trouble can be remedied if she will give up the changeling boy, but she remains adamant. The child's mother was one of Titania's attendants, but she has since died. Titania is determined to keep the child for the mother's sake and refuses to part with him. Titania exits angrily with her train.

Oberon decides to punish Titania and calls Puck to help him. One evening, Oberon witnessed Cupid's arrow being shot to earth. It struck a flower, turning the bloom from white to purple. The juice of this flower placed on a sleeper's eyelids will make him or her fall in love with the next person he or she sees. Puck exits to fetch the flower as Oberon plans to use the flower on Titania. He will make her fall in love with some ridiculous thing so that he can claim the child while she is distracted. Oberon hides as Demetrius and Helena enter.

Demetrius enters, followed by Helena. He is searching for Hermia and Lysander. He insults Helena, who proclaims her love for him regardless of his ill treatment of her. She finds that the crueler Demetrius is to her, the more she loves him. He warns her that she is unwise to venture into the woods with a man who does not love her and therefore will not protect her. He leaves, threatening to do her harm if she follows him. Helena is not dissuaded and exits in pursuit. Oberon comes out of hiding and decides that he will see to it that the roles will be reversed, so that Demetrius will pursue Helena.

Puck returns with the flower. Oberon takes some of the juice to use on Titania and gives some to Puck, instructing him to use it on Demetrius when the next thing he sees will be Helena. Puck will know his target by the Athenian clothing he wears. Puck is to complete his mission and return to Oberon before cock crow.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Puck is a symbol of nature. He loves tricks and pranks and leading the unsuspecting or unwary into precarious situations. Although he is officially a servant of Oberon, Puck is most often seen acting independently and is not an ordinary part of the fairy retinue. Even when following orders, he according to his own interpretation of what he has been told.

Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairies, have been fighting over a little Indian boy who has become Titania's attendant. Titania dotes on the child, even though it means a split with her husband. This rift between the fairy king and queen has caused all of nature to be upset. The seasons are changed around, and natural disasters occur. Hippolyta and Theseus' love turns strife into peace. Now the quarrel between Oberon and Titania is turning peace into strife.

Although the Indian child is blamed for the quarrel among the fairies, the real cause is jealousy. In their argument, Titania and Oberon refer to past instances of infidelity and other lovers who came between them and their relationship. The Indian child represents another kind of infidelity. Titania is giving all her attention to the child and neglecting Oberon. Oberon wants Titania to prove that she values his affection over the child's by giving the child over to him. Just as Helena's relationship with Hermia is being broken down by her jealousy over Demetrius, Oberon's jealousy of the Indian child is creating a wedge between himself and his queen.

The purple flower is a symbol of Cupid. The flower is the result of a misfired arrow, a mistake made by Cupid. Just as Cupid could not control where his arrow fell, the flower cannot control how its juice will be used.

Like blind Cupid, Puck is acting blindly with the juice that he has been instructed to use. Oberon has given vague instructions about a man in Athenian clothing, which will confuse Puck's perception of the man he is meant to find. Puck is playing the role of "Cupid painted blind," through the flower that cupid's arrow has painted purple.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

In another part of the wood, Titania enters with her train of attendants. She instructs the fairies to sing her to sleep. The fairies sing a lullaby. When they finish, Titania goes to sleep. One fairy is left to stand guard, and the rest exit. Oberon enters stealthily and drips the juice of the magic flower on Titania's eyes. He hopes that she will waken when some vile thing is near. He exits as Hermia and Lysander enter.

Lysander and Hermia are lost and tired. They decide to stop and rest where they are. Hermia insists that Lysander sleep a little distance away from her, since they are not yet married. The two go to sleep. Then, Puck enters, having been unable to find the Athenian man. He sees Lysander's Athenian garments and takes him for the man Oberon sent him to bewitch. Puck anoints Lysander's eyes with the flower and exits.

Demetrius and Helena enter, running. Demetrius spurns Helena again and rushes away, leaving her behind. Helena is too tired to chase him and laments her situation. She is jealous of Hermia and hurt by Demetrius. Helena sees Lysander sleeping nearby and wakes him.

Under the flower's enchantment, Lysander immediately falls in love with Helena. Helena protests that he loves Hermia and believes that she is being made the butt of a joke. Lysander insists that he is no longer in love with Hermia, but the more he entreats, the more Helena is convinced that he is playing a cruel trick. Helena exits with Lysander in pursuit. Hermia then wakes from a nightmare, calling for Lysander. Realizing that he is gone, she exits into the woods to find him.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Act 2, Scene 2 is a plot-driven scene that sets up the rest of the play's action. Oberon anoints Titania's eyes so that she will fall in love when she awakes. The four lovers are separated from their correct partners, and Puck anoints the wrong man, who immediately falls in love with the wrong woman. Love is rendered completely blind by the combined elements of the potion and the confusion created by the woods themselves.

The forces of nature are the forces of confusion. Puck, as a symbol of nature, is the champion of confusion. The woods and the darkness leave the four human lovers confused and disoriented. Lysander and Hermia choose separate areas to sleep and are parted by the darkness of the wood. When Puck finds Lysander, he does not see that Hermia is nearby and ends up adding to confusion when he anoints Lysander's eyes with love potion.

Just as Titania's new love for the Indian child has supplanted her older love for Oberon, Lysander's new love for Helena completely supplants his old love for Hermia. In this sense, love is not only blind and foolish, but also short on memory. Lysander is so involved in his new affections that he doesn't even notice his old love, Hermia, and leaves her alone in the dangerous woods.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Act 3, Scene 1 begins in the wood where Titania is lying asleep. Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout and Starveling enter to begin the rehearsal of their play. There are several difficulties with the play that the men must address before the rehearsal can begin. Bottom has decided that the play needs a prologue, to explain to the audience that the swords and deaths are not real. The lion will also need to introduce himself so that the ladies won't mistake him for a real lion and be frightened. Lastly, they will need moonlight and a wall where Pyramus and Thisbe meet, so two of the actors will be assigned the roles of moonlight and the wall. They begin the rehearsal as Puck enters from behind, surprised to find actors in Titania's bower. Puck decides to watch the play and perhaps to participate.

The rehearsal begins with Bottom in the role of Pyramus playing a romantic scene with Flute as Thisbe. Bottom speaks his line and exits, followed by Puck. While they are absent, Quince tries to coach Flute, who is having difficulty with his lines. When Puck and Bottom re-enter, Bottom has the head of an ass. Bottom is unaware of the enchantment and speaks his next cue as if nothing has happened. Quince, Flute, Snug, Stout and Starveling take fright and run off. Puck follows after to torment them.

Bottom begins to sing, and his voice awakes Titania, who falls in love with him immediately. She insists that Bottom will remain in the forest with her. Titania calls her attendants, Peaseblossom, Mustardseed, Cobweb and Moth to look after Bottom. Bottom banters with the fairies, playing on their names. Titania ends the scene by ordering the fairies to bring Bottom into her bower.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

In Act 3, Scene 1, reality is deceptive, and enchantment reveals truth. It begins with the players attempting to rehearse their play and fearing that their disguises will be mistaken for reality. To their way of thinking, disguise and pretence are perceived as truth. In this way, a man playing a lion can be mistaken for a lion, and things such as a wall or moonlight can be effectively represented by a human being. Their world is defined by outward appearances.

Bottom is a man who looks like anyone else, but he behaves like an ass. His outward appearance is a false representation of his true nature. Puck, acting as a representative of the natural world, gives Bottom the head of an ass. Rather than being a man disguised as an ass, Bottom is an ass who has been wearing the disguise of a man, and his true nature is now revealed in his appearance.

Now that Bottom has been altered into a more natural state, he no longer has a place in human society, and his character is moved into the world of the fairies. Rather than

being an active participant, he is now in the role of an object. He is needed as a focus for Titania's affections, but Titania controls the action. Bottom cannot return to the world of the rustics until his human face is restored, because in the rustics' world, appearance creates reality. Since Bottom looks like an ass, he is an ass and no longer one of them.

Titania, having been enchanted with the love potion, awakes and immediately falls in love with Bottom, despite his enchantment. This is a representation of love's blindness. Although it should be obvious to Titania that Bottom is an ass, thanks to Puck's enchantment, she is blinded by the potion and cannot see the foolishness of her choice for a lover.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

In another part of the wood, Oberon wonders if Titania has been awakened, and if so, what monstrous thing she now loves. Puck enters to relate the events of the last scene. Titania has fallen in love with a monster. A group of common men gathered in the wood to rehearse a play for Theseus' wedding day. Puck led off the man who was to play Pyramus, the biggest fool in the group, and gave him the head of an ass in place of his own head. Puck then teased the men, leading them on wild chases through the wood. When Titania woke, she saw Pyramus and fell in love with an ass.

Oberon asks if Puck has also found the Athenian man and enchanted him as well. Puck says that it has been done as instructed. Hermia and Demetrius enter. Oberon tells Puck to stay close, as this is the very same man who was to be enchanted and woman who loves him. Puck replies that this is indeed the woman he saw, but not the man.

Demetrius protests his love to Hermia, but her only concern is Lysander's safety. She fears that Demetrius has slain him in the wood. She can think of no other reason why Lysander would have abandoned her. Demetrius finally explains that he has not murdered Lysander, nor does he know where Lysander has gone. Hermia exits to continue her search for Lysander elsewhere. Demetrius decides that the pursuit of Hermia is pointless for the time being, and he settles down to sleep.

Oberon chides Puck for having put the love-juice on the wrong man's eyes, turning true love false rather than false love true. Oberon sends Puck to find Helena of Athens and bring her to the place where Demetrius is sleeping. Puck exits and Oberon puts the flower's juice on Demetrius' eyes. A moment later, Puck appears with Helena and Lysander not far behind. Puck and Oberon step aside to watch the entertaining scene.

Lysander pleads his love to Helena. Helena is more and more convinced that Lysander is playing some joke. His vows of love should be for Hermia. Demetrius awakens and immediately begins proclaiming his own love for Helena. Helena thinks that the men, having been rivals for Hermia's love, are now rivals in mocking Helena. She tries to talk them into behaving with more courtesy and sense, but to no avail. Lysander tells Demetrius that since he loves Hermia, he should leave Helena alone. Demetrius replies that he doesn't want Hermia and that Lysander should keep her.

Hermia enters, asking Lysander why he left her. Lysander explains that he loves Helena rather than Hermia, much to Hermia's shock. Helena, on the other hand, is convinced that Hermia too is in on the plot to humiliate her. She reminds Hermia of their close friendship in happier times and chides her that joining with the men to scorn Helena is unkind.

Hermia is amazed at Helena's comments, because it seems to her that she is the one scorned. Helena then suggests that Hermia has told Lysander and Demetrius to pretend love for Helena. The two young women quarrel, insulting one another's looks. Demetrius and Lysander join in, each insisting that he loves Helena and hates Hermia. The men turn on Hermia, who angrily turns on Helena. Hermia is ready to come to blows, but Helena prefers to run away, still protesting that she has never done Hermia any harm. The four lovers exit in confusion.

Oberon comes out and tells Puck that the lovers are seeking a place to fight, and it is Puck's fault. Puck protests that Oberon was negligent in his orders to Puck and did not clearly specify which man he was to enchant. Besides, the result of Puck's mistake has been very amusing.

Oberon sends Puck to lead the lovers into the night, keeping Lysander and Demetrius away from each other by imitating their voices and leading them astray until they become exhausted and sleep. Puck is then to anoint Lysander's eyes with an herb that will counteract the effect of the love-juice. While Puck is busy with the lovers, Oberon will go to Titania to ask for the Indian boy. Then, he will release her from the spell. Daylight is approaching, so they must make haste. Oberon exits.

Lysander enters, look for Demetrius. Puck imitates Demetrius' voice and leads Lysander off. Demetrius enters next, and Puck leads him off as well, now pretending to be Lysander. Unable to find Demetrius, Lysander returns and lies down to sleep. Demetrius returns, still being goaded on by Puck, but he also gives up the chase and lies down to sleep. Helena enters, unable to find her way back to Athens, and she goes to sleep. Hermia appears, and unable to find Lysander again, she decides to sleep as well. Puck squeezes the juice onto Lysander's eyes. When the lovers wake again, all will be well, and the couples will be properly matched.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

The combination of jealousy and blindness works to break down all of the relationships between the four lovers. Throughout the play, jealousy has been explored as a divisive force. In Act 3, Scene 2, friendship is torn apart by jealousy. Helena cannot understand the sudden change in Lysander and Demetrius that has made them love her rather than Helena. Although she and Hermia have been close friends, her jealousy of Hermia clouds her reason, and she blames her friend for the situation. Hermia, previously an object of jealousy, is placed in the opposite situation and is jealous of Lysander's attentions to Helena. Hermia's jealousy quickly turns to anger against the friend that she had previously pitied, and the two young women begin to quarrel violently.

Puck, the voice of nature, uses confusion to restore order. He leads Demetrius and Lysander astray in the woods, goading and confusing them until they are too worn out to continue and decide to sleep. Although love is blind, Puck is now very much aware of the natural order and uses the antidote to restore everyone to a natural state. The

antidote herb is collected by Puck and symbolizes his role as a protector of nature. The love-herb causes chaos, and the naturally occurring antidote creates order.

Puck restores Lysander to his original state but leaves Demetrius in love with Helena. Helena was forced by Demetrius' disdain to act in an unnatural way, pursuing him as he once pursued her. Now that Demetrius loves Helena, she can return to the natural order.

Puck has also restored the natural state of Helena and Hermia's friendship and the relationship between Hermia and her father. By matching up the couples and removing the influence of jealousy, the world can be at peace. This idea will be developed further in the next scene, when the natural order itself is restored by Titania and Oberon's reconciliation.

Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

Act 4, Scene 1 opens in the same setting as Act 3, Scene 2. Lysander, Demetrius, Helena and Hermia are lying asleep. Titania, Bottom, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed and other fairies enter, followed by Oberon, who is unseen. Bottom is still enchanted with the head of an ass.

Titania invites Bottom to sit with her while she dotes on him. Bottom asks Peaseblossom to scratch his head, which is itching. He banters with Mustardseed and Cobweb, asking them to scratch his head as well. His face feels strangely hairy. Titania offers music and food, but Bottom is tired and wants to sleep. Titania goes to sleep with Bottom, and the other fairies exit.

As Puck enters, Oberon points out how well his plan has worked. Oberon met with Titania earlier, and after some argument, he was able to convince her to give him the Indian child to be his attendant. Now that the matter is settled, Oberon almost feels sorry for Titania and intends to undo the enchantment. Oberon tells Puck to undo the enchantment on Bottom so that he can return to Athens, but not before Titania wakes up. Oberon smears Titania's eyes with the antidote to the love-juice and then wakes her.

Titania wakes up, believing that she has been dreaming that she loved an ass. Oberon points out the sleeping Bottom, whom Titania now loathes. Puck removes the enchantment from Bottom, giving him back his human head. Oberon and Titania are reconciled. The king and queen of fairies will dance at Theseus' wedding to wish him prosperity. All of the fairies follow Titania and Oberon off.

Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus enter with their train of attendants. The party has come to the woods for a hunt. They see the four lovers sleeping, and Egeus recognizes them as Helena, Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander. This is the very day that Hermia must tell her father whether she will marry Demetrius or go to the convent. Theseus orders huntsmen to wake the lovers with their horns.

Theseus asks for an explanation of how the four lovers came to be in the woods. Lysander explains that he and Hermia fled from Athens, headed for a place where they could be married without breaking the law. Egeus invokes the law against Lysander and tells Demetrius that he may claim Hermia. Demetrius says that although he followed Hermia into the woods, his love for her has melted, and he now loves Helena and intends to be true to her.

Theseus decides that the hunt should be put aside. They will all return to Athens where the two happy couples will be married. The four lovers feel as if they must have been lost in some sort of dream, as they follow Theseus and his train back to Athens.

Alone, Bottom awakens. He remembers the events of the previous night, but he imagines that he must have dreamed being an ass. He plans to recount the tale to Quince, who should write it into a new ballad, called Bottom's Dream, which can be sung at the end of their play.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

The beginning of Act 4, Scene 1 completes the reconciliation of the forces of nature. Oberon explains to Puck that having turned Titania's attentions to Bottom, he has been able to remove her old love, the Indian child. Now that the element of jealousy has been resolved, the fairy world (and the natural world) can be returned to a normal state, through the use of the antidote to the love potion.

When Titania awakes, having been returned to a natural state by the antidote herb, she is able to see Bottom for what he really is - an ass. She is shocked that she could have ever loved such a creature and assumes that she must have dreamt the situation. Now that Bottom is no longer needed as an object to replace the Indian child in Titania's affections, Puck restores Bottom's human face. This returns Bottom to the world of the rustics, where an ass is a man as long as he has a man's face. Now that nature is restored, all past jealousies are forgotten. Titania and Oberon will dance at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, blessing the marriage by their presence.

Titania is not the only one who imagines that the action is the result of a dream. The four lovers and Bottom come to the same conclusions. The dream is introduced as an explanation for elements that contradict nature. The changing affections of the lovers and the removal of Bottom from his rustic peers can only be understood in the character of a dream, where the natural order would not apply.

Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Act 4, Scene 2 is set at Quince's house in Athens. Quince, Flute, Snout and Starveling enter. They have been unable to locate Bottom, and without Bottom their play is ruined. They fear that Bottom was transported in the woods. Snug arrives with news that the duke has been married, along with several more lords and ladies. It is time to put on the play. Flute laments that no other man but Bottom could play Pyramus as well.

Bottom enters, looking for the other men. The others are delighted to see him. Bottom promises to tell them everything that has happened at a later time. Right now they must all hurry and get into costume. Theseus has asked for their play. The men rush off.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

Now that Bottom is gone, the world of the rustics is upset. They are unable to function without him, despite his occasionally difficult behavior. When Bottom returns, order is restored, and the men are able to return to their function as comedians and commentators. Their play has been called for at the palace, and they are ready to perform.

Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

At 5, Scene 1 takes place in Athens at the palace of Theseus. Hippolyta and Theseus talk about the story that they have heard from the four lovers about their experiences in the woods. It sounds like it must be a fairy tale. They decide that these tales are the results of love's delusion, which can cause all kinds of strange visions and fancies to seem like truth.

Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia and Helena enter together. There are three more hours between dinner and bedtime to be filled with revels and plays. Philostrate brings in a list of entertainments for Theseus to select from. Theseus selects the scene of Pyramus and Thisbe as being most appropriate for the festivities. Philostrate says that he has seen some of the play and found it very comical, but not in a good way. He advises Theseus not to hear it, but Theseus has made his choice. Philostrate goes to bring the players.

Quince enters as the Prologue. He makes a short speech explaining that the players' only intent is to delight their audience. Pyramus, Thisbe, Wall, Moonshine and the Lion enter. The Prologue introduces the characters to his audience. Pyramus and Thisbe are the lovers. They will communicate through a chink in the Wall that separates them. The character of Moonshine will shine on the lovers when they meet at Ninus' tomb. The Lion will frighten Thisbe away, catching her mantle in its bloodstained mouth. Later, Pyramus will see the bloody mantle and will think Thisbe has been killed. In grief, Pyramus will kill himself. Finding Pyramus dead, Thisbe will kill herself as well. All of the characters exit, except for Wall.

Theseus wonders if the Lion will speak. Demetrius replies that the Lion might as well speak when so many asses do. The play continues. The Wall introduces himself as Snout, playing the character of a wall with a chink through which Pyramus and Thisbe will talk to each other. Bottom enters as Pyramus and asks the wall to show him the chink, represented by Snout's fingers. Pyramus curses the wall, since he cannot see Thisbe. Theseus comments that a sensible wall would curse again, and Bottom breaks character to explain that this is Thisbe's cue. He will see her through the wall just as he has said.

Thisbe enters, looking for Pyramus. The lovers talk through the chink in the Wall and agree to meet at Ninus' tomb. They exit. The Wall announces that his part is now finished, and he exits. Hippolyta and Theseus think this is the silliest play they have ever seen.

The Lion enters with Moonshine. He addresses the ladies, to explain that he is really Snug the joiner and no real lion, lest they be frightened. Moonshine holds up a lantern

to represent moonlight. Thisbe enters, looking for Pyramus. She sees the Lion and runs off, leaving behind her mantle. The Lion takes up the mantle and shakes it in his mouth.

Pyramus arrives and finds the mantle. He curses the Lion for killing his beloved Thisbe. He stabs himself on his sword and then sends moonshine away as he dies. Theseus and his party banter about the action of the play until Thisbe enters. Seeing that Pyramus is dead, Thisbe stabs herself and dies. Bottom again breaks character to ask if Theseus will prefer to have a dance or hear the epilogue to the play. Theseus says the play needs no epilogue and compliments the players. They will have the dance instead. When the dance is over, Theseus sends everyone to bed. It is now the fairies' time.

Now that nighttime has come, Puck enters to ready the house for the fairies. He is followed by Titania and Oberon with their train. Titania and Oberon call for the fairies to begin their revels. The fairies will stray through the house to bless all of the bridal beds. The lovers and their children will always be fortunate. They exit. Puck delivers the epilogue that what everyone has seen tonight has been a dream and bids the audience goodnight.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

Now that the lovers are no longer being led astray by misplaced love, the foolishness of love can be clearly seen in the play within the play, the rustics' presentation of Pyramus and Thisbe. Shakespeare makes use of the Pyramus and Thisbe story to comment on the stories present earlier within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Pyramus and Thisbe are a pair of comically presented lovers, who are analogous to Hermia and Lysander as well as Helena and Demetrius. Pyramus and Thisbe are true lovers who are separated by their parents, just as Hermia and Lysander are separated by Hermia's father, Egeus. Like Hermia and Lysander, Pyramus and Thisbe are determined to see each other regardless of the consequences. When they meet, they are separated by a "wall" which is represented by a human being who stands between them. Similarly, Lysander and Hermia are separated by a human wall in the form of Demetrius. Helena and Demetrius have also been separated by a human wall, in the shape of Hermia. Hermia's presence has created a distraction that made Demetrius unable to see Helena or his affections for her.

Pyramus and Thisbe decide to meet a Ninus' tomb, a location distant from their homes and not without its dangers in the form of the lion. The four lovers meet one another in the woods outside of Athens, a location distant from their homes and made dangerous by the presence of the fairies. The Lion is a symbol of the dangers of jealousy. It tears Thisbe's cloak apart, leaving it torn and bloodstained. Jealousy tears the four lovers apart, leaving all of their relationships broken.

When Bottom, in the character of Pyramus, arrives and sees the torn and bloodstained cloak, he mistakes its meaning and kills himself. Thisbe arrives shortly afterwards and

kills herself as well. Like the lovers, Pyramus is blinded by his love and acts contrary to nature and sense.

During the performance, Bottom does not remain dead. Although he has taken on the appearance of Pyramus, Bottom is not Pyramus. He has been changed by his experience in the woods and is grounded in a reality that is not fooled by his appearance. Therefore, Bottom himself can speak, after the Pyramus character should be silent.

In the end, the fairies arrive to bless everyone. Now that natural order is restored, Titania and Oberon are a positive force that brings luck and good fortune, rather than illness and destruction.

Characters

Attendants:

Attendants appear in several scenes during the play, and are sometimes mentioned in the stage directions as "others" or as Theseus's train. In lV.i, Theseus addresses attendants directly, instructing them to do various tasks. The attendants have no speaking parts.

Bottom:

Nick Bottom, the weaver, first appears in I.ii, with the other mechanicals, or clowns (Quince, Snug, Flute, Snout, and Starveling), as they are sometimes called. It is often noted that the mechanicals' names reflect their work. "Bottom," critics explain, refers to the bottom, or skein, around which yarn is wound. Bottom directs Quince to tell the group which play they will be performing and to tell everyone which parts they will be playing. Quince assigns the role of Pyramus to Bottom. Bottom seems enthusiastic about playing this part, and he volunteers also to play the role of Thisby, and that of the lion. Quince convinces him, however, that he "can play no part but Pyramus" (I.ii.85). Bottom appears again III.i as the group of mechanicals gathers in the wood to rehearse. He tells Quince that the play needs a prologue to explain that the dangers in the play (Pyramus draw ing his sword to kill himself, and the lion) are not real. After the group decides that the moonshine by which Pyramus and Thisby meet, and the wall which separates the lovers must be played by peo ple, the group proceeds with their rehearsal. Bottom bungles his first line, and Quince corrects him. Flute, playing Thisby to Bottom's Pyramus, doesn't do much better, to Quince's dismay. Puck, who has been watching, intervenes to change Bottom's head into the head of an ass. When the others se this, the run off, frightened. Bottom thinks they are playing a trick on him, trying to scare him, so he begins singing to show them he his not afraid. His song is interrupted by Titania, who has just woken up, having been anointed with the love juice by Oberon. Titania swears she is in love with Bottom, a man with the head of an ass, and he replies "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that" (III.ii. 142-43). When Titania tells Bottom that he is both wise and beautiful, he assures her that he is not. Nevertheless, he seems to accept her affection, and follows her with little objection.

Bottom is next seen seated upon Titania's "flow'ry bed" as she caresses him, adorns his head with flowers, and kisses his "fair large ears" (IV.i.l- 4). Bottom is busy instructing the fairies to fetch him honey and scratch his ears. When Bottom and Titania fall asleep, Oberon reverses the effect of the love juice on Titania. As Titania wakes up saying that she thought she had been in love with an ass, she sees Bottom lying next her and exclaims "O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!" (IV.i.78). Puck then removes the ass's head from Bottom. When Bottom awakens, he determines that he has had a "rare vision" (IV.i.205) and he vows to get Quince to write it down for him. He then finds his friends and they leave for the palace to perform *Pyramus and Thisby.*

Act V is comprised primarily of the perform ance of the Pyramus and Thisby play. Bottom, as Pyramus, and the rest of the group frequently misspeak their lines and mispronounce the names of the legendary lovers referred to in the play. Bottom also interacts with his audience (Theseus, Hippolyta, and the four young lovers). For example, when Theseus comments on the speech of the Wall, Bottom responds, telling him what is about to happen and that "You shall see it / fall pat as I told you" (V.i. 186-87). Although the on-stage audience scoffs a bit athe performance (for example, Hippolyta says "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" [V.i.210]), as the performance progresses, they make some positive comments as well. Hippolyta, in fact, seems touched by Bottom's performance: "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man" (V.i.290) she says as Pyramus comes to think that his beloved Thisby is dead. As the play ends, with Bottom and Flute lying on the stage representing the dead Pyramus and Thisby, Demetrius comments that the Wall is left to help Moonshine and Lion bury the dead. Bottom then sits up and says, "No, I assure you, the wall is down that parted their fathers. Will it please you to see the epilogue .. . ?" (V.i.351-54). Theseus declines the epilogue.

Bottom is considered by many commentators to be the central figure of the play. He is admired for his humor and his imagination. It has been noted that he seems to represent the common experience of humanity. Additionally, Bottom is the only character in the play who can see and interact directly with the fairy world. And when he wakes up and has been returned to his former self, he acknowledges that something has happened to him and it would be foolish to try explain it: 'I have had a most / rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of / man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, / if he go about [t'] expound this dream" (IV.i.204-07). In fact, it is this speech, referred to as the awakening speech or soliloquy, that intrigues many critics. The speech is often argued to be indicative of Shakespeare's acknowledgment of the possibility of spiritual

life beyond our everyday existence. The speech is also said to demonstrate both nature's and love's inexplicability. Additionally, Bottom's lively involvement in the Pyramus and Thisby performance has been cited as proof of Bottom's ability to understand the imaginative process of art. This ability, some argue, sets Bottom apart from the other mortals in the play who don't seem to share this understanding.

Cobweb:

Cobweb is one of Titania's fairies. Cobweb is introduced to Bottom in III.i, and in IV.i, Bottom instructs Cobweb to kill a bumble be and retrieve its "honey-bag" (IV.i.10-13).

Demetrius:

Demetrius first appears in Li with Egeus, Hermia, and Lysander. Egeus speaks highly of Demetrius, calling him "my noble lord" (I.i.24), and telling Theseus that it is Demetrius who has his consent to marry Hermia, Egeus's daughter. After Hermia has expressed

her desire to marry Lysander, and the duke has outlined her choices (death, nunnery, or marriage to Demetrius), Demetrius asks Hermia to "Relent" and Lysander to "yield / Thy crazed title to my certain right" (I.i.91-92). Lysander replies that Demetrius has in fact "Made love to .

Helena, / And won her soul" (Li.107-08). Theseus admits that he had heard of this, and meant to speak to Demetrius about it. Nevertheless, he holds Hermia to her father's will. It is not clear why Demetrius transferred his affections from Helena to Hermia, but Helena seems obsessed with getting him back. When Demetrius learns from Helena of Hermia's and Lysander's plans, he pursues his beloved, and Helena pursues him. Oberon overhears the conversation between Helena and Demetrius, in which she repeatedly professes her love for him. After Demetrius ungently discourages her, he runs off. Oberon then reveals his plan to have Puck anoint Demetrius's eyes with the love juice, so that Demetrius will return Helena's love. Puck instead finds Lysander and puts the juice of the flower on his eyes. As it happens, Helena, who has been chasing Demetrius but,can pursue no longer, comes upon Lysander and wakes him. Lysander then falls in love with Helena. In an attempt to rectify the situation, Oberon places the love juice on Demetrius's eyes, so that when he wakes he will indeed be in love with Helena. And this is exactly what happens. Demetrius and Lysander are now both in love with Helena; Hermia does not understand why Lysander now hates her; and Helena is convinced the three of them are playing a cruel joke on her. Oberon then arranges, with Puck's assistance, to finally right what has gone wrong by placing an herb on Lysander's.eyes which will reverse the effects of the love juice, thus restoring Lysander's love for Hermia. Once this transforma tion is complete, Theseus approves of both couples and announces that they will all be married. In the last act, Demetrius and the others comment on the Pyramus and Thisby play as it is being performed. Critics generally agree that the four young lovers are practically interchangeable; it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Some attribute this lack of characterization to Shakespeare's own inexperience as a playwright. Most commentators, however, argue that this lack of individualization is central to the plot, that Shake speare did this on purpose. The young Athenians may seem indistinguishable to the audience, but as objects of love tone another they are seen as sheer perfection. Arguably, it is the transformative power of love that makes four almost identical people seem so different and so wonderful in each other's eyes. On the other hand, Shakespeare may have painted the young lovers as he did in order highlight the folly, capriciousness, and inconsistency of their love.

Duke of Athens (Theseus, Duke of Athens):

See Theseus

Egeus:

Egeus is Hermia's father. He appears in I.i, complaining to Theseus that his daughter will not marry Demetrius. Egeus explains to the duke that Lysander has ' bewitch'd"

(I.i.27) Hermia with his poetry and his moonlight serenades, among other things. Finally, Egeus comes to the point and makes his request of Theseus: "As she is mine," Egeus says, 'I may dispose of her; / Which shall be either to this gentleman [Demetrius], / Or to her death, according to our law ..." (I.i.42-44). After Theseus gives Hermia another option, to enter a nunnery, he suggests she follow her father's wishes and marry Demetrius. Later, in the company of Theseus and Hippolyta, Egeus finds his daughter sleeping in the wood. Nearby are Lysander, Demetrius, and Hele na. When Lysander awakens and confesses that he and Hermia were in the process of fleeing Athens to elope, Egeus demands that Lysander be punished: "I beg the law, the law, upon his head" (IV.i.155). But Theseus does not back him this time; instead, he insists that the two couples be wed alongside him and Hippolyta.

Fairies:

The fairies appear in several scenes, primarily as attendants of Oberon and Titania. Four of the fairies are individually identified as Cobweb, Moth, Peaseblossom, and Mustardseed and they serve Titania, and later, Bottom. In II.i, one unnamed fairy converses with Puck. In II.ii, Oberon and Titania appear each attended by a train of fairies. Later in the same scene, several fairies sing Titania to sleep at her request. In III.i, the four named fairies appear to be introduced to Bottom, and they appear again in IV.i to do Bottom's bidding (scratch his head and fetch honey). At the play's end, the fairies appear, identified as Oberon's and Hippolyta's train, to sing and dance.

Flute:

Francis Flute, a bellows-maker, is one of a group which is often referred to as the clowns, or the mechanicals. This group also includes Bottom, Quince, Snug, Snout, and Starveling. It is frequently noted that the names of these common laborers reflect the work that they do. "Flute," critics ex plain, suggests the fluted bellows of church organs that Flute would be likely to repair. In I.ii, Flute appears with the rest of the mechanicals, as Quince the carpenter is assigning the roles in the Pyramus and Thisby play. Quince assigns Flute the role of Thisby. Apparently unfamiliar with the play, Flute asks "What is Thisby? A wand'ring knight?" (I.ii.45), to which Quince replies that Thisby is the lady Pyramus is in love with. Flute objects, arguing that he's got a beard coming in. Quince will have none of it; he tells Flute to play the part wearing a mask, and that he may "speak as small as you will" (I.ii.50). Bottom offers to play the role of Thisby, and offers a sampling of the voice he would use to do so. But Quince insists that Bottom is Pyramus and Flute is Thisby.

Flute appears again in Ill.i, rehearsing with the rest of the mechanicals, and getting his lines wrong, much to Quince's dismay. He runs of after Puck has given Bottom the ass's head. In IV.ii, Flute seems overjoyed at Bottom's return, and he praises profusely Bottom's acting abilities. In V.i, Flute appears as Thisby. With the other players, Flute comically blunders his lines, frequently getting wrong the names of the classical references in the play.

Goodfellow (Robin Goodfellow):

See Puck

Helena:

In the first scene of the play, we are introduced to Helena's problem: she desperately loves Demetrius but he is in love with her friend Hermia. Both Lysander and Helena herself reveal that Demetrius was at one time involved with Helena. Lysander tells Theseus that Demetrius "Made love to ... Helena, / And won her soul" (I.i. 107-08). Helena says that before Demetrius looked upon Hermia, "He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine" (I.i.242-43). In an attempt to win back some of Demetrius's affection, Helena tells him of Hermia's plan to meet in the wood and elope with Lysander. According to Helena's plan, Demetrius pursues Hermia, and Helena follows Demetrius. Continuing to scorn her, Demetrius runs off. In the midst of her pursuit, Helena comes upon the sleeping Lysander, who has mistakenly been anointed with the love juice by Puck. When Lysander wakes up and sees Helena, he falls in love with her instantly. Meanwhile, Demetrius has also been affected by the love potion, and also falls in love with Helena. As the two men vie for Helena's attention, Hermia appears and is completely confused by Lysander's sudden scorn of her. Seeing al this, Helena becomes con vinced that the others are mocking her. She asks Hermia if she has forgotten their friendship (III.ii.201- 02), apparently forgetting that she herself betrayed the friendship by revealing Hermia's plans to Demetrius. Soon, however, Puck and Oberon recti- fy the situation by reversing the affect of the love juice on Lysander, thereby removing his love of Helena and restoring his love for Hermia. Theseus announces that the couples will be wed. In Act V, Helena watches the Pyramus and Thisby perform ance and is later blessed, along with the others, by Oberon. Critics generally agree that the four young lovers are practically interchangeable; it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Some attribute this lack of characterization to Shake speare's own inexperience as a playwright. Most commentators, however, argue that this lack of individualization is central to the plot, that Shakespeare did this on purpose. The young Athenians may seem indistinguishable to the audience, but as objects of love to one another they are seen as sheer perfection. Arguably, it is the transformative power of love that makes four almost identical people seem so different and so wonderful in each other's eyes. On the other hand, Shakespeare may have painted the young lovers as he did in order highlight the folly, capriciousness, and inconsistency of their love.

Hermia:

Hermia's dilemma is introduced early in the first scene of the play, as her father Egeus complains to the duke that she refuses to marry Demetrius. She maintains that she is in love with Lysander, who she argues is as worthy as Demetrius. Claiming that she does not know 'by what power I am made bold" (I.i.59), she asks Theseus what will happen to her if she does not comply with her father's wishes by marrying Demetrius. Theseus

gives her twoptions: death or lifelong imprisonment in a nunnery. Remarking that she would rather live in a convent all her life than be with Demetrius, Hermia remains constant in her love of Lysander, and later quickly agrees to his plan to escape Athens and elope. As they are discussing this plan, Helena appears, la menting that Demetrius loves Hermia. Hermia tells her friend to "Take comfort; he no more shall see my face; / Lysander and myself will fly from this place" (I.i.202-03). Helena uses this information in an attempt to gain favor with Demetrius. When Lysander and Hermia become lost in the woods, he suggests they stop and rest, and Hermia virtuously insists that they do not lie next to one another. She awakens calling outo Lysander after dreaming that "a serpent eat [ate] my heart away, / And you sate smiling at his cruel prey" (III.i.149- 50). When Lysander does not answer, Hermia fears the worst and sets out to find him. When she does, she is confused to find that he claims love for Helena and hatred of her. She asks:

What? Can you do me greater harm than hate? Hate me, wherefore? O me, what news, my love! Am not I Hermia? Are not you Lysander? (III.ii.271-73)

After the four lovers insult each other and nearly resort to physical violence against each other, Oberon and Puck resolve everything. Lysander's love for Hermia is restored, and Theseus soon appears to give his blessing to the couple, much to Egeus's dismay. In the last act, Helena watches the play about Pyramus and Thisby and is later blessed, along with the others, by Oberon. Critics generally agree that the four young lovers are practically interchangeable; it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Some attribute this lack of characterization to Shakespeare's own inexperience as a playwright. Most commentators, however, argue that this lack of individualization is central to the plot, that Shakespeare did this on purpose. The young Athenians may seem indistinguishable to the audience, but as objects of love to one another they are seen as sheer perfection. Arguably, it is the transformative power of love that makes four almost identical people seem so different and so wonderful in each other's eyes. On the other hand, Shakespeare may have painted the young lovers as he did in order highlight the folly, capriciousness, and inconsistency of their love.

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Hippolyta:

The play opens as Hippolyta and Theseus are discussing their upcoming marriage. Theseus comments that he . . . woo'd thee [Hippolyta] with my sword, And won thy love doing thee injuries; But I will wed thee in another key, With pomp, triumph, and with revelling. (I.i.16-19) Theseus is referring to the fact that he conquered Hippolyta in his war with the Amazons. Hippolyta's only lines in this act are in response to Theseus's comment that they will be wed in "Four happy days" (I.i.2). She says simply, in a few lines, that the time will pass quickly. Hippolyta does not appear again until IV.i. She accompanies Theseus and others on a hunt in the wood, and she fondly remembers a moment from her past as queen of the Amazons when she was hunting "with Hercules

and Cadmus" (IV.i.112). She comments on the musical quality of the baying of the hounds on that hunt, that she had "never heard / So musical a discord, such sweet thunder" (IV.i.116-17). Theseus then praises his own hounds, when Egeus stumbles upon the four sleeping young lovers.

Hippolyta appears again in Act V, first discussing with Theseus, the story of the young lovers, commenting that it was "strange and admirable" (V.i.27). During the performance of *Pyramus and Thisby,* Hippolyta makes various remarks through out the play, sometimes scoffing ("This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" [V.i.210]) and sometimes praising ("Well shone, Moon. Truly, the moon shines / with a good grace" [V.i.267-68]). In the end, she and Theseus are blessed, along with the other couples, by Oberon.

Many commentators see Hippolyta's and Theseus's relationship as providing a framework for the dramatic action of the play, given that the couple only appears in the beginning and thend of the play. Additionally, this relationship undergoes no change during the course of the play and arguably represents stability and consistency, in direct contrast to the somewhat capricious relationships of the young lovers. Some commentators, however, have observed Hippolyta's relative silence through out Act I of the play. They believe that this silence does not reflect Hippolyta's happy acceptance of her marriage to Theseus. Rather, her reticence suggests that she has been coerced into the marriage (remember, she *has* been taken captive), and that she seems to regard it with resignation and sadness.

King of the Fairies:

See Oberon

Lion:

Se Snug

Lysander:

Lysander first appears in I.i with his love Hermia, her father Egeus, and his competitor for Hermia's love, Demetrius. Egeus accuses Lysander of bewitching his daughter, of writing poems for her, exchanging love tokens with her, singing to her by moonlight at her window. After Hermia is given the choice of death or imprisonment in a convent if she refuses to marry Demetrius, Lysander pleads his own worth to Egeus: "I am, my lord, as well deriv'd as he, / As well possess'd; my love is more than his; / My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd" (I.i.99- 101). Furthermore, he accuses Demetrius of having an affair with Helena, in order to demonstrate Demetrius's inconsistency. None of this changes Egeus's mind or Theseus's decision. Lysander then proposes to Hermia that they flee Athenian law and secretly elope, and Hermia agrees to the plan. After losing their way in the wood, Lysander suggests to Hermia that they stop and rest, and tries to convince Hermia to let him lie next to her: ' One turf shall serve as pillow for us both, /

One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth" (I.ii.41-42). Hermia virtuously denies him this, so they sleep some ways apart from each other. At this point Puck appears, and mistaking Lysander for Demetrius, squeezes the juice of the flower on his eyes. When Helena, pausing in her pursuit of Demetrius, happens upon Lysander, she wakes him and he falls in love with her. Confused, she flees and he follows.

Meanwhile, Demetrius has also been affected by the love potion, and has also fallen in love with Helena. When the four Athenians find each other, Demetrius and Lysander are professing love for Helena and hatred for Hermia; Helena thinks they are all cruelly mocking her; and Hermia is confused by Lysander's rejection of her and hurt by Helena's verbal attacks. Before long, Oberon and Puck sort things out, and Lysander's love for Helena is erased, and his love for Hermia restored. To Egeus's dismay, Theseus approves of both couples and announces that they will be married. In Act V, Lysander comments on the performance *ofPyramus and Thisby,* and is later blessed, along with the others, by Oberon. Critics generally agree that the four young lovers are practically interchangeable; it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. Some attribute this lack of characterization to Shake speare's own inexperience as a playwright. Most commentators, however, argue that this lack of individualization is central to the plot, that Shake speare did this on purpose. The young Athenians may seem indistinguishable to the audience, but as objects of love to one another they are seen as sheer perfection. Arguably, it is the transformative power of love that makes four almost identical people seem so different and so wonderful in each other's eyes. On the other hand, Shakespeare may have painted the young lovers as he did in order highlight the folly, capriciousness, and inconsistency of their love.

Moonshine:

See Starveling

Moth:

Moth is one of Titania's fairies. Moth is introduced to Bottom in III.i, and in IV.i, Moth appears with Cobweb, Mustardseed, and Peaseblossom, but unlike these other fairies, Moth is not asked to do Bottom's bidding.

Mustardseed:

Mustardseed is one of Titania's fairies and is introduced to Bottom in III.i. In IV.i, Bottom instructs Mustardseed to help Cobweb in the scratch ing of Bottom's head. (Cobweb, however, has been sent to fetch some honey for Bottom, and it is Peaseblossom who has initially been asked to scratch Bottom's head.)

Oberon:

Oberon, the king of the fairies, first appears in II.ii. He is arguing with his queen, Titania, over a changeling (a child exchanged by fairies for anoth er) .who she possesses and he desires. When she refuses to give up the changeling, Oberon devises a plan to steal it from her. He sends Puck of to find a certain flower, whose juices when squeezed on the eyes of Titania will make her fall in love with the next creature she sees. Oberon plans to take the child when Titnania iso spellbound. After outlining this plan, Oberon observes Helena's pursuit of Demetrius and his scornful dismissal of her. Oberon decides to use the flower to make Demetrius love Helena, and instructs Puck to find a man wearing Athenian garments (Demetrius) and place the flow er's juice on his eyes. Meanwhile, Oberon finds the sleeping Titania and squeezes the flower on her eyelids, hoping that she will "Wake when some vile thing is near" (II.ii.34).

Oberon next appears in III.ii. He listens to Puck's report: Titania has fallen in love with a "monster" (III.ii.6) whom Puck has created. Puck then relates the tale of how he came upon Bottom and the others, and how he transformed Bottom. When asked about the Athenian, Puck replies that he has taken care of him as well. But Puck and Oberon almost immediately learn that Puck has *not* anointed Demetrius. Oberon resolves to fix the situation by placing some of the love juice on Demetrius's eyes. The four lovers together, Oberon sees that he must reverse the effect of the love juice on Lysander. Assessing the mess, Oberon accuses Puck,' This is thy negligence. Still thou mistak'st, / Or else commit'st thy knaveries willfully" (III.ii.345- 46). Puck denies that he purposefully placed the love juice on Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius's. The two finally gather the lovers together, and undo what Puck has done to Lysander, so that Lysander's love for Hermia is restored. Soon after, Oberon reveals to Puck how Titania gave up the changeling to him. Instructing Puck to remove the ass's head from Bottom, Oberon first restores Titania. The couple appears once more, with the rest of the fairies and with Puck at the play's end, as Oberon blesses Theseus and Hippolyta, Lysander and Hermia, and Demetrius and Helena.

Oberon is usually seen be audiences to be a benevolent spirit, and critics have noted that he is associated in the play with light and with dawn, even though as Puck reminds him, he is part of the fairy world, and his activity is limited to the night. When Puck says that they must work quickly to complete their plans because morning is approaching, Oberon replies: "But we are spirits of another sort. /I with the Morning's love have oft made sport ..." (III.ii.388-89), and goes on do affiliate himself with the rising sun. Other critics have cited Oberon's wish that Titania will awaken and fall in love with some "vile thing" (II.ii.34) as evidence that he does have some malevolent tendencies. Additionally, Oberon is typically associated with order in the play. He resolves the play's disorder, and some critics note that this can only happen after his relationship with Titania is restored. It has also been argued that the reappearance of Oberon and the fairies at the play's end empha sizes their divine power as they bless the mortals, and that this providential order contrasts with the ineffectual nature of the mortals.

Peaseblossom:

Peaseblossom is one of Titania's fairies. Peaseblossom, along with the other named fairies, is introduced to Bottom in III.i. In IV.i, Bottom in structs Peaseblossom to scratch his head.

Philostrate:

Philostrate is identified as Duke Theseus's Master of Revels. In Li, Theseus instructs Philostrate to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments" (I.i. 12) and generally to promote a festive atmosphere in Athens, in anticipation of the duke's wedding to Hippolyta. Later, in V.i, Philostrate presents Theseus with a list of possible entertainments for the evening. When Theseus asks about the description listed for the Pyramus and Thisby play (" 'A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisby; very tragical mirth' " [V.i.56-57]), Philostrate explains the "tedious" and "tragic" nature of the performance. He also tells the duke that the play is to be performed by common working men "Which never labor'd in their minds till now" (V.i.72), and attempts to discourage the duke from seeing the play. Theseus, however, insists, and instructs Philostrate to bring in the players.

Prologue:

See Quince

Puck (also known as Robin Goodfellow):

Puck, a sprite also known as Robin Goodfellow, first appears in II.ii, as he and a fairy discuss the troubles Oberon and Titania are having. The fairy gives us some indication of Puck's character as she describes how Puck "frights the maidens of the villagery" (II.ii.35) among other activities. When Titania refuses to give up the changeling Oberon wants, he comes up with a plan to steal the child, and enlists Puck's aid in doing so. Puck's first task is to retrieve the very special flower, which he does quickly. Meanwhile, Oberon has learned of the trouble between Demetrius and Helena, and he instructs Puck to use some of the flower on Demetrius (described as wearing Athenian clothes) so that he may return Helena's love. But Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, and puts the juice on his eyes. Soon after, Puck comes upon Bottom, Quince, and the other mechanicals, who are rehearsing their play. He changes Bottom's head into that of an ass, thereby scaring away the other members of the company, who he then proceeds to taunt and chase through the wood. Before long, Bottom and Titania find each other, and Puck reports al of this to Oberon, in III.ii.

At this time, Puck's error (his mistaking Lysander for Demetrius) is revealed and Oberon decides to place the juice of the flower on Demetrius's eyes to rectify the situation. Puck is instructed to lead Helena toward Demetrius, which he does, and Lysander (now in

love with Helena) follows. Puck is delighted at the entertainment that is to ensue as the four young lovers with mixed up emotions come together: "Shall we their fond pageant see? / Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III.ii.l 14-15). Oberon accuses Puck of deliberately causing all this trouble, an accusation which Puck denies. The two finally successfully resolve this situation the young lovers are in, and the one involving Titania and Bottom.

After Oberon has taken the changeling from Titania, she is released from her spell, and Bottom from his. Puck appears athend of the play and offers an apology to the theater audience for the performance. 'If we shadows have offended," he offers, ' Think but this, and all is mended, / that you have but slumb'red here / While these visions did appear. / And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream..."(V.i.423-28). Puck is seen by some to be simply mischievous. Others view him as frightening and dangerous, noting that he is associated with darkness, whereas Oberon is associated with light and the dawn. In II.ii.382-87, Puck urges that he and Oberon work quickly, as their activities must take place under the cover of the night. Oberon's reply contrasts with Puck's speech, as he claims that they are "spirits of another sort" and that he (Oberon) "with the Morning's love have oft made sport" (III.ii.388-89). Additionally, it has been noted that Puck can be seen not only as a spectator of the play's dramatic situations, but as a commentator and interpreter of the play's action. Critics often cite Puck's comment: "Shall we their fond pageant see? / Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III.ii.114-15) as evidence of this.

Pyramus:

See Bottom

Queen of the Fairies:

See Titania

Quince:

Peter Quince is a carpenter and belongs to the group which is often referred to as the clowns, or the mechanicals. This group also includes Bottom, Flute, Snug, Snout, and Starveling. It is frequently noted that the names of these common laborers reflect the work that they do. "Quince," critics explain, probably refers to a wedge-shaped block of wood used in carpentry. In I.ii, the mechanicals are assembled at Quince's house, and, at Bottom's direction Quince is assigning the roles in the Pyramus and Thisby play. Quince assigns himself the role of Thisby's father and answers questions about the play, making suggestions as to how various parts should be played. When Bottom volunteers to play parts other than the one he was assigned (that of Pyramus), Quince flatters Bottom until the latter agrees to play the part of Pyramus. When Bottom wants to play the lion's part, for example, Quince argues that he will play it too well, and frighten

all the ladies, and get himself and the rest of them hanged as a result. When al parts have been assigned, Quince arranges to have a rehearsal in the wood.

The rehearsal takes place in III.i. As the men gather, Bottom brings up his concern that the violence in the play might frighten the female audience members. He suggests that a prologue be written explaining that the dangers in the play□Pyramus drawing his sword to kill himself, and the presence of the lion□are not real. Quince and the others agree on this solution, and he then brings up another concern: how will they represent the moonshine by which Pyramus and Thisby meet? It is agreed that they will use a person to represent the moonshine, and another person to represent the wall which separates the lovers (since they "can never bring in a wall" [III.i.66]). As the group practices, Quince corrects the errors Bottom and Flute make in their lines. They are interrupted when Puck changes Bottom's head into the head of an ass. In IV.ii, Quince seems dismayed at Bottom's disappearance and says that there isn't anyone in Athens who can play Pyramus like Bottom. When Bottom reap pears, Quince expresses his relief and gladness: "Bottom! O most courageous day! O most happy hour!" (IV.i.27). In V.i, Quince reads the part of the Prologue.

Robin Goodfellow:

See Puck

Snout:

Tom Snout, the tinker, is a member of a group which is often referred to as the clowns, or the mechanicals. This group also includes Bottom, Flute, Quince, Snug, and Starveling. It is frequently noted that the names of these common laborers reflect the work that they do. "Snout," critics explain, may suggest a spout of a kettle, an item probably mended by the tinker. In I.ii, Snout appears with the rest of the mechanicals, as Quince the carpenter is assigning the roles in the Pyramus and Thisby play. Quince assigns the role of Pyramus's father to Snout. However, it is decided by the group in III.i that a person will have to play the wall, which, in the play separates Pyramus and Thisby. In V.i we learn that Snout plays the role of Wall. Snout also appears in IV.ii, when Bottom returns from his interlude with Titania, but he does not speak.

Snug:

Snug is one member of a group which is often referred to as the clowns, or the mechanicals. This group also includes Bottom, Quince, Flute, Snout, and Starveling. It is frequently noted that the names of these common laborers reflect the work that they do. "Snug," critics explain, suggests his work as a joiner, one who joined pieces of wood together to make furniture. In I.ii, Snug appears with the rest of the mechanicals, as Quince the carpenter is assign ing the roles in the Pyramus and Thisby play.

Quince assigns Snug the role of the Lion. Snug appears again in III.i, rehearsing with the rest of the mechanicals, but he does not speak. He runs off after Puck has given Bottom the ass's head. In IV.ii, Snug enters and announces to Quince, Flute, Snout, and Starveling that the duke has just come from the temple and that "there is two or three lords and ladies more married" (IV.ii.15-17). In V.i, Snout appears as the Lion. When he comes on stage he announces to the ladies that he is Snug the joiner, so that they will not fear him. Of his performance, Demetrius comments "Well roar'd Lion" (V.i.265).

Starveling:

Robin Starveling is one member of a group which is often referred to as the clowns, or the mechanicals. This group also includes Bottom, Quince, Flute, Snug, and Snout. It is frequently noted that the names of these common laborers reflect the work that they do. "Starveling," critics explain, suggests the proverbial skinniness of tailors. In I.ii, Starveling appears with the rest of the mechanicals, as Quince the carpenter is assigning the roles in the Pyramus and Thisby play. Quince assigns Starveling the role of Thisby's mother. However, it is decided by the group in III.i that a person will have to play the moonshine by which Pyramus and Thisby meet, and in V.i we learn that Starveling plays the role of Moonshine. Starveling also appears in IV.ii, when he suggests that Bottom, who still can't be found, has been "transported" (IV.ii.4), or taken by the fairies. In V.i, when Starveling appears as Moonshine, he receives this accolade from Hippolyta: "Well shone, Moon. Truly, the moon shines with a good grace" (V.i.267-68).

Theseus (Theseus, Duke of Athens):

The play opens as Theseus and his bride-to-be, Hippolyta, are discussing their upcoming marriage. Theseus comments that he "woo'd thee [Hippolyta] with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (I.i.16-17) referring to the fact that he conquered Hippolyta in his war with the Amazons. But now they are to be married, and their discussion is interrupted by Egeus, who comes to Theseus for help in sorting out the affairs concerning Egeus's daughter, Hermia. After hearing Egeus present his case he points out to Hermia that she should be obedient to her father and that Demetrius "is a worthy gentleman" (I.i.52). Hermia asks Theseus how the law will affect her is she refuses to marry Demetrius, and Theseus outlines her options: death, or lifelong confinement to a nunnery. He advises her to abide by her father's wishes but gives her several days to make her decision.

Theseus does not appear again until IV.i, when he, Hippolyta, and Egeus find the four young lovers in the wood. When Theseus hears what they have to say, and after Egeus demands that Lysander by punished for his attempted elopement of Hermia, Theseus announces that the couples will be married along side him and Hippolyta. He goes back on his earlier decision to support Egeus in trying to force Hermia to marry Demetrius. As for Egeus's request that Lysander be punished, Theseus simply says, "Egeus, I will overbear your will" (IV.i. 179). As the last act opens, Theseus and Hippolyta discuss

what has happened to the four young lovers, with Theseus attributing tales of fairies and the like to the imagination. Hippolyta responds that the lovers' stories support each other, and that this made the combined image they painted "something of great constancy; / But howsoever, strange and admirable" (V.i.26-27). Theseus then requests to see *Pyramus and Thisby,* despite Philostrate's urging to the contrary. Throughout the play, Theseus and the others watching the performance comment on the actors' abilities and interpretation of the tragedy. When everyone has gone off to bed, Theseus and Hippolyta, along with the other couples, are blessed by Oberon.

Although Theseus has relatively few lines in the play, his role is often considered to be fairly major, for several reasons. Firstly, many commentators se Theseus's relationship with Hippolyta as providing a framework for the dramatic action of the play, given that the couple only appears in the beginning and thend of the play. Additionally, this relationship undergoes no change during the course of the play and arguably represents stability and consistency, in direct contrast to the somewhat capricious relationships of the young lovers. Perhaps more importantly, many critics believe that Shakespeare uses the character of Theseus to discuss the interlocking themes of imagination and art. Often cited in the discussion of this topic are two passages. The first is Theseus's "lunatic, lover, poet" speech (V.i.2-27) in which Theseus says:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, al as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to
heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination, .. .
(V.i.7-18)

The second is the later exchange with Hippolyta as they watch *Pyramus and Thisby:*

Hippolyta: This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.
Theseus: The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.
Hippolyta: It must be your imagination the, and not theirs.
Theseus: If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men.
(V.i.210-16)

Some commentators have argued that both of these passages indicate that Theseus has a lack of aesthetic discrimination, that he cannot distinguish between superior or inferior art. And the "lunatic, lover, poet" speech, while seeming to acknowledge the

power of the imagination, at the same times appears to discount the importance of imagination. However, others note that Theseus, especially in the second passage quoted above, seems to understand the importance of the audience's imagination in understanding art. As some commentators have summarized, Theseus realizes the importance of imagination to love and life, as long as it does not undermine reason and sanity. to her, she asks ' How came these things to pass? / O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!" (IV.i.78-79). In Act V, Titania appears with Oberon and the rest of the fairies as they bless the sleeping couples.

Some commentators have noted that Titania, like Hippolyta, is ruled by her husband. Her defiance in not yielding the child to him does not get her very far, since Oberon gets what he wants in the end. Additionally, it has been observed that Titania's rebellion against Oberon's authority parallels Hermia's rebellion against her father and Athenian law. Crit ics have also noted that order in the play is not restored until Oberon regains his relationship with Titania.

Wall:

See Snout

Thisby:

See Flute

Titania:

Titania, queen of the fairies, first appears in II.i when she and Oberon are arguing. Puck has already outlined their disagreement for us: Titania has a changeling (a child exchanged for another by the fairies) whom she adores. Oberon wants the boy for himself. Titania refuses to give the child to him. As part of a plan to steal the child from her, Oberon instructs Puck to fetch a certain flower. The juice of this flower, when squeezed on Titania's eyes, will make her fall in love with whatever creature she first sees.

Titania next appears in II.ii, asking her fairies to sing her to sleep, which they do, to Oberon's advantage. He uses this opportunity to squeeze the juice on her eyes and he hopes that when she wakes "some vile thing is near" (II.ii.34). The "vile thing" happens to be Bottom, who Puck has transformed from an ordinary man into a man with an ass's head. As expected, Titania is in love. She praises Bottom and gives him several of her fairies to attend to him. In IV.i, we see Titania and Bottom seated together on her "flow'ry bed" where she is caressing him and kissing him (IV.i.1-4). They fall asleep together, after which Oberon tells Puck that he has successfully retrieved the child. Oberon then releases Titania from the power of the potion. She awakens, saying she thought she'd been in love with an ass. When Oberon points out Bottom lying next

Character Studies

The characters of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* exist on three different levels: the fairies appear in the supernatural sphere, the lovers wander through the labyrinths of a dream world, and Bottom and his companions belong to everyday reality. Since the lovers, although human, seem vague and undefined, and assume certain qualities of the spectral world, critics have traditionally concentrated on Bottom, praising this earthy, resourceful, and multi-faceted figure as one of Shakespeare's greatest comical creations. Unpredictable, witty, a master ironist, and the only mortal capable of communicating directly with the fairy-world, Bottom embodies the dramatist himself. who introduces his fellow mortals to the rich world of fantasy, using his pen to capture the essence of a dream. In comparison with Bottom, the four protagonists Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena-seem, as critics have remarked, pale and undefined, akin to puppets at the mercy of higher powers. Commenting on what critics have discerned as a certain uniformity of the four lovers, Kott defines them as "exchangeable" and identifies this absence of true individuality as one of the crucial features of the play. As the characters degenerate into faceless objects of desire, thereby relinquishing their individuality, they ultimately cease to exist as characters, and situations become paramount in the play. An alternate view proposes a different interpretation of the four protagonists, however, maintaining that speech clearly identifies each of the principal characters as a distinct person. For example, Helena expresses affection rather tersely, while Hermia uses terms of endearment quite profusely. According to commentators, there are significant similarities between the two royal couples in *A Midsummer Nights Dream:* both Oberon and Theseus rule their women, Titania and HippoIyta, with rigorous authority. Oberon exemplifies the more capricious aspects of power, whereas Theseus symbolizes benign despotism. While submissive to their respective lords, Titania the fairy queen and Hippolyta the Amazon queen retain some of their mythical power. It is particularly Titania, identified by commentators as the moon-goddess, who appears as the guiding spirit that ultimately presides over love's triumph when the four lovers are happily united and reconciled. Despite several convincing arguments brought forth by scholars, characterization *in A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems far from a closed issue, and many ambiguous points and unresolved questions still remain.

Conclusion

Scholarly debates concerning the key aspects of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will doubtless yield new insights and engender new theories of interpretation. But the changing perspectives of scholarship do not seem to affect-the enduring popularity of this play, which for many remains emblematic of Shakespeare's comic genius. Appealing to a primordial human desire to cross the boundary between reality and fantasy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also brilliantly expresses the profound human uncertainty about love. What makes this work truly immortal, however, is the poetry which enlightens the soul while transforming the entire universe of passions and emotions, ranging from primitive to noble, into a suggestive discourse of extraordinary artistic beauty.

(See also *Shakespearean Criticism,* Vols. 3, 12)

Themes

Focusing on such issues as love. dreams, and reality, A *Midsummer Night's Dream* has been regard ed by critics as Shakespeare's first mature comedy, a work which addresses fundamental questions about life, Since love triumphs at the end of the play, dispelling the chaotic magic of the night, the drama seems almost conventional. Thus a traditional reading of the play tends to emphasize the joyful outcome, regarding the supernatural elements as the natural background for a story which celebrates life. However, a rather different interpretation was suggested in 1961 by the eminent Polish scholar Jan Kott, who in his seminal *Szkice 0 Szekspirze (Shakespeare. Our Contemporary)* drew attention to the sinister undercurrents of this seemingly charming and gentle love story. Unlike earlier critics who only touched upon the dark side of A *Midsummer Night's Dream,* Kott dismisses the romantic view of Shakespeare's work, maintaining that the play essentially *focuses* on brutal eroticism and explores a range of violent sexual fantasies. Furthermore, Kott argues, love is debased by the interchangeability of objects of desire, reaching its lowest ebb in Titania's erotic attraction to a beast.

Kott's reading of the play points to the battle of the sexes as a major topic. As feminist critics have observed, the tensions among the antagonists-such as Hermia and her father-do not stem from a blind urge to inflict pain, but reflect the efforts of a male-dominated society to safeguard its laws and values. Not only are the women in the play debased in love and treated as objects of desire and/or possession, but *female* bonds-such as the friendship between Hermia and Helena-are undermined by male suspicion. insecurity, and fear of possible exclusion from a world ruled by women such as Hippolyta, the queen of a tribe of women warriors, who was defeated by Theseus and claimed as the spoils of war. Some critics maintain that this male anxiety reflects a dread of sexual powerlessness. As a result, the male characters feel secure only when they are able to divide and conquer their women.

But the ambiguities of love, critics contend, do not exhaust the vast universe of Shakespeare's comedy: A *Midsummer Night's Dream* also attempts to grasp the elusive nature of reality. The boundaries between the real world, represented by the Athenians, and the supernatural world of Oberon and Titania are sometimes fluid, as evidenced by the many instances when a protagonist, such as Bottom, seems caught somewherebetween the two levels of existence. According to some critics, Shakespeare, while describing both reality and fantasy as relative, identifies poetry as the lasting, imperishable result of the perilous journey through the fantastic worlds of apparitions, dreams, and nightmares, Based on this understanding of the function of poetry in the drama, some critics contend that it is the playwright himself who directly imparts a sense of wonder to his audience, thus rendering the universe ofhis play meaningful and inspiring, In fact, Hippolyta acknowledges the audience's aesthetic experience by declaring, "But all the story of the night told over,/ And all their minds transfigur'd so together'/ More witnesseth than fancy's images,/ And grows to something of beat constancy/ But howsoever strange (V. i. 23-7). Another remarkable leature closelyassociated to the theme of reality versus illusion in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*

is the work's selfconsciousness. In other words, the characters not only discuss the nature of drama but also comment indirectly on the play in which they perform. As critics explain, Shakespeare accomplishes this by employing a well-known theatrical device: the play-within-the-play. The performance of "Pyramus and Thisby" can be interpreted as a triple parody: of itself, of *A Midsummer Nights Dream,* and of theater as an aesthetic experience.

The magic wand which conjures up Shakespeare's world is, as critics generally agree, peerless poetic language, Finding the right type of language, metrical framework, allusion, and figure to fit every character and situation, Shakespeare enriches his play with memorable examples of literary virtuosity. For example, a character's psychological changes are illustrated by variations in tone or meter. In addition, there are many moments when the characters' eloquence soars high above the confines of dramatic discourse to the realm of pure poetry. The verbal brilliance of the play was particularly emphasized by Peter Brooke's seminal 1970 Royal Shakespeare Company production, which focused on the text and drastically reduced the visual dimension by staging the dramatic action in a set resembling a white box.

Rich, allusive, melodious, and multi-layered, Shakespeare's dramatic poetry not only fully employs all of the resources of the English language, but also conjures up the power of mythology. Within the complex mythological background of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* one finds interwoven strands of pre-Classical, Classical, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Germanic folklore, particularly in the poet's descriptions of the fairy world. Some of the supernatural figures Shakespeare introduces in the drama represent formidable archetypes which appear in different traditions under various names and form. Such a figure, according to scholars, is Diana. the triple goddess, who performs her celestial role as a moon divinity, lives on earth as the virginal Diana-the hunting deity (called Titania once by Ovid)-and haunts the underworld as the witch-goddess Hecate. The moon, one of the goddess's domains, operates as a potent poetic symbol suggesting possible pathways connecting higher realms and our own world, which the Elizabethans called "sub lunar" or "under the moon," In the last act, Theseus mentions "the lunatic, the lover and the poet" (V. i. 7), using the "moon-word" "lunatic" to underline the connections between madness, love, and poetry. Critics who suggest an en tirely different genealogy of Shakespeare's fairy-world, however, argue that the Elizabethan fairies of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* are not characters from folklore, but figures from literary and religious tradition. Tracing the origins of Shakespeare's supernatural world in Arthurian legend and in the Christianized form of Cabala, a Jewish system of reading the Scriptures based on the mystical interpretation of words, these commentators identify the moon goddess as the Virgin Queen, or Elizabeth I. As a result, Shakespeare's references to the lunar divinity could be understood as a homage to the existing cult of Queen Elizabeth.

Modern Connections

While there are many things in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that modern audiences enjoy about the play, the theme of love is one that many people, from Shakespeare's original audiences to modern audiences, can relate to.

The four young lovers in the play□Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius□all seem to feel love very deeply, even before the fairies work their magic. For Lysander's love, Hermia is willing to go against her father's wishes (he wants her to marry Demetrius). Both Hermia and Lysander would rather run away and risk the punishment of Athenian law if they are caught. Helena, in love with Demetrius, betrays her friendship with Hermia with the hope of gaining a little of Demetrius's favor. She hopes that in telling Demetrius of Hermia's plan and her whereabouts, he will thank her, and that perhaps this attention will lead to something more. Demetrius has pursued Hermia into the wood, and is almost insane from not finding her ("And here am I, and wode [mad] within this wood, / Because I cannot meet my Hermia" [II.i. 192-93]).

This love which seems so strong, however, is weak in two ways: for the men, it appears to be fickle; and for the women, it comes between them as lifelong friends. Lysander and Demetrius are both affected by the love potion of Oberon, applied by Puck to their eyelids. Lysander, who so deeply loved Hermia, suddenly loves Helena. Not only is he completely enamored with her, but he now violently despises Hermia. He "repent[s] / The tedious minutes" he has spent with her (II.ii.lll- 12). Similarly, Demetrius, who had also loved Hermia and so venomously despised Helena ("I am sick when I do look on thee" he told her in II.i.212), suddenly refers to her as "goddess, nymph, perfect, divine" (III.ii.137). The thing that transforms the affections of Lysander and Demetrius in the play is a magical potion; in real life, such seemingly deep emotions are also easily transformed, especially among the young. Like the young lovers in the play, young people in love today are still finding their own identities. Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, and Hermia, in fact, do not really seem to have *any* identifying characteristics. As young people are still finding out who *they* are, what appeals to them in a romantic sense is likely to change as they themselves change.

Helena and Hermia, on the other hand, remain constant in the sense that they each love the same person throughout the play. However, they jeopardize their own friendship as they strive to hold on to the young men they love. Helena, as previously mentioned, betrays Hermia when she tells Demetrius of Hermia's planned elopement to Lysander. Later, when Helena becomes convinced that Hermia is in on what she thinks is Lysander's and Demetrius's cruel joke, she accuses Hermia of betraying their friendship. She asks, "O, is all forgot? / All schooldays friendship, childhood innocence?" (III.ii.201- 02). Hermia denies that she has scorned her friend, but becomes so increasingly dismayed by Lysander's professed love for Helena and hatred for her, and by Helena's accusations, that she finally lashes back at Helena saying "I am not yet so low / But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes" (III.ii.297-98). The bickering ceases when Hermia blames the whole confused mess on Helena, after which Helena

runs off. How often is this scene replayed in modern times? Do today's teenagers, and adults, let romantic relationships come between friendships?

There is another example of love in the play: the bewitched love between Titania and the transformed Bottom. Titania falls in love with the assheaded Bottom. Having fallen in love with and adored this creature, Titania awakens from this love, and from sleep, feeling a little foolish for having been so blinded by love: "O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!" (IV.i.77). Again, how many times is this scene replayed in modern times? Do people today fall in love with people who aren't what they seem to be? And don't we feel a little like Titania did when we see what they really are? The other romantic relationship in the play (aside from that of Pyramus and Thisby, portrayed by Bottom and company) is that of Theseus and Hippolyta. While we don't really get to see the two interact very much during the course of the play, there relationship does not change, perhaps attesting to its stability. Critics have also maintained that the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta represents love balanced by reason, in contrast to the inconstant, passionate love of the four young people.

Shakespeare presents a variety of views about love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and it is not clear which conception of love he supports. Perhaps the point is that love is different things to different people, and may affect us in any number of ways, depending on where we are in our lives.

Overviews

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Critical Essay #1

[Clemen provides a general introduction to A Midsummer Night's Dream, *identifying and analyzing the play's historical background, language, themes, dramatic structure, characterization, and literary significance. Remarking that the transitory nature of love is the principal theme of the play, this critic praises Shakespeare's masterful use of language, particularly images representing the contrast of light and darkness, to suggest the atmosphere of a fantastic dream world. Shakespeare's language, Clemen maintains, is not only remarkably visual but aiso possesses a certain musical quality, clearly discerned in repetitive patterns of sounds and effects. Not only is* A Midsummer Night's Dream *a great comedy, the critic concludes, but it also offers, using the device of the play-within-the-play, profound insights into the limitations of dramatic art]*

A study of Shakespeare's development as a dramatic artist shows that one of his supreme achievements during his "middle period" consists in combining heterogeneous elements in a single play. The dramas of Shakespeare's predecessors all exist on a smaller scale, mostly adhering to one particular type and keeping within more limited resources of style and subject matter. However, even in his very first comedies, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors, and Love's Labor's Lost,* we see Shakespeare widening the scope of the dramatic genre to which these plays belong and introducing new elements taken over from other sections of the literary tradition of the past. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* then, which must have been written about 1595, combines for the first time totally disparate worlds into one unified whole: the sharp contrasts brought together there would have destroyed the play's balance in the hands of any lesser playwright For, indeed, it required Shakespeare's genius to bring together Bottom and Puck, the crude realism of the artisans and the exquisite delicacy of the fairy world, the stylized and pointed repartee of the Athenian lovers and the dignified manner of Theseus and Hippolyta. What we find are contrasts on many levels, exemplified by diversified means. Yet Shakespeare strikes an equilibrium between these contrasts, reconciling and fusing the discordant factors within the organic body of his comedy. *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* therefore, not only exhibits bold contrasts and divergent elements of plot, atmosphere, and character: it also illustrates the unifying power of the spirit of comedy and the poetic imagination. We further find that the play's unity is reinforced by a subtle technique of counterpoint and juxtaposition, a skillful contrasting of different strands of plot, and the creation of an atmosphere full of illusion, wonder, and strangeness, all of which facilitate the many transitions occurring during the course of the play.

Some facts about its origin and title may help us better to understand the particular nature of the play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is clearly related to the practices of midsummer night, the night before June 24, which was the date of St. John the Baptist's festival and hence connected with merrymaking, various superstitions and folk customs, dances, pageants, and revels. More than any other night in the year, midsummer night suggested enchantment and witchcraft, something which Shakespeare has superbly embodied in his fairy world. To an Elizabethan audience, moreover, the play's title would have immediately called to mind the so-called "midsummer madness," which was a

state of mind marked by a heightened readiness to believe in the delusions of die imagination that were thought to befall the minds of men after days of great summer heat. Thus, by means of his highly suggestive title, Shakespeare has firmly planted the dreamlike action of his drama in the popular beliefs and customs of his time. Furthermore the title gives theatergoers and readers a clue as to how the work should be understood-namely, as an unrealistic creation of the imagination. a series of dream images containing all the contradictions and inconsistencies that dreams normally possess, but containing too their symbolic content. Indeed, the dreamlike character of what takes place is repeatedly alluded to. In Puck's epilogue, for instance, the audience themselves are explicitly addressed:

And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream, Gentles, do not reprehend. . .
[V. i. 427-29]

In short, the play's title makes significant allusion to the nature and meaning of the work, though it makes no reference to the period of time during which the events of the drama occur. In fact, the action takes place between April 29 and May 1, the latter date, being that of May Day, demanding of course particular celebrations, and for that reason it is perhaps a suitable day for the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta.

Now the wedding of the princely pair is not only the destination of the action: it is also the occasion for which the play itself was written. *A Midsummer Nights Dream* was undoubtedly intended as a dramatic epithalamium [a bridal song] to celebrate the marriage of some aristocratic couple. (The attempts made to fix on a definite historical marriage, however, must remain conjectural.) Plays written for such festive occasions addressed themselves to an aristocratic audience. They were mostly performed on private stages rather than in public theaters and revealed an entirely different style of performance from the popular dramas. The relationship of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* to the court masque-something which Act V, Scene i, line 40 draws attention to-also comes in here. The masques formed a central part of the entertainments that were always given at court celebrations, and several noticeable features *inA Midsummer Nights Dream* clearly relate to the genre of the court masque. The music and dances, the appearance of fairylike creatures possessed of supernatural qualities, the employment of motifs involving magic and metamorphosis, and the vigorous stylization and symmetrical structure of some parts do indeed remind one of the court masque. Finally, the scenes with Bottom, Quince, and company may be compared to the antimasque, which formed the burlesque and realistic counterpart performed together with the masque itself.

In referring to the masque, one is only pointing out a single aspect of *A Midsummer Nights Dream.* We must also remember that Shakespeare has similarly taken over stylistic and formal elements from his own early comedies, popular drama, the romantic play, and the mythological dream plays of John Lyly. Shakespeare has tapped many sources, but he has nevertheless been able to create an orig inal and independent form of drama that includes skillful organization of plot-involving the manip ulation of three subplots that run parallel to one another-as well as a rich suffusion of the whole by both

the atmosphere of nature and that of magic. Between a descriptive and retrospective kind of dramatic method and one that makes us see the process of things in action Shakespeare has struck a perfect sense of balance.

A study of the interrelation of the four plots reveals how their contrasts, juxtapositions, and dovetailing help to disclose the meaning of the drama. The play begins with a scene between Theseus and Hippolyta, who do not appear again until Act IV. In Act V their wedding is celebrated. The plot involving Theseus and Hippolyta can therefore be styled an "enveloping action" that provides the play with a definite framework and a firmly established temporal scaffolding; it stands outside the world of dream, enchantment, and love entanglements, suggesting the sphere of everyday reality out of which the events of the drama first develop and to which they then ultimately return. The section in Scene i with Egeus, Hermia, Lysander, and Demetrius relates the Theseus-Hippolyta plot to that of the lovers, for Theseus himself appears as arbitra tor in the love dispute and it will be on his wedding day that the harsh verdict he passes on Hermia is to take effect, should she not have changed her mind by that date. This verdict is the cause of Hermia and Lysander's decision to flee into the wood near Athens, so that with this the events of the sec ond and third acts have already been determined.

The comic subplot, moreover, beginning in Scene ii with the gathering of the artisans to prepare themselves for rehearsal, is also announced in Scene i, insofar as we learn of the entertainments to be presented on Theseus' wedding day. Theseus' promise to woo Hippolyta "With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling" [1.1. 19] can also be understood as an allusion to the dramatic entertainments that are to come later. From the very beginning, then, our expectations are raised in connection with the wedding day, which is to bring with it the artisans' play, the decision regarding the love dispute between the Athenian couples, and the festive marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta.

If this were all that Shakespeare had given us, we would have had a comedy little different from his early ones. The plot connected with the fairies, however, with Oberon and Titania at its center, not only brings considerable complications into the course of the above-mentioned matters, but also adds to the whole drama a new feature that Shakespeare had never employed before. For the supernatural, which intervenes in the activities of the characters, turns their intentions upside down, and directs their actions. It is the fairies who are responsible for the confusion, and also for the final reconciliation, thus substituting enchantment and arbitrariness for the lovers' own responsibility and power of will. Yet these influences also have repercussions on the fairies themselves, because Titania thereby falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom.

Thus the world of the fairies is linked with that of the artisans, and we get those incomparably comic situations that are themselves the outcome of the fairies' intervention. Finally, a link between the plots dealing with the fairies and Theseus emerges in the conversation between Oberon and Titania in which the fairy rulers' earlier connections with Theseus and Hippolyta are recalled; and this is a moment that accelerates the pair's mutual jealousy and estrangement.

Since the fairies remain always invisible to the other members of the *dramatis personae* (only Bottom is ironically allowed the privilege of seeing Titania), and their deeds are accomplished without the knowledge of the other characters, Shakespeare has been able to achieve a highly dramatic effect of "double awareness:' We as audience are aware of Puck's magic juice and therefore look forward with pleasure to what might develop. We know even more than the usually omniscient Oberon, who does not realize till some time later the confusion that Puck has caused by mistake. This error on Puck's part bears deeper significance, for it shows that even the fairies can err and that the influences they exert as supernatural agents in the play do not in the least answer to anything providential, but rather contain filaments of arbitrariness, self-deception, and folly.

An insight into the peculiar nature of the fairy world in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* helps us to understand the entire play, for although the fairies certainly possess supernatural qualities, they are nevertheless closely linked to the world of mankind and have their share of human frailties. Their origin in the realm of the elemental and their partly instinctive, partly playful nature, together with their capriciousness and irrationality, indicate which forces and qualities Shakespeare wanted us to see as conditioning and influencing human love relationships; for the haphazard and arbitrary game that love plays with the two Athenian couples appears as a projection of the irrationality, irresponsibility, and playfulness characterizing the nature of the fairies themselves. However, the fairies not only make other people behave in a way that corresponds, as it were, to their own fairy natures: they also strengthen and reinforce people's latent tendencies. Previous to the fairies' intervention, we learn from Demetrius that he has loved Helena before bestowing his affections on Hermia

[I. i. 106-07,242-43]: it is not for nothing that he is termed "spotted and inconstant man" [I. i. 110]. Shakespeare has interspersed his text with numerous illuminating hints referring to the fairies' peculiar traits of character and sphere of existence, so that we are able to get a vivid picture of the type of creatures they are. Although the world of the fairies exhibits several characteristics common to popular belief and folklore tradition, it is to a considerable extent a new creation of Shakespeare's own. This is particularly true when we think of Puck, whose descent from Robin Goodfellow or Hobgoblin, as he is called by one of the fairies when he first appears [II. i. 34, 40], only accounts for one aspect of his being. If one examines the numerous statements that Puck utters about himself and that the other characters utter about him, one immediately realizes that Shakespeare has created a complex dramatic figure to whom is assigned a key position within the fabric of the play. Not only is Puck the comically rough and earth-bound goblin with his mischievous pranks, blunt speech, and intervention in day-to-day affairs: he is also a spirit closely linked with the elements, having command over supernatural powers and capable of moving at incredible speed. As "Oberon's jester" he is close to the fools of Shakespeare's later comedies, enjoying his own jests and possessing the gift: of sharp. critical observation. Keeping this last point in mind, we see that Shakespeare has assigned him the role of spectator several times during the course of the play, and as such he comments on the action and aptly characterizes the people taking part. Hence it is he who, in view of the confusion he has caused among the lovers, cries out: Shall we their fond pageant see? Lord, what fools these mortals be!

[III. ii. 114-15] Thus Puck becomes the interpreter of the play's dramatic situations and intermediary between stage and audience as he places himself at a distance from events that have depended on and been influenced by him, and to which in the epilogue, significantly spoken by him, he is able to look back, as from a higher vantage point. Indeed, it is remarkable how many motives determining the play's action derive from Puck, how many invisible wires he holds in his hand. Yet his interventions in the development of the plot are as much the result of a casual mood or mischievous whim as they are the result of premeditated instructions from his master, Oberon. This is shown, for instance, in the case of Bottom's transformation in the first scene of Act III. It is a paradox of the dramatic action that Oberon's well-meaning intention is turned into its opposite through Puck's mistake [Lysander, instead of Demetrius, is anointed with the magic herb], so that the activity of the supernatural forces seems to be largely conditioned by error and coincidence. Still, it is precisely this fickleness and inconstancy of fate that Puck acknowledges in his laconic answer to Oberon when the latter reproves him for the mistake: "Then fate o'errules. . . "[III. ii. 92]. With these words Puck gives utterance to a basic motif in the drama.

It has often been stressed that in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* Shakespeare wanted to portray the irrational nature of love, the shifting and unstable "fancy" that continually falls prey to illusion, re gards itself as being playful and short-lived, and is accompanied by a certain irresponsibility; whereas in *Romeo and Juliet,* written during the same period, love appears in quite a different shape, as a fateful and all-consuming force making claims to absolute authority and demanding that the whole of the self be yielded up to it. But Shakespeare makes clear to us in several ways that the love between the Athenian couples is not rooted in actuality. Puck's magic juice, operating as a supernatural medium, is of course only one of the means by which Shakespeare places the relationships of the four Athenian lovers outside of reality. The love entanglements occur during a night full of dreams and enchantment, of which only an imprecise picture afterward remains in the memory of those concerned. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly the poet's deliberate intention (contrary to his practice in other plays of the same period) that the lovers should be so weakly characterized that it is impossible for us to retain them in our memory as real and differentiated human beings. We may likewise take it for granted that their symmetrical grouping and their appearance in pairs is the result of conscious stylization on Shakespeare's part. And if the style of their dialogues, together with the handling of the verse, often seems to be flat, trite, and frankly silly, this neither signifies Shakespeare's lack of skill nor justifies the contention that passages have been left in from an earlier version of the same play. Rather it gives evidence that Shakespeare intended the four lovers to be just what they are, puppets and not fully realized characters. Even the spectator to those scenes of confusion in the wood soon has no idea where he is or who precisely is in love with whom.

Above all, however, the dreamlike atmosphere of such scenes accentuates our feeling that the four lovers appear to be quite removed from any criteria applicable to reality. "The willing suspension of disbelief" that [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge designated as one of the poet's chief aims Shakespeare achieves by creating a world of illusion that manifests itself from the first scene onward. Dream world and reality merge imperceptibly, so that the persons concerned are not sure themselves in which sphere

they move, nor whether what they have experienced has been imagination or truth. The idea that what has happened has been a dream, illusion, or "vision" is often expressed from various standpoints by the characters themselves. "Dream" is a key word in the drama. and the idea that everything is based on imagination is given frequent and-subtle variation. The art with which Shakespeare shifts from the dream world to reality is unique. This is evident in the first scene of Act IV, where both the lovers and Bottom are depicted as awaking out of their dreams-a scene in which all four plots are brought together for the first time, whereby the mind of the spectator is made to see the boundaries separating them as being simultaneously nonexistent and yet firmly fixed. Finally, as if in a series of flashbacks, the incidents that have occurred during the night of dreams are lit up once again from a distance by means of Theseus' famous speech describing "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" as being "of imagination all compact" (V. i. 7-8]. These words refer once more to that faculty which lies behind not only dreams, but the poet's own creations as well and under whose spell we, as spectators, have been kept during the whole course of the play; for we too have been enchanted, responding eagerly to the call of the poetry and accepting the playas an organism that conforms to its own rules, a world where strange and real things mingle in a curious way.

The illusion of a dream sequence scurrying past is also enhanced by a sense of the forward surge of time. Not only is the passing of night into morning given expression through the shifting movement of light and dark within a series of superb images and subtle allusions: the impatience and longing with which the different characters look forward to the future are perceptible from the very start, thus making time flow in an anticipatory way. Again, the language of the play is rich in images and expressions indicating quick movement, lightness, and transitoriness, thereby contributing to the over-all atmospheric impression. How delicately and accurately the play's particular atmosphere, together with its theme and leitmotifs, is rendered from the very beginning, an examination of the first scene of the play alone would show, although we can permit ourselves only a few observations here. The very first exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta conveys to us a twofold awareness of time, from the standpoint of which we contemplate a time span that culminates in the wedding day, the date of which is fixed immediately at the outset. This emerges when Hippolyta's "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night; / Four nights will quickly dream away the time" [I. 1. 6-8] is con trasted with Theseus' " . . . but, 0, methinks, how slow / This old moon wanes!" [I. 1. 3-4]. During this initial dialogue Shakespeare skillfully puts us in tune with the moonlit scenes that follow by means of Theseus' comparison of the "old moon" with "a stepdame, or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's- revenue" [I. 1. 4-6]. In this scene alone "moon" and "night" each occur five times, "dream" three times. The lines just quoted also suggest the aristocratic world of the court, where a part of the action is to take place. A further element is introduced when, immediately following, we read these instructions to Philostrate:

Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments, Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth....
[I. i. 13-14]

Yet the entry ofEgeus immediately afterward, leading in his daughter Hermia and, "full of vexation," bringing accusations against Lysander because the latter "hath bewitched the bosom of Our) child" [cf. I. 1. 22-31, ushers in the radically contrasting note of discord, deception. and trickery, something that is never missing in any Shakespearean comedy and is always present as an undercurrent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream;* for the final state of harmony reached at the end of the play both in the world of the fairies and that of the court turns out to be a resolution of previously opposed forces. a reconciliation attained after former estrangement, and "the concord of this discord" (V. 1. 60].

The main theme of the drama-namely, the transitoriness and inconstancy of love-is also anticipated in this first scene when Lysander describes love as

. . . momentary as a sound Swift as a shadow, short as any dream, Brief as the lightning in the cold night, That. in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and
earth,
And ere a man hath power to say "Be
hold!"
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to confusion.
[I. i. 143-491

This passage is illuminating because it shows how Shakespeare not only bodies forth the themes and motifs of his drama in terms of action. but also gives them expression through imagery. In no other play of Shakespeare's middle period do we find so much poetry and verse melody, or indeed nature imagery, with its references to plants, animals, and other natural phenomena: nature itself even enters the drama as a participating agent alongside the characters. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* should therefore be apprehended as poetry and music, and not only be absorbed and endorsed by the eye and intellect as a connected series of actions. For the play's language, by means of its images, its subtle allusions and suggestions, its verbal repetitions and rhythmic patterns, has built up a complex and finely varied tissue of ideas, impressions, and associations that constantly act on our powers of imagination and stimulate them to participate. The great range and delicacy of impact that poetic drama possesses, as opposed to prose-drama, can be perfectly witnessed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* The degree to which the language, with its proliferation of allusions, ironies, and ambiguities, creates the over-all dramatic effect is made clear by those prose scenes with the artisans, where the lyrical and poetic are completely lacking. Apart from suggesting a wealth of gestures, the language used by Bottom and company is rich in implications and evokes delightful misunderstandings; it gives expression to the artisans' ludicrous ambition for higher things as well as to their rustic limitations. All this gives rise to that constant incongruity which is the prerequisite for great comedy-the incongruity existing between the basic natures of the characters and their pretensions. The scenes with Bottom, Quince, and company provide a comic and realistic contrast to the poetry of the fairies and the artificial and stylized love scenes of the Athenians. Thus the delicacy, polished bearing, and lightness inherent in all other sections of the play are counterbalanced by the uncouthness, the heavy solidity of everyday life, and a naive roughness that the artisans bring into the magical fairy world

of the moonlit scenes. Puck, the shrewd onlooker, at one stage justly calls them "hempen home-spuns." But Shakespeare has made far more out of this antimasque than a merely amusing subplot filled with clown-like figures; during the course of the play one of them has come to be the most unforgettable character in the entire drama. For the lack of vitality and pronounced individuality noticeable in the other personages we are fully recompensed in Bottom, who has justly been described as the greatest comic creation in the dramatist's early work.

Abundantly endowed with remarkable qualities, Bottom is continually putting himself in a comic light. There are no features of his character that at one point or another do not lead to some ridiculous situation, some unforgettable moment of contrast or unintentionally provoked comparison. Bottom's supreme satisfaction with himself and his sense of ease remain with him even in his transformed state, while his stage ambitions (he wants to play the part of the lion as well as that ofPyramus, This by and the tyrant) parody the profession of acting and yet at the same time form a characteristic trait that fits him remarkably well. That his ambitions are fulfilled even before the Pyramus and Thisby drama takes place, insofar as Bottom has to play the parts of both ass and lover, is significant, just as is the marked irony that Bottom alone, out of all the persons in the play, is permitted to come into contact with the fairies-though this encounter does not impress him in the least or signify for him any unusual experience. In Titania's presence he discards nothing at all of his own personality: the ass's head, which with other people would have resulted in monstrous caricature, in his case is something that illuminates for us his real nature. If the story of the craftsmen forms a satirical counterbalance to the plot of the lovers, then it is also true to say that the drama of Pyramus and Thisby initiates a twofold, even threefold kind of awareness. For what we get in this parody of the love tragedy is an exaggerated depiction of the four lovers' sentimentality, their highflown protestations of love, and their pseudo-solemnity-a depiction in the form of a flashback that they themselves are now able to contemplate as spectators, serenely calm and reconciled with one another. The lovers' own relationships have likewise been a play that the fairies have found highly amusing, and these entanglements parallel the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, the quarrel from which the confusion among the lovers originated.

"The play within the play," superbly worked out by Shakespeare, makes us particularly aware that the entire drama has indeed been a "play," summoned into life by the dramatist's magic wand and just as easily made to vanish. When Puck refers in the first line of his epilogue ("If we shadows have offended" (V. i. 423]) not merely to the fairies, previously termed "shadows," but also to all the actors who have taken part, we realize that Shakespeare is once more making it clear to us that we have been watching a "magic-lantern show," something where appearance, not reality, is the operative factor.

It is peculiarly ironic that Bottom, Quince, and company perform the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby as an auspicious offering on behalf of the newly established love union, thereby, one might say, presenting the material of *Romeo and Juliet* in a comic and grotesque manner. Thus an exaggerated form of tragedy is employed so that the preceding scenes may be parodied as comedy. The play of Pyramus and Thisby parodies not only the torments of love, which the Athenian lovers can now look back on

with serene calmness, but also the Senecan style of Elizabethan tragedy with its melodrama and ponderous conventions. Shakespeare parodies these conventions here by means of exaggeration or clumsy and grotesque usage-the too explicit prologue, for instance; the verbose self-explanation and commentaries; the stereotyped phrases for expressing grief: and the excessive use of such rhetorical devices as apostrophe, alliteration, hyperbole, and rhetorical question.

Even the elements of comedy and parody in the Pyramus and Thisbyperformance appear in a two fold light. Though they themselves are being mocked, the lovers smile at these awkward efforts on the part of the craftsmen, and Theseus even adds a highly suggestive commentary. In the craftsmen's play, Shakespeare is also parodying the whole life of the theater. He calmly takes the shortcomings of all theatrical production and acting, drives them to absurd lengths, and holds them up for inspection. The lantern, which is supposed to represent the moon, makes us conscious of how equally inadequate Pyramus and Thisby are in their roles and suggests that such inadequacy may time and again have made its appearance on the Elizabethan stage. For those Elizabethan playgoers who viewed a play superficially, without using their own powers of imagination, much in Shakespearean drama must have remained completely unintelligible. It is at such narrow-minded theatergoers as these that Shakespeare is indirect ly poking fun. And he enables us to see the limita tions ofhis own stage, which had to portray a large world and create atmosphere without the elaborate scenery and technical equipment that we have today. But the very inadequacy of the artisans' production gives emphasis to the true art of dramatic illusion and magic, as we have witnessed it in the pre ceding scenes, in which the evocative power of Shakespeare's language, assisted by our imagination, enables us to experience moonlight and nighttime in the woods. Theseus himself makes this point when, in answer to Hippolyta's remark, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard,"_ (V. i. 210] he says: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." (V. i. 211-12]. (pp. xxiii-xxxvii)

Wolfgang Clemen, in an introduction to A Midsummer Night's Dream *by William Shakespeare, edited by Wolfgang Clemen, New American Library,* 1987, *pp. xxiii-xxxvii.*

Critical Essay #2

[Vaughn outlines the narrative composition of A Midsummer Night's Dream *and presents a summary of the plot. Characterizing the comedy as an eminently poetic work, this critic discusses Shakespeare's language, with particular attention to eye imagery, such as the blindness of love, which "suggests and reinforces thematic concerns about love, the principal subject of the comedy." He then provides a brief historical overview of memorable productions of Shakespeare's play, focusing on Peter Brook's famous 1970 rendition. According to Vaughn, "through the visual austerity and actor-centered focus of his production, Brook was able to redirect the audience's attention to Shakespeare's text-to its lyricism, its imagery, its fantasy. "]*

One could hardly imagine a more unlikely combination of comic plot materials than that of classical Greek mythology, English fairy lore, Italianate love intrigue, and Elizabethan amateur theatricals. Yet that is precisely the mélange that Shakespeare concocted in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the play that most critics agree is his first wholly satisfactory comedy.

The virtue of the piece lies partly in Shakespeare's successful blending of disparate plot elements into a unified whole, and partly in the poetic advances that he made here over his four previous comedies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare wove the threads of four distinct actions into a tapestry of magical enchantments and courtly festivity, creating a complexity in multi-plotting far greater than that of any of his earlier comedies. And in its verse and imagery he achieved a successful union of poetry and drama-a considerable advancement over, for example, the mannered formalism and self-conscious badinage of *Loves Labors Lost* (p. 61)

The impending marriage of the Athenian King Theseus to the Amazon Hippolyta constitutes the first thread of plot, one that forms a framing action for the entire play. . . . The opening and closing scenes of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* are dominated by the royal couple. Theseus' first-act decree that Hermia must comply with her father's wishes and marry Demetrius, against her will, causes the lovers' plot of Acts II-IV to come about. It is in order to escape the parental and royal edicts that Hermia and Lysander, followed by Demetrius and Helena. flee to the enchanted wood where they fall under the influence of the "watery moon" and the fairies' spell. It is generally accepted that Shakespeare wrote this comedy in celebration of some noble marriage, although critics cannot agree on exactly which one. Thus, Theseus and Hippolyta serve as surrogates for the noble couple before whom the work is being played. They stand largely outside the action: the events of the plot happen for them, rather than to them. Therefore, after the opening scene we do not see them again until Act IV. They reappear only after all the confusions, transformations, and love madness have been set aright, and they preside over the play-within-a-play of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in Act V. Because *A Midsummer Nights Dream.,* like *Loves Labors Lost,* was played before a courtly audience, the play-within-aplay is once again a royal-entertainment-within-aroyal-entertainment. The setting of our play, then, is technically ancient Athens, but this is (as in so many of Shakespeare's "period" plays) of little consequence. Their names

notwithstanding, the characters are, throughout, thoroughly English. This is especially true of the fairies, whose actions constitute a second major thread of the plot. The fairies-principally King Oberon, Queen Titania. and Robin Goodfellow (called Puck)- derive from native English folklore. They control the ac tion of the play once it shifts to the enchanted wood, and their activities serve as the adhesive that binds the four subplots together. This is not to say, however, that they lack direct involvement or are themselves immune from magic. Titania charmed into loving an ignorant weaver with the head of an ass-is as much a victim of enchant ment as Lysander and Demetrius. Still, the fairies, particularly Oberon and Puck, exercise almost complete control over the Athenian lovers.

It is precisely because we know that the fairies are in control that we are able to enjoy the confusions and distress of the four lovers: Lysander, Hermia. Demetrius, and Helena. If a supernatural, external force is causing the entailments, cannot it also untie them? Puck himse1I assures us, when the love madness is at its most confusing state, that "Jack shall have Jill, / Nought shall go ill: / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well" [III. ii. 461-63].

Puck is the most purely entertaining of the fairy band. His proper name, from traditional English fairy lore, is Robin Goodfellow, "puck" being a generic term for a mischievous sprite. Robin Goodfellow was known as a tricky but essentially harmless household spirit. At his first entrance, another fairy asks him:

Are you not he
That frights the maidens of the villagery;
Skim milk. and sometimes labour in the quern
And bootless make the breathless house
wife chum;
And sometime make the drink to bear no
barm;
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at
their harm?
[II. i. 34-91

And Puck replies:

Thou speak'st aright;
I am that merry wanderer of the night. . .
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl,
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And when she drinks. against her lips I
bob
And on her wither'd dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale.
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh
me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples

she.
And "tailor" cries. and falls into a cough.
[II. i. 42-54]

Clearly, Robin Goodfellow evolved in fairy lore as a supernatural explanation for the many trivial mishaps and accidents so commonplace in domestic living.

Puck is instrumental in the movement of the plot. It is he who mistakenly administers the love potion intended for Demetrius to Lysander, thinking him the "disdainful youth" Oberon has described. This sets in motion the love chain of cross-wooings that make up the central action of the comedy. It is also Puck who, out of pure mischief, transforms Bottom into an ass.

In addition to his direct involvement in these plot complications, Puck serves as a *raisonneur,* or chorus figure. He observes the love madness of the Athenians as an outsider and comments on their folly, sometimes directly to the audience and sometimes to them through Oberon:

Captain of our fairy band,
Helena is here at hand;
And the youth. mistook by me,
Pleading for a lover's fee.
Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord. what fools these mortals be!
[III. ii. 110-15]

The fairy king Oberon and his consort Titania, unlike Puck, maintain a certain royal bearing and dignity, the exception being Titania's infatuation with the grotesque Bottom. They do not indulge in mischievous trickery, although their magic is potent. We first see them engaged in a jealous quarrel, exchanging accusations of infidelity. This lovers' altercation and their wrangling over possession of the "little changeling boy" [II. i. 120] precipitate not only the enchantment of the Athenian mortals but also, as Titania states, a "progeny of evils" [II, i. 115] in the natural world:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents:
The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke
In vain.
The plougbman lost his sweat, and the
green com Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard:
The fold stands empty in the drowned
field,
And crows are fatted with the murrain
flock; . . .

And thorough this dis-temperature we see
The seasons alter. hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set: the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter.
change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazed
world,
By their increase. now knows not which is
which.
[II. i. 88-114]

It is in order to punish and torment Titania that Oberon drops the liquor of the "little western flower" [II. i. 166] on her eyes, effecting the enchantment that causes her to fall in love with the "translated" Bottom. This flower, the same whose juices Puck mistakenly administers to Lysander, is thematically significant. Oberon tells us that it came into being when CUpid once "loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow" [II, i. 159] at a "fair vestal" but missed his target:

Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's
wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
[II. i. 165-68]

It is the juice of love-in-idleness, then, that afflicts Lysander, Demetrius, and Titania (and indirectly Hermia, Helena, and Bottom). "Idleness" to the Elizabethans was nearly synonymous with "madness," and it is love madness that dominates the center of this comedy. Sudden passion and overwhelming desire replace rational love, as when Titania dotes on Bottom or Lysander abruptly switches courtship from one lady to another.

The antidote to love-in-idleness is the juice of yet another flower, one that Oberon calls "Dian's bud" (Diana being, of course, the goddess of chastity). When this antidote is applied to the eyes of the enchanted, their love madness is dispelled. The night's "accidents" are remembered by the lovers as but "the fierce vexation of a dream" [IV. i. 69]. Titania, cured of the "hateful imperfection of her eyes" [IV. i. 63], is reconciled to Oberon and the two go with their fairy band to bless the nuptials at the Athenian palace.

The four lovers-and their chaotic night of love in idleness-constitute the third major thread of action in the comedy. As in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* the source of these intrigues is Italianate romance. . . But in *A Midsummer Nights Dream,* Shakespeare gave the material the ultimate in complications, making

Lysander's prophetic observation that "the course of true love never did run smooth" [I. i. 134] the understatement of all time.

Quartets of lovers were to become commonplace in Shakespeare's comedies *(Much Ado about Nothing, Twelfth Night,* and *As You Like It,* to name a few), but we never again find the elaborate variations of cross-wooing present here in our Athenian quartet. As the plot develops, we have five distinct states of affairs in the love intrigues:

1. At some point before the play opens, Demetrius was betrothed to Helena, and Lysander and Hermia loved each other.

2. As the play opens, Demetrius has shifted his affections and now loves Hermia, as does Lysander. Helena, still in love with Demetrius, is forsaken.

3. In the wood, Puck mistakenly administers the love potion to the sleeping Lysander who awakes, sees Helena, and falls in love with her. Now Lysander loves Helena and Demetrius loves Hermia-the opposite of the original pairing or norm.

4. Oberon administers the potion to Demetrius who, awaking, sees Helena and falls in love with her. Now both Demetrius and Lysander love Helena, and Hermia is forsaken-the reverse of situation 2.

5. Puck administers the antidote to Lysander, who awakes and once more loves Hermia. Demetrius remains in love with Helena, and the original pairings once again prevail, bringing the plot full circle.

It is somewhat atypical of Shakespeare that most of the plot complication is caused by an external force (the juice of love-in-idleness) and that the four lovers are simply ignorant victims, unaware of the cause of their distresses. But the force is a benevolent one, for although it makes the true lover (Lysander) love falsely it also causes the false lover (Demetrius) to return to true love. Upon finally waking and beholding Helena, Demetrius claims:

To her, my lord,
Was I betroth'd ere I saw Hermia:
But. like in sickness, did I loathe this food;
But, as in health, come to my natural
taste,
Now I do wish it, love it, long for it,
And will for evermore be true to it.
[IV. i. 171-76]

Demetrius and Helena are reunited; Theseus consents (for no apparent reason) to the marriage of Lysander and Hermia; and three weddings are celebrated in the fifth act.

Obviously the three threads of action considered thus far reinforce one another in their "nuptials" themes. In addition, the nuptial celebration extends beyond these three marriages to encompass the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania, a kind of remarriage.

It is fitting, then, that our fourth thread of action, that of the "rude mechanicals,'" as Puck calls them, should deal with a love story: "The Most Lamentable Comedy, and Most Cruel Death ofPyramus and Thisbe" [I. if. 11-12], enacted by "bully Bottom" and his band.

Shakespeare was undoubtedly well acquainted with the behind-the-scenes activities of amateur theatricals, and his delight in spoofing them is obvious. In the performance by Bottom and the other "hempen homespuns" he gives us a wonderfully entertaining subplot that provides most of the low comedy in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* So appealing are the mechanicals, in fact, that their plot was (and is, even today) frequently extracted and performed as a playlet in its own right.

An amateur theatrical capped the closing scene of *Love's Labors Lost,* but with "Pyramus and Thisbe" we enjoy not only the performance (V, i] but also the selection and casting of the script [I, ii] and a rehearsal [III, i], including a hilarious discussion of stage props and settings.

Our amateur Thespians (Bottom the weaver, Quince the carpenter, Snug the joiner, Flute the bellows-mender, Snout the tinker, and Starveling the tailor) choose for their playa love tragedy, a singularly inappropriate choice for a wedding celebration. This "very tragical mirth" [V. 1. 57] of the deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe parodies Shakespeare's own *Romeo and Juliet* (written probably a year earlier) and serves as a ludicrous counterpoint to the love entanglements of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* Bottom the weaver is one of Shakespeare's finest clowns and a favorite with audiences whenever the play is performed. His portrait had been lightly sketched before in Launce (The *Two Gentlemen of Verona)* and Costard *(Loves Labor's Lost).* He serves, vis a vis the fairy spells and lovers' fantasies, as a touchstone of prosaic reality. So lacking in creative imagination is this simple weaver that he transmutes the imaginative (the theater) into the hopelessly literal-the reverse of *A Midsummer Nights Dream s* world Bottom is the antidote to the dream.

In preparing the play [III, i], Bottom cannot conceive of an audience's ability willingly to suspend its disbelief. He fears that "the ladies cannot abide" [III. i. 11-12] Pyramus's killing himself and that the appearance of the lion will tie "a most dreadful thing" [III. i. 31], the terror of which must be allayed by a prologue:

Nay, you must name his [the actor's] name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck: and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect,-"Ladies;'-or "Fair ladies,-I would wish you," -or "I would request you,"-or "I would entreat you,-not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours. . . . " And there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner.

[III. i. 36-46]

The play calls for a moon: Bottom wants to know if the moon will shine the night they play. When Quince assures him that it will, the problem is solved:

Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we play, open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.
[III. i. 56-8]

It is Bottom's immunity to imagination that makes his transformation into an ass and subsequent encounter with the Queen of the Fairies so amusing. He is the only mortal in the play who has converse with the fairy world, and it doesn't faze him in the least. When his fellows run away in terror at his "translated" form, he cannot conceive that *he* has changed: it must be a trick on *their* part:

Why do they run awav'? This is a knavery of them to make me afeard. . . . I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; to fright me. if they could.
[III. i. 112-13. 120-21]

He is singularly unimpressed with Titania's overtures of love toward him: he might as well be chatting with the villa/;!e milkmaid. His introduction to her fairy attencIants-peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed-occasions only some feeble jokes upon their names. They are of use to him only for scratching his hairyface and bringing him some hay. Presented with a unique opportunity to commune with the fairy world, he addresses him self to the supernatural as though it were the commonplace, just as he denigrates the fantasy world of the theater with practical considerations and reality.

It is ironic that Bottom is the only one of the enchanted mortals who remembers his transformation. Upon awaking in the morning [IV, i], the four lovers can barely recan how they came to be in the enchanted wood, but Bottom seems to have a distinct, fun setting, impression of his "dream":

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream. past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass. if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was-there is no man can tell what. Methought I was,-and methought I had,but man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had
[IV. i. 204-10]

For Bottom, clearly, the strange is best not tampered with.

The language of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* is rich1yvaried and laden with imagery. The dialogue of its royal personages-Theseus. Hippolyta. Oberon, and Titania-is blank verse, although Oberon speaks in rhyme when discussing magical subjects. Puck's spells are cast in a sing-song verse form, usually trochaic tetrameter. Nearly all of the Athenian lovers' lines are rhymed, occasionally quite artificially so. The effect of this, especially at the height of enchantment and cross-wooing, is to prevent us from taking matters too seriously. The mechanicals speak prose, but their playlet is cast in doggerel and sing-song rhymes that parody medieval romance.

A Midsummer Nights Dream represents Shakespeare's initial achievement, in comedy, in creating and sustaining patterns of poetic imagery that enhance the meaning and mood of the play. Although the subject of imagery here deserves extended treatment. a single example must suffice.

Beginning with the opening scene, an image cluster based upon eyes, looking, and seeing is established. Loving Lysander against her father's will, Hermia protests, "I would my father look'd but with my eyes" [t 1. 56], to which Theseus replies, "Rather your eyes must with his judgement look" [I. i. 57]. Later in the scene, Hermia despairs of her father's preference for Demetrius: "0 hell! to choose love by another's eyes" [I. t 140). Helena describes Hermia's eyes as "lode-stars." And Hermia tells -Lysander that they must "from Athens turn away our eyes" [I. i 218) and "starve our sight / From lovers' food till morrow deep midnight" [I. i. 222-23]. This eye imagery continues throughout the play in various forms. According to a count by Ralph Berry [in his *Shakespeare's Comedies],* the word "eye" (including compounds and plurals) occurs sixty-eight times in the play, "see" is used thirty-nine times, and "Sight" appears ten times.

The eye imagery suggests and reinforces thematic concerns about love, the principal subject of the comedy. Put most simply, "Love is blind." But on amore complex level, the eyes are treated as the betrayers of judgment and of the rational. Conventionally, of course, love enters through the eyes, but in this comedy it is usually false love-love-in-idleness. Potions and antidotes are squeezed onto the eyes of-the sleepers, causing them to see "with parted eye, / When every thing seems double" [IV. i 189], Even Titania cannot "see" how ugly Bottom is.

In the first four acts of this comedy, love is a disordered condition of the imagination-a sort of romantic astigmatism. It is so, of course, because the flight to the wood and its fairy world is a retreat from the rational and ordered world of the Athenian court, where parental and societal authority prevails. When morning comes and all the characters return to Athens, order is again restored and each lover returns to the correct beloved. Each lover now "sees" clearly. It is largely through the use of imagery like this that Shakespeare embodied in the language of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* its thematic concerns about love, natural order, rational judgment, and creative fantasy, possibly because of its intense appeal to the imagination, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been one of Shakespeare's more successful comedies on the stage, particularly in modem times. It was fashionable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to play the work in adapted form. A 1661 version, for example, utilized only the mechanicals' plot, as a "droll" or light entertainment called "The Merry Conceited Humours of Bottom the Weaver."_ David Garrick turned *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a full-scale opera in 1755, with some twenty songs and with lavish scenic spectacle.

Shakespeare's original text was more or less restored to the stage by Charles Mathews in his 1840 production, the one that introduced Felix Mendelssohn's famous overture to the play. Other notable nineteenth-century mountings of the comedy were those of Samuel Phelps (who played Bottom) at Sadler's Wells in 1853, of Augustin Daly in New York in 1887, and of F, R. Benson in 1889. All of these productions, typical of their time, emphasized lavish scenic spectacle, pageantry, and music in an attempt to render Shakespeare's extravagant fantasy through concrete, visual opulence of the most literal kind.

In our own century there have been two productions worth noting here for their opposing approaches to the realm of poetic fantasy. Max Reinhardt staged the play a

number of times, leading to his 1935 film version for Warner Brothers. Reinhardt, in both the stage and the film versions, took literalism as far as it could go, trusting nothing to the imagination. Dozens of gossamer fairies With glittering wings skipped about on golden moonbeams, through a lush and detailed forest to an Athenian palace rivaling the Parthenon, Unfortunately, much of Shakespeare's text was cut and what poetry remained seemed only to interfere with the visual effects, Reinhardt was as scrupulous in his approach to the magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Bottom was in rendering the true tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe.

The other version earned world-wide critical acclaim as a breakthrough in Shakespearean stage production. It was staged by Peter Brook for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-uponAvon in 1970 and subsequently toured America. Brook stripped away all preconceived notions about fairies and fantasy, throwing out production tradition accumulated over some three hundred years, and rendered his Athenian world in singularly Spartan terms. His setting was a pure white rectangular room with cushions for the actors to sit upon and ropes and trapezes for them to climb; his lighting was white, bright, and constant: his fairies wore uniforms suggesting jogging suits; and supernatural effects were replaced by full emphasis upon the actors' voices and bodily movements, which included calisthenics and gymnastics.

Through the visual austerity and actor-centered focus of his production, Brook was able to redirect the audience's attention to Shakespeare's text-to its lyricism, its imagery, its fantasy. Therein lay his success. If there is magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (and decidedly there is), it is the magic not of let's-pretend sprites prancing about in gauzeand-glitter fairy suits, but of the English language, raised by the fertile imagination of its greatest poet to full suggestive power. (pp. 62-76)

Jack A Vaughn. "The Comedies: 'A *Midsummer Night's Dream:" in his* Shakespeare's Comedies, *Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980,pp.* 61-76.

Critical Essay #3

[Describing A Midsummer Night's Dream *as similar to a fertility rite, Gamer discusses the sexual, psychological, and social implications if Shakespeare's comedy. More than a simple celebration if erotic love, the play, Gamer maintains, reflects certain attitudes characteristic of male-dominated societies. For example, a woman s entire existence, particularly her sexual and emotional life, is controlled by a powerful male figure, as illustrated by Egeus's almost incestuous possessiveness toward his daughter Hermia. Further. the extent of a woman's sexual and emotional freedom, Garner argues, is determined by male desire. Thus conventional heterosexual love flourishes only if certain conditions, determined by the male protagonists, are satisfied. For example, a woman must sever all her emotional ties with other women to assuage her husband's fears of possible rejection. As Gamer concludes, "the male characters think they can keep their women only if they divide and conquer them Only then will Jack have Jill; only then will their world flourish. "]*

More than any of Shakespeare's comedies, *A Midsummer Nights Dream* resembles a fertility rite, for the sterile world that Titania depicts at the beginning of Act II is transformed and the play concludes with high celebration, ritual blessing, and the promise Of regeneration. Though this pattern is easily apparent and has often been observed, the social and sexual implications of the return of the green world have gone unnoticed. What has not been so clearly seen is that the renewal at the end of the play affirms patriarchal order and hierarchy, insisting that the power of women must be circumscribed, and that it recognizes the tenuousness of heterosexuality as well. The movement of the play toward ordering the fairy, human, and natural worlds is also a movement toward satisfying men's psychological needs, as Shakespeare perceived them, but its cost is the disruption of women's bonds with each other. Regeneration finally depends on the amity between Titania and Oberon. As she tells him. their quarrel over possession of an Indian boy has brought chaos. disease, and sterility to the natural world:

And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate. Irom our dissension:
We are their parents and original.
[II. i. 115-17)

The story of the "lovely boy" is told from two points of view, Puck's and Titania's. Puck tells a companion fairy that Oberon is "passing fell and wrath" [II. 1. 20] because Titania has taken as her atten dant "a lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king" [II. i. 23]: he continues:

She never had so sweet a changeling.
And jealous Oberon would have the child
Knight of his train, to trace the forests
wild.
But she perforce withholds the loved boy,

Crowns him with flowers, and makes him
all her joy.
And now they never meet in grove or
green,
By fountain clear, or spangled starlight
sheen,
But they do square, that all the elves for
fear
Creep into acorn cups and hide them
there.
[II. i. 23-31]

Shortly afterward, when Oberon tells Titania that it is up to her to amend their quarrel and that he merely begs "a little changeling boy" [II. i. 120] to be his "henchman," she retorts, "Set your heart at rest. / The fairy land buys not the child of me" [II. i 121-22]. Then she explains the child's origin, arguing her loyalty to the child's mother to be the reason for keeping him:

His mother was a vot'ress of my order,
And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow
sands,
Marking th' embarked traders on the
flood;
When we have laughed to see the sails
conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton
wine;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following-her womb then rich with my
young squire
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifles, and return again,
As from a voyage. rich with merchandise.
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.
[II. i. 123-37]

Both accounts affirm that the child has become the object of Titania's love, but the shift in emphasis from one point of view to the other is significant. Puck describes the child as "stolen from an Indian king" [II. i. 22], whereas Titania emphasizes the child's link with his mother, her votaress. Puck's perspective, undoubtedly close to Oberon's, ignores or suppresses the connection between Titania and the Indian queen, which, in its exclusion of men and suggestion of love between women, threatens patriarchal and heterosexual values.

Titania's attachment to the boy is clearly erotic. She "crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy" [II. i. 27-8], according him the same attentions as those she bestows on Bottom when Under the spell of Oberon's love potion, she falls in love with the rustic-turned-ass. She has "forsworn" Oberon's "bed and company" [II. i. 62]. Whatever the child is to her as a "lovely boy" and a "sweet" changeling, he is ultimately her link with a mortal woman whom she loved. Oberon's passionate determination to have the child for himself suggests that he is both attracted to and jealous of him. He would have not only the boy but also the exclusive love of Titania. He needs to cut her off from the child because she is attracted to him not only as boy and child, but also as his mother's son. Oberon's need to humiliate Titania in attaining the boy suggests that her love for the child poses a severe threat to the fairy king.

Puck's statement that Oberon wants the child to be "knight of his train" [It i 25] and Oberon's that he wants him to be his "henchman" have led some critics to argue that the fairy king's desires to have the boy are more appropriate than the fairy queen's. Oberon's wish to have the boy is consistent with the practice of taking boys from the nursery to the father's realm so that they can acquire the character and skills appropriate to manhood But Puck describes Oberon as 'Jealous," and his emphasis on the "lovely boy," the "sweet" changeling, and the "loved boy" [II. i. 23-7] suggests that Oberon, like Titania is attracted to the child. There is no suggestion that Oberon wants to groom the child for manhood; he wants him rather "to trace the forests wild" [II. i 25] with his fairy band

Those critics who attribute moral intentions to Oberon, arguingfor his benevolent motives in taking the boy from Titania. overlook that Oberon has no intention of returning him to his father, with whom he, as a human child, might be most properly reared. When we last hear 0f the boy, Titania's fairy has carried him to Oberon's "bower" [IV. i. 61].

Oberon's winning the boy from Titania is at the center of the play, for his victory is the price of amity between them, which in turn restores the green world. At the beginning, Oberon and Titania would seem to have equal magical powers, but Oberon's power proves the greater. Since he cannot persuade Titania to turn over the boy to him, he humiliates her and torments her until she does so. He uses the love potion not simply to divert her attention from the child, so that he can have him, but to punish her as well. As he squeezes the love flower on Titania's eyes, he speaks a charm-or rather a curse-revealing his intention:

What thou see'st when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy truelove take;
Love and langulsh for his sake.
Be it ounce, or cat, or bear,
Pard, or boar with bristled hair,
In thy eye that shall appear
When thou wak'st, it is thy dear.
Wake when some vile thing is near.
[II. ii. 27-34]

When Puck tells him that Titania is "with a monster in love" [III. ii. 6], he is obviously pleased: "This falls out better than I could devise" [III. ii. 35].

Though the scenes between Titania and Bottom are charming and hilarious, Titania is made ridiculous. Whereas her opening speech is remarkable for its lyric beauty, and her defense of keeping the Indian boy has quiet and dignified emotion power, now she is reduced to admiring Bottom's truisms and his monstrous shape: "Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful" [III. i. 147]. However enjoyable the scenes between her and Bottom, however thematically satisfying in their representation of the marriage of our animal and spiritual natures, Titania, free of the influence of Oberon's love potion, says of Bottom, "0, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!" [IV. i. 79]. By his own account, Oberon taunts Titania into obedience: he tells Puck:

See'st thou this sweet sight? Her dotage now I do begin to pity:
For, meeting her of late behind the wood, Seeking sweet favors for this hateful fool, I did upbraid her, and fall out with her. For she his hairy temples then had rounded
With coronet offresh and fragrant flowers;
And that same dew, which sometime on
the buds
Was wont to swell, like round and orient
pearls,
Stood now within the pretty flouriet's
eyes,
Like tears, that did their own disgrace be
wail. When I had at my pleasure taunted her,
And she in mild terms begged my pa
tience, I then did ask of her her changeling child;
Which straight she gave me, and her fairy
sent
To bear him to my bower in fairy land.
And now I have the boy, I will undo
This hateful imperfection of her eyes.
[IV. i. 46-63]

Oberon gains the exclusive love of Titania and also possession of the boy to whom he is attracted. But his gain is Titania's loss: she is separated from the boy and, in that separation, further severed from the woman whom she had loved. Oberon can offer ritual blessing at the play's end because he has what he wanted from the beginning: Titania obedient and under his control and the beautiful Indian boy in his bower.

Like the fairy king, the two men in power in the human world, Theseus and Egeus, want to attain the exclusive love of a woman and, also, to accommodate their homoerotic desires. In order to do so, they, like Oberon, attempt to limit women's power, and their success or failure to do so affects their participation in the comic world.

The opening of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* puts Hippolyta's subjugation in bold relief as Theseus reminds his bride-to-be:

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with revel
ing.
[I. i. 16-19]

Capturing Hippolyta when he defeated the Amazons, Theseus has abducted her from her Amazon sisters to bring her to Athens and marry her.

Though most directors play Hippolyta as a Willing bride, I once saw San Francisco's Actors' Workshop, following the cues of Ian Kott, bring her on stage clothed in skins and imprisoned in a cage. The text invites such a rendering, for almost imme diately it sets her apart from Theseus by implying that she sides with Hermia and Lysander against Egeus and Theseus, when he sanctions Egeus's authority. After Theseus tells Hermia to prepare to marry Demetrius or "on Diana's altar to protest / For aye austerity and single life" [I. i. 89-90] and then beckons Hippolyta to follow him offstage, he undoubtedly notices her frowning, for he asks, "What cheer, my love?" [I. i. 122]. Shakespeare heightens her isolation by presenting her without any Amazon attendants.

Though Theseus is less severe than Egeus, he is, from the outset, unsympathetic toward women. The first words he speaks, voicing the play's first lines and first image, must be taken as a sign: the moon "lingers" his desires, he tells Hippolyta, "Like a step dame, or a dowager, / Long withering out a young man's revenue" [I. i. 4-6]. He utterly supports Egeus as patriarch, telling Hermia:

To you your father should be as a god,
One that composed your beauties; yea,
and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it.
[I. i. 47-51]

As a ruler, he will enforce the law, which gives Egeus control over Hermia's sexuality and embodies patriarchal order. Though he has heard that Demetrius has won Helena's heart but now scorns her, and has meant to speak to him about it, "My mind did lose it" [I. i. 114]. A lover-andleaver of women himself, he undoubtedly identifies with Demetrius and forgets his duty toward Helena. He exits inviting Egeus and Demetrius to follow and talk confidentially with him, suggesting his spiritual kinship with them.

Whatever other associations Theseus had for Shakespeare's audience, he was notorious as the first seducer of Helen. As early as Act II, Oberon recalls Theseus's reputation as a deserter of women.

When Titania accuses Oberon of infidelity, asking rhetorically why he was in Athens if not to see Hippolyta, "the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskined mistress and your warrior love" [II. i. 70-1], he accuses her of loving Theseus:

Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigenia, whom he ravished? And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa?
[11.1.77-80]

It is significant that the woman whom he at last will marry is not traditionally feminine. She has been a warrior, and in her new role as the fiancee of the Athenian Duke, we see her as a hunter. Nostalgically, she recalls her past experiences:

I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear
With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for, besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seemed all one mutual cry. I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.
[IV. i. 112-18]

Her androgynous character appears to resolve for Theseus the apparent dissociation of his romantic life, the sign of which is his continual desertion of women who love him.

Having found an androgynous woman, Theseus captures her and brings her home to be his wife. By conquering and marrying this extraordinarily powerful woman, he fulfills his need for the exclusive love of a woman while gratifying his homoerotic desires. Unlike Oberon, however, he finds satisfaction for his desires merged in one person. If we imagine Hippolyta played by a male actor who, though cast as a woman, dresses and walks like a man ("buskined mistress,"_ "bouncing Amazon"), Hippolyta and Theseus must have looked more like homosexual than heterosexual lovers. Hippolyta's androgynous appearance is further con firmed by the fact that in Renaissance fiction and drama men were occasionally disguised as Amazons, e.g., lovers, like Sidney's Zelmane, in the *Arcadia,* who wished to be near his lady. Hippolyta, like Viola and Rosalind in disguise [in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It],* fulfills a male fantasy, and more happily so since she is not in disguise. Because Theseus's romantic life is fortunately resolved once the young lovers have paired themselves off anew, with Demetrius loving Helena, he can sanction their preferences and ignore Egeus's persistent demand that Hermia marry Demetrius. By insisting that Hermia marry Demetrius, Egeus hopes to keep his daughter rather than lose her and to have Demetrius near him as well. Shakespeare makes Egeus's motives suspect by creating him foolishly comic, treating him more harshly than he does his other controlling and possessive fathers-Lear, Capulet [in *Romeo and Juliet],* Bra bantio [in *Othello],* Shylock

[in *The Merchant of Venice],* Prospero [in *The Tempest].* Unable to make his daughter marry where he wishes, Egeus turns to the law to enforce his will. More outrageous than Brabantio, he turns Lysander's courtship of his daughter into a series of crimes: Lysander has "bewitched the bosom" of Hermia, "stol'n the impression of her fantasy," "filched" her heart [I. i. 27-36]. As Shakespeare depicts the two lovers who compete over Hermia, he is careful to draw them so that Egeus's choice is irrational and not in Hermia's best interests. Lysander states his case before Theseus:

I am, my lord, as well derived as he (Demetrius),
As well possessed; my love is more than
his:
My fortunes every way as fairly ranked (If not with vantage) as Demetrius';
And, which is more than all these boasts
can be,
I am beloved of beauteous Hermia.
[I. i. 99-104)

Lysander continues to accuse Demetrius of making love to Helena, who now "dotes in idolatry, / Upon this spotted and inconstant man" [I. 1.109-10]. His accusation is evidently founded, for Theseus confesses that he has "heard so much" [I. 1. 111] and Demetrius does not deny it or defend himself. Later, Demetrius admits that he was betrothed to Helena before he saw Hermia [IV. i. 17273]. Egeus chooses badly for his daughter unless he wishes to keep her for himself, as I think he does. By insisting that she marry a man whom she does not love and one who may be unfaithful to her besides, ifhis present conduct is agauge, Egeus assures that she will always love her father: that she will never really leave him.

There are suggestions, as well, that Egeus has a particular affection for Demetrius. Shakespeare does not leave us to assume that Egeus's preference for Demetrius is simply proprietary, i.e., since Hermia is his, he may give her as he chooses; or that it is simply an affirmation of male bonding, like Capulet's demand that Juliet marry Paris, "And you be mine, I'll give you to my friend" [*Romeo and Juliet,* III. v. 191]. Lysander's sarcasm defines Egeus's feeling for Demetrius:

You have her father's love, Demetrius:
Let me have Hermia's: do you marry him.
[I. i. 93-4]

And Egeus immediately affirms:

True, he hath my love,
And what is mine, my love shall render
him.
[I. i. 95-6]

Even after Demetrius has fallen in love with Helena, Egeus continues to pair himself with him. When the lovers are discovered asleep in the forest coupled "right" at last and Lysander begins to explain what Theseus calls their "gentle concord," Egeus urges:

Enough, enough, my lord; you have
enough. I beg the law, the law. upon his head.
They would have stol'n away; they would,
Demetrius,
Thereby to have defeated you and me,
You of your wife and me of my consent,
Of my consent that she should be your
wife.
[IV. i. 154-59]

Egeus would draw Demetrius back to him, realign ing the original *we* against *them.* Egeus, then, has hoped to have the exclusive love of Hermia and to accommodate his homoerotic feelings by binding Demetrius to him. To give up Hermia and accept that Demetrius loves Helena would defeat him doubly. Consequently, he leaves the stage unreconciled. Had it been left to him to affirm the comic resolution, we would have none. Whereas the separation of Hippolyta and Titania from other women is implied or kept in the background, the breaking of women's bonds is central in the plot involving the four young lovers. Demetrius and Lysander are divided at the outset, but the play dramatizes the division of Hermia and Helena. Furthermore, their quarreling is more de meaning than the men's. And once Demetrius and Lysander are no longer in competition for the same woman, their enmity is gone. Hermia and Helena. on the contrary, seem permanently separated and apparently give over their power to the men they will marry. Once their friendship is undermined and their power diminished, they are presumably "ready" for marriage.

Hermia's fond recollection of her long-standing and intimate friendship with Helena calls attention to Helena's disloyalty, occasioned by the latter's desire to win Demetrius's thanks and to be near him. Telling her friend that she intends to run away with Lysander. Hermia recalls:

And in the wood, where often you and I
Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,
Emptying our bosoms of their counsel
sweet,
There my Lysander and myself shall meet.
[I. i. 214-17]

Just as Helena breaks her faith with Hermia to ingratiate herself with Demetrius, so later she will believe that Hermia has joined with men against her. Deeply hurt, Helena chastizes Hermia:

Is all the counsel that we two have shared,
The sister's vows, the hours that we have

spent,
When we have chid the hasty-footed time
For parting us-a, is all forgot?
All school days friendship, childhood innocence?
We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
Have with our needles created both one
flower,
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
Both warbling of one song, both in one
key;
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and
minds,
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition,
Two lovely berries molded on one stem;
So, with two seeming bodies, but one
heart;
Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,
Due but to one, and crowned with one
crest.
And will you rent our ancient love asunder,
To join with men in scorning your poor
friend?
It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly.
Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,
Though I alone do feel the injury.
[III. ii. 198-219]

In a scene that parallels in its central position Titania's wooing of Bottom, the rupture of their friendship becomes final. They accuse and insult each other, with Hermia calling Helena a "juggler," "canker blossom," "thief of love," "painted maypole"; and Helena naming her a "counterfeit" and a "puppet" [III. ii. 282-96]. Their quarrel becomes absurd as it turns on Hermia's obsession, taken up by both Lysander and Helena. that Lysander has come to prefer Helena because she is taller. Though no other women characters in Shakespeare's plays come close to fighting physically, Hermia threatens to scratch out Helena's eyes [III. ii. 297-98]. Her threat is serious enough to make Helena flee [III. ii. 340-43]. Lysander is made equally ridiculous in his abrupt change of heart; yet he and Demetrius are spared the indignity of a demeaning quarrel and leave the stage to settle their disagreement in a "manly" fashion, with swords. Even though Puck makes a mockery of their combat through his teasing, they are not so thoroughly diminished as Hermia and Helena.

In the course of the play, both Hermia and Helena suffer at the hands of their lovers. Betrothed to Helena. Demetrius deserts her for Hermia. When she pursues him, he tells her that she makes him sick [II. i. 212] and threatens to rape her [II. 1. 214-19]. By doggedly following him, she maintains a kind of desperate power over him . . . .

Consequently, he cannot sustain the image of the romantic rake, whose women pine and die, commit suicide, or bum themselves on pyres when he leaves them. Disappointed in his love for Hermia. he cannot get loose from Helena. Yet her masochism undercuts her power:

I am your spaniel; and. Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me,
strike me.
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave.
Unworthy as I am. to follow you.
What worser place can I beg in your love
And yet a place of high respect with me
Than to be used as you use your dog?
[II. i. 203-10]

When Helena is in a position of positive power with both Lysander and Demetrius in love with her, she cannot take advantage of it because she assumes that she is the butt of a joke. And of course, in a sense, she is right: she is the victim of either Puck's prank or his mistake. Hermia must also bear Lysander's contempt. In the forest, he insists that he "hates" her [III. ii. 270, 281] and calls her outrageous names: "cat," "burr," "vile thing," "tawny Tartar," "loathed med'cine," "hated potion," "dwarf," "milieus, of hind' ring knotgrass made," "bead," "acorn" [III. ii. 260-64, 328-30]. While both women protest their lovers' treatment of them, neither can play Beatrice to her Benedick [in *Much Ado about Nothing].* Both more or less bear their lovers' abuses. After the four lovers sleep and awaken coupled as they will marry, Hermia and Helena do not reconcile. Once tl1ey leave the forest, they lose their voices. Neither of them speaks again. Recognizing that it is difficult for an actor to be on stage without any lines, as Helena and Hermia are for almost all of Act V, Shakespeare was undoubtedly aware that he was creating a portentous silence. Since Helena and Hermia are evidently married between Acts IV and V, their silence suggests that in their new roles as wives they will be obedient, allowing their hu&bands dominance.

The end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is as fully joyous as the conclusion of any of Shakespeare's comedies. No longer angry with each other, Oberon and Titania bring blessing to the human world:

Hand in hand, with fairy grace.
Will we sing, and bless this place.
[V. i. 399-400]

Though Oberon calls up dark possibilities, he offers a charm against them. The prospect of love, peace, safety, prosperity is as promising as it ever will be. The cost of this harmony, however, is the restoration of patriarchal hierarchy, so threatened at the beginning of the play. This return to the old order depends on the breaking of women's bonds with each other and the submission of women, which the play relentlessly exacts. Puck's verse provides the paradigm:

Jack shall have Jill;
Nought shall go ill;
The man shall have his mare again and all shall be well.
[III. ii. 461-63]

If we turn to some of Shakespeare's comedies in which women's bonds with each other are unbroken and their power is left intact or even dominates, the tone of the ending is less harmonious or even discordant. In *The Merchant ofVenice,* for ex ample, where Portia is in control and she and Nerissa triumph over Gratiano and Bassanio, there is no ritual celebration. Portia directs the scene and carefully circumscribes her marriage with Bassanio to close out Antonio. When she and Nerissa reveal their identities as the doctor and the clerk, they make clear their extraordinary power to outwit and deceive, calling up women's ultimate destructive power in marriage and love-to cuckold. The final moments of the play move toward reconciliation, but not celebration. The last line, a bawdy joke, is spoken by Gratiano, the most hate filled character in the play, and reminds us of men's fear of women and their need to control them: "While I live I'll fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring" (V. i. 306-07]. In *Love's Labor's Lost,* where the women remain together and in control, there is no comic ending. Echoing Puck, Berowne makes the point as he speaks to the King of Navarre:

Our wooing doth not end like an old play; Jack hath not Jill.
These ladies' courtesy
Might well have made our sport a comedy.
[V. ii. 874-76]

When the King replies, "Come, sir, it wants a twelvemonth and a day, / And then 'twill end," Berowne answers, "That's too long for a play" (V. ii. 872-76]. The refrains of the closing songs call forth images of cuckolding and of "greasy Joan" stirring the pot.

The pattern of these comic endings suggests that heterosexual bonding is tenuous at best. In order to be secure, to enjoy, to love-to participate in the celebration that comedy invites-men need to maintain their ties with other men and to sever women's bonds with each other. The implication is that men fear that if women join with each other, they will not need men, will possibly exclude them or prefer the friendship and love of women. This is precisely the threat of the beautiful scene that Titania describes between herself and her votaress. This fear may be based partially on reality, but it is also partially caused by projection: since men have traditionally had stronger bonds with other men than with women and have excluded women from participation in things about which they cared most, they may assume that women, granted the opportunity, will do the same. Given this possibility or likelihood, Shakespeare's male characters act out of a fear of women's bonding with each other and a feeling of sexual powerlessness. The male characters think they can keep their women only if they divide and conquer them. Only then will Jack have Jill; only then will their world flourish. (pp. 47-61)

Shirley Nelson Gamer, "'A Midsummer Night's Dream ': *'Jack Shall Have Jill; / Nought Shall Go Ill;* " *in* Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Vol. 9, No.1, 1981, pp. 47-63.

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Critical Essay #4

[In Kott's view , A Midsummer Night's Dream *is the most erotic of Shakespeare's plays. Rejecting the traditional interpretation of the playas a romantic love comedy, Kott focuses on the undercurrents of sexual violence and bestiality, which in many ways determine the protagonists' actions. Kott identifies the female characters as the principal victims of sadistic sexual behavior, noting their masochistic tolerance of their lovers' cruelty. The confused lovers in A Midsummer Night's Dream, with their brusque shifts from one object of affection to another, resemble exchangeable puppets. According to the critic, the protagonists are not depicted as individuals in Shakespeare's play; rather, they are merely objects defined by their desires. What seemed to be a night of love, Kott concludes, was really a nightmare for the protagonists. "But that night, " he adds, "liberated them from themselves. They were their real selves in their dreams. "]*

The *Dream* is the most erotic of Shakespeare's plays. In no other tragedy, or comedy, of his, except *Troilus and Cressida,* is the eroticism expressed so brutally. Theatrical tradition is particularly intolerable in the case of the *Dream,* as much in its classicist version, with tunic-clad lovers and marble stairs in the background, as in its other, operatic variation, with flowing transparent muslin and ropedancers. For a long time theatres have been content to present the *Dream* as a Brothers Grimm fable, completely obliterating the pungency of the dialogue and the brutality of the situations.

LYSANDER
Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing,
let loose,
Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!
HERMIA
Why are you grown so rude? What change
is this,
Sweet love?
LYSANDER
Thy love? Out, tawny Tartar, out!
Out, loathed med'cine! a hated potion,
hence!
[III. ii. 260-64]

Commentators have long since noticed that the lovers in this love quartet are scarcely distinguishable from one another. The girls differ only in height and in the colour of their hair. Perhaps only Hermia has one or two individual traits, which let one trace in her an earlier version of Rosaline in *Loves Labours Lost,* and the later Rosalind in *As You Like It* The young men differ only in names. All four lack the distinctness and uniqueness of so many other, even earlier Shakespearean characters.

The lovers are exchangeable. Perhaps that was his purpose? The entire action of this hot night. . . is based on the complete exchangeability of love partners. I always have

the impression that Shakespeare leaves nothing to chance. Puck wanders round the garden at night and encounters couples who exchange partners with each other. It is Puck who makes the observation:

This is the woman; but not this the man.
[III. ii. 42]

Helena loves Demetrius, Demetrius loves Hermia. Hermia loves Lysander. Helena runs after Demetrius, Demetrius runs after Hermia. Later Lysander runs after Helena. This mechanical reversal of the objects of desire, and the interchangeability of lovers is not just the basis of the plot. The reduction of characters to love partners seems to me to be the most peculiar characteristic of this cruel dream: and perhaps its most modem quality. The partner is now nameless and faceless. He or she just happens to be the nearest. As in some plays by [Jean] Genet, there are no unambiguous characters, there are only situations. Everything has become ambivalent.

HERMIA
. . . Wherefore? a me! what news, my
love?
Am not I Hermia? Are not you Lysander? I am as fair now as I was erewhile.
[III. ii. 272-74]

Hermia is wrong. For in truth there is no Hermia. just as there is no Lysander. Or rather there are two different Hermias and two different Lysanders. The Hermia who sleeps with Lysander and the Hermia with whom Lysander does not want to sleep. The Lysander who sleeps with Hermia and the Lysander who is running away from Hermia. (pp.218-20)

If *Love's Labour's Lost,* the transparent comedy about young men who determined to do without women, is rightly considered to have been a play with a secret meaning to the initiated, how much more must this be true of the *Dream.* The stage and auditorium [of its first performance] were full of people who knew one another. Every allusion was deciphered at once. Fair ladies laughed behind their fans, men elbowed each other, homosexuals giggled softly.

Give me that boy, and I will go with thee.
[II. i. 143]

Shakespeare does not show the boy whom Titania to spite Oberon has stolen from the Indian king. But he mentions the boy several times and stresses the point. For the plot the boy is quite unnecessary. One could easily invent a hundred other reasons for the conflict between the royal couple. Apparently the introduction of the boy was essential to Shakespeare for other, non-dramatic purposes. It is not only the Eastern page boy who is disturbing. The behaviour of all the characters, not only the commoners but also the royal and princely personages, is promiscuous:

. . . the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior

love,. . .
[II.i. 70-1]

The Greek queen of the Amazons has only recently been the mistress of the king of the fairies, while Theseus has just ended his liaison with Titania. These facts have no bearing on the plot, nothing results from them. They even blur a little the virtuous and somewhat pathetic image of the betrothed couple drawn in Acts I and V. But these details undoubtedly represent allusions to contemporary persons and events.

I do not think it is possible to decipher all the allusions in the *Dream* Nor is it essential. I do not suppose it matters a great deal whether we discover for whose marriage Shakespeare hastily completed and adapted his *Midsummer Night's Dream.* It is only necessary for the actor, designer, and director to be aware of the fact that the *Dream* was a contemporary play about love. Both "contemporary" and "love" are significant words here. The *Dream* is also a most truthful, brutal, and violent play. (pp. 220-22) The metaphors of love, eroticism, and sex undergo some essential changes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* They are completely traditional to start with: sword and wound; rose and rain: Cupid's bow and golden arrow. The clash of two kinds of imagery occurs in Helena's soliloquy which forms a coda to Act I, scene 1. The soliloquy is about her intellectual capacities and for a while singles her out from the action of the play. It is really the author's monologue, a kind of Brechtian "song" in which, for the first time, the philosophical theme of the *Dream* is stated; the subject being Eros and Tanatos.

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted
blind.
[I. i. 232-35]
(p.223)

Starting with Helena's soliloquy Shakespeare introduces more and more obtrusively animal erotic symbolism. He does it consistently, stubbornly, al most obsessively. The changes in imagery are in this case only an outward expression of a violent departure from the Petrarchian idealization of love.

It is this passing through animality that seems to us the midsummer night's dream, or at least it is this aspect of the *Dream* that is the most modern and revealing. This is the main theme joining together all three separate plots running parallel in the play. Titania and Bottom will pass through animal eroticism in a quite literal, even visual sense. But even the quartet of lovers enter the dark sphere of animal love-making:

HELENA
. . . I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you. Use me but as your spaniel-spurn me,
strike me, . . .
[11.1.203-05]

And again:

What worser place can I beg in your
love. ..
Than to be used as you use your dog?
[II. i. 208-10]

Pointers, kept on short leashes, eager to chase or fawning upon their masters, appear frequently in Flemish tapestries representing hunting scenes. They were a favourite adornment on the walls of royal and princely palaces. But here a girl calls herself a dog fawning on her master. The metaphors are brutal, almost masochistic.

It is worth having a closer look at the "bestiary" evoked by Shakespeare in the *Dream.* As a result of the romantic tradition, unfortunately preserved in the theatre through Mendelssohn's music, the forest in the *Dream* still seems to be another version of Arcadia. But in the actual fact, it is rather a forest inhabited by devils and lamias, in which witches and sorceresses can easily find everything required for their practices.

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
Newts and blindworms, do no wrong,
Come not near our Fairy Queen.
[II. ii. 9-12]

Titania lies down to sleep on a meadow among wild thyme, ox-lips, musk-roses, violets, and eglantine, but the lullaby sung by the fairies in her train seems somewhat frightening. After the creatures just quoted they go on to mention long-legged poisonous spiders, black beetles, worms, and snails. The lullaby does not forecast pleasant dreams.

The bestiary of the *Dream* is not a haphazard one. Dried skin of a viper, pulverized spiders, bats' gristles appear in every medieval or Renaissance prescription book as drugs to cure impotence and women's afflictions of one kind or another. All these are slimy, hairy, sticky creatures, unpleasant to touch and often arousing violent aversion. It is the sort of aversion that is described by psychoanalytic textbooks as a sexual neurosis. Snakes, snails, bats, and spiders also form a favourite bestiary of Freud's theory of dreams. Oberon orders Puck to make the lovers sleep that kind of sleep when he says:

. . . lead them thus
Till o'er their brows death-counterfeiting
sleep
With leaden legs and batty wings doth
creep.
[III. ii. 363-65]

Titania's fairies are called: Peaseblossom. Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed. In the theatre Titania's retinue is almost invariably represented as winged goblins, jumping and

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soaring in the air, or as a little bailet of German dwarfs. This sort of visual interpretation is so strongly suggestive that even commentators on the text find it difficult to free themselves from it However, one has only to think on the very selection of these names to realize that they belong to the same love pharmacy of the witches.

I imagine Titania's court as consisting of old men and women, toothless and shaking, their mouths wet with saliva who sniggering procure a monster for their mistress.
The next thing then she waking looks
upon
(Be it on lion. bear. or wolf. or bull.
On meddling monkey or on busy ape)
She shall pursue It with the soul of love.
[II. I. 179-82]

Oberon openly announces that as a punishment Titania will sleep with a beast. Again the selection of these animals is most characteristic particularly in the next series of Oberon's threats:

Be it ounce or cat or bear,
Pard. or boar with bristled hair. . .
III. ii. 30-l]

All these animals represent abundant sexual patency, and some of them play an important part In sexual demonology. Bottom is eventually transformed into an ass. But in this nightmarish summer night, the ass does not symbolize stupidity. From antiquity up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all quadrupeds was supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus. (pp. 224-27) The scenes between Titania and Bottom transformed into an ass are often played for laughs in the theatre. But I think that if one can see humour in this scene, it is the English kind of humour, *"humeur noire"* ["black comedy"], cruel and scatological, as it often is in [the works of Jonathan] SWift. The slender, tender, and lyrical Titania longs for animal love. Puck and Oberon call the transformed Bottom a monster. The frail and sweet Titania drags the monster to bed, almost by force. This is the lover she wanted and dreamed of: only she never wanted to admit it, even to herself. The sleep frees her from inhibitions. The monstrous ass is being raped by the poetic Titania. while she still keeps on chattering about flowers:

TITANIA
The moon, methinks, looks with a wat'ry
eye;
And when she weeps, weeps every little
flower, Lamenting some enforced chastity.
Tie up my love's tongue, bring him silent
ly.
[III. 1. 198-201]

Of all the characters in the play Titania enters to the fullest extent the dark sphere of sex where there is no more beauty and ugliness; there is only infatuation and liberation. In the coda of the first scene of the *Dream* Helena had already forecast:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity, Love can transpose to form and dignity.
[I. 1. 232-33]

The love scenes between Titania and the ass must seem at the same time real and unreal, fascinating and repulsive. They are to rouse rapture and disgust, terror and abhorrence. They should seem at once strange and fearful.

Come, sit thee down upon this flow'ry bed, While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,
And stick musk-roses in thy sleek smooth
head,
And kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy.
[IV. 1. 1-4]

Chagall has depicted Titania caressing the ass. In his picture the ass is sad, white, and affectionate. To my mind, Shakespeare's Titania caressing the monster with the head of an ass, ought to be closer to the fearful visions of Bosch and to the grotesque of the surrealists. (pp. 228-29)

The night is drawing to a close and the dawn is breaking. The lovers have already passed through the dark sphere of animal love. Puck will sing an ironic song at the end of Act III. It is at the same time a code and a "song" to summarize the night's experiences.

Jack shall have Jill;
Naught shall go ill;
The man shall have his mare again, and
all shall be well.
[III. ii. 461-63]

Titania wakes up and sees a boor with an ass's head by her side. She slept with him that night. But now it is daylight. She does not remember ever having desired him. She remembers nothing. She does not want to remember anything.

TITANIA
My Oberon, what visions have I seen!
Methought I was enamour'd of an ass.
OBERON
There lies your love.
TITANIA
How came these things to pass?
0, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!
[IV. 1. 76-9]

All are ashamed in the morning: Demetrius and Hermia. Lysander and Helena. Even Bottom. Even he does not want to admit his dream:

Methought I was-there is no man can tell
what
Methought I was, and methought I had
But
man is but a patch'd fool if he will offer to
say
what methought I had.
[IV. i. 207-11]

In the violent contrast between the erotic madness liberated by the night and the censorship of day which orders everything to be forgotten, Shakespeare seems most ahead of his time. The notion that "life's a dream" has, in this context, nothing of baroque mysticism. Night is the key to day!

. . . We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; . . .
[The Tempest, IV. 1. 156-57]

Not only is Ariel an abstract Puck with a sad and thoughtful face; the philosophical theme of the *Dream* will be repeated in *The Tempest,* doubtless a more mature play. But the answers given by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* seem more unambiguous, perhaps one can even say, more materialistic, less bitter.

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
[V.1. 7-8]

The madness lasted throughout the June night. The lovers are ashamed of that night and do not want to talk about it, just as one does not want to talk of bad dreams. But that night liberated them from themselves. They were their real selves in their dreams. (pp. 233-35)

Jan Kott, "Titania and the Ass's Head," in his Shakespeare, Our Contemporary, *translated by Boleslaw Taborski,* 1964. *Reprint by Norton & Company, 1974,pp.* 213-36.

Critical Essay #5

[In his discussion of A Midsummer Night's Dream, *Bonnard's principal thesis is that the worlds, fantastic and mundane, represented in the play, exist apart from each other, never meeting at any given point The inhabitants of the fairy world, the critic explains, are indeed ethereal in the sense that they lack true feelings and intelligence. But the dream world, Bonnard argues, although beyond the mortals' comprehension, nevertheless strongly influences the entire realm of ordinary life. Although separated by a veritable social chasm, the Athenian aristocrats and the common players are all vulnerable to Oberon's power by the very nature of their humanity. Yet this fairy kingdom is essentially a dream which appears whenever reason goes to sleep. Such illusions and dreams, Bonnard remarks, can be dangerous if they block our perception of reality, but there they nevertheless perfonn an important function in life, as the playwright eloquently demonstrates.]*

Shakespeare, as we all know, loved to bring together in the same playa variety of diverse and even incongruous elements. Of none of his plays is this truer than of *Midsummer-Night's Dream.* It would be difficult to imagine a more fantastic combination of heterogeneous elements drawn from all kinds of sources. Chaucer gave him Theseus and Hippolyta and suggested the festivities that marked their wedding, as well as the idea of connecting with the story of the Duke of Athens and his fair captive another story of young men who are rivals in love. Ovid provided him with Pyramus and Thisbe. Out of a blend of classical reminiscences, notions derived from folk-lore, a literary and dramatic tradition he evolved his own fairyworld. To those borrowed elements he freely added others out of his personal experience. But whatever he chose to use he altered to suit his purpose. His Theseus is wholly different from Chaucer's. The love story of his young Athenians is a parody of the love story of Palamon and Arcite. Quince's "Pyramus and Thisbe" is a ludicrous caricature of Ovid's touching narrative. Oberon and Titania, elves and fairies, Puck himself are essentially different from the King and Queen and inhabitants of any traditional fairy land. And neither had Bottom and his friends exact prototypes in actual life nor was there ever such court performance of a playas theirs. The poet's fancy holds undisputed sway over all his material. Whatever is, in the world of facts or fiction, is his to do what he likes with. But the originality of *Midsummer-Night:S Dream* is not merely due to the manner in which Shakespeare used what he freely borrowed; it also lies in the combination itself of all those elements into a comedy. For there can be no doubt that he alone was responsible for bringing together the wedding of the Duke of Athens and the Queen of the Amazons, the story of young men in love with the same girl, the staging and acting of a tragedy by humble mechanics, and a fairy world. And he can hardly have done so merely for the sake of making sure that every one in his audience would be sure to get something to his taste, or simply because it amused him to concoct a successful hotch-potch. He must have had some definite purpose. To find out what that purpose may have been may not add to our enjoyment of the play. It may help us to a fuller understanding of it. I propose to try and bring it to light by briefly discussing first each of four main elements and then the structure of the comedy.

Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his captive Hippolyta whom he marries are no longer young people. As Oberon reminds Titania, Theseus has had a long and varied experience as a lover before conquering the Queen of the Amazons. And the long war Hippolyta has sustained against Theseus compels us to imagine her past her youth. There is something matter of fact about their union. There is no conventional love-making between them, they never even speak of their love. They remind us of Petruchio and Katharina in the latter part of *The Taming of the Shrew.* Not only do they stand for good honest human love shorn of any romantic nonsense, but what does Theseus tell his bride?

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries.
[I. i. 16-17]

Could not Petruchio have addressed his wife in the same words? But one thing is certain: their deep happiness, the strong quiet joy they find in each other. Every word of Theseus bespeaks his satisfaction at having found a true mate at last, one that he feels sure will be a good wife to him, a helpful companion through life, one also that will know how to keep her place, as her silence proves when he discusses Hermia's marriage with Egeus and the young lovers. Throughout that scene the Duke acts the sovereign judge of course and Hippolyta knows she has no business to interfere, which is not only tactful but highly sensible of her. And how full of common sense they are when they come upon the lovers asleep in the wood, when they watch the play performed in their honour! In fact, whenever they are present, the air we breathe is light, invigorating;, and healthy: the atmosphere is clear, and in it all things appear in their true outlines and colours, in their due proportions and just relations: a wholly sane view of life seems to prevail. In their eyes, the fairy world does not exist. The King and Queen of the fairies may have come to Athens to bless their wedding: they are totally unaware of it. When they come to the wood with their hounds and huntsmen, their arrival is enough to restore sober reality to that scene of so many delusions, to chase all supernatural beings away. Neither Oberon, nor Titania nor the fairies, nor Puck can possibly meet them; they all vanish "into thin air"; and at the clear, shrill sound of the hunting-horns the lovers wake up, all their dreams at once dispelled. With Theseus and Hippolyta reality reasserts itself, and triumphs over a world from which reason had fled. But large-minded as he is, full of gentle forbearance for the limitations and absurdities of other people, the Duke is no enemy to imagination. He has no desire to suppress it or curb its activity, for he knows its value. He merely wishes it not to usurp the place of reality. For him there must be no confusion between its creations and the actualities among which we live. His outlook is as broad as can be and eminently reasonable. Hippolyta's is just as sensible, but narrower. Together they stand for experience, intelligent use of it good sense and reason.

In full contrast to them, Shakespeare has placed his fairies, with their kingdom in that vague, dream-like East from which legends and myths and impossible stories seem to be for ever coming, with their motion that takes no account of space and time, their love of the moon and her beams, their delight in the dusk and the twilight, that is in the season for dreams, whether one is awake or asleep. For the fairies are essentially the

bringers of dreams to mortals, as Mercutio tells Romeo. And. . . Shakespeare has given his fairies a character in harmony with their function. Just as in our dreams we lose all sense of responsibility, all moral impulse, so Oberon, Titania and all their subjects have no morality, no delicate feelings. Puck feels no compunction at the effects of his mis chievousness, no sympathy for the affliction of the lovers:

Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be! . . .
Then will two at once woo one;
That must needs be sport alone.
[III. ii. 14-19]

And again when Lysander and Demetrius, sword in hand, step aside to fight their quarrel out, and the comedy suddenly takes on a sinister aspect, Puck not only proclaims himself blameless but adds:

And so far am I glad it so did sort,
As this their jangling I esteem a sport.
[III. ii. 352-53]

Or take Titania: on awaking from her delusion, she feels no regret, no shame; and there is no scene of reconciliation with her husband: her resentment makes her forsake him, and they make it up in a dance: there is no trace of a real feeling in her. And just as our fairies know no moral impulse, so they never think. They are exquisite, but brainless creatures. The means they use to exert their influence on men are strictly material: changing the lovers' eyes, turning Bottom into an ass-headed monster, counterfeiting voices. Where they reign sense impressions, uncontrolled by reason or common sense, develop unchecked and fancy is allowed free play. No wonder that their life should be all given up to the pleasures of the senses. And because their senses must be for ever delighted, their desire is for all that is most choice, finest and pleasantest; singing and dancing best expresses their unchanging mood of thoughtless happiness. Were it not for that sense of beauty, they would form but an ugly little world, what with their heartlessness, their moral insensitiveness, their thorough materialism, their lack of brains. But their instinctive love of whatever pleases their delicate senses, their natural association with flowers and butterflies, nightingales and glow-worms, their hostility towards all repulsive creatures, spiders and bats, snakes and black-beetles, redeem them in our eyes and lend them a power of enchantment from which there is no escape. Still the atmosphere in which they live and move is, to men in their senses disquieting, even oppressive. All the laws, moral and material, that govern the world of reality, have no existence in the dream-world of the fairies. In it therefore we no longer know where we are, we have lost our bearings, our sense of being in harmony with our eyes and lend them a power of enchantment from which there is no seem to hover on the brink of lunacy, we feel that at any moment some irresistible delusion, some overpowering image may seize hold on us. Helpless in the grip of lawless fancy, we feel driven here and there. . . until Theseus and Hippolyta, models of human dignity, arrive unexpectedly and, by their mere presence, deliver us of the "nothings" that were tormenting us, and we can exclaim with Demetrius

These things seem small and undistinguishable
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.
[IV. i. 187-88]

Dreams, says Mercutio, are the children of an idle brain,

Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air
And more inconstant than the wind
[Romeo and Juliet, I. iv. 97-100]

The world of Theseus and Hippolyta and the world of Oberon and Titania are exclusive of each other. At no point do they really meet. But the two pairs of lovers and the simple-minded artisans waver between them and fall under the influence now of the one and now of the other. Sound sense and the delusions born of *vain fantasy* struggle for the possession of their souls, and in this they are alike.

But in every other respect how far apart the lovers and the *hard-handed men,* Bottom and his companions, appear to be. The lovers belong to the upper ranks of Athenian society; Hermia's father, Egeus, is admitted to the ducal presence whenever he likes, and addresses Theseus almost like an equal: the young man whom he wishes his daughter to marry is one of those young men whose doings cannot leave the sovereign indifferent; the Duke who had heard of Demetrius' breach offaith with Helena had meant to speak to him about it: and no one thinks of disputing Lysander's claim to be *as well derived, as well possessed* [I. 1. 99-100] as his rival: they are courtiers all. After delivering his sentence on Hermia. Theseus bids Egeus and Demetrius come along with him. *I must employ you in some business.* . . *and confer with you* [I. i. 124-25]. No wonder therefore that Egeus should be in attendance on the Duke when, on the morning of his wedding-day, he goes hunting with his bride, that the two couples, at Theseus' order, should be married in the same temple and at the same time as he and Hippolyta. Peter Quince and his friends stand at the other extremity of the social scale. Weaver, bellows-mender, tailor, tinker, theirs is the humblest class of respectable citizens. Between them and the court circles there is a gulf. Listen to Snug the joiner rushing in to tell the others that the Duke is coming from the temple: *Masters,* he exclaims, *the Duke is coming from the temple, and there is two or three lords and ladies more married* [IV. ii. 15-16]. His excitement is that of one whose only source of information is public rumour. And when they hear their play has been chosen and they must perform it before the Court, they tell one another, in a highly perturbed state of mind in which dismay mixes with elation, not to forget to put on clean linen, and Bottom adds: *And, most dear actors, eat no onions, nor garlic,* for *we are to utter sweet breath* [IV. ii. 42-3]. Clearly garlic and onions are articles of daily consumption with them, and clean linen an unusual experience. This contrast between the lovers and the artisans as regards their social status is carried out in their speech. Lysander and Demetrius, Hermia and Helena. are always made to use verse and even rhymed verse-they use blank verse when their feelings are roused-; they are fond of conceits and quibbles, of delicate images, many of them exquisite poetry. Their language is the outcome of a refined education. Bottom, on the opposite, uses prose, in spite of his pretensions; for

he is fond of big words, of words smacking of books and learning; but he neither knows their true form nor exactly what they mean, and his ridiculous misuse of them is evidence of his illiteracy. And his companions naturally speak good simple English prose.

But however different they may be, our young aristocratic lovers and our poor mechanics all suffer from delusions. Imagination or fantasy makes fools of them all. They all enter the dream-world of the wood where the fairies have them at their mercy. But it is not by mere chance that they fall under their baneful influence. They are partly responsible for their misfortunes. For what is our poor uneducated artisans' ambition to act a play, and act it in the presence of the Duke, but clear evidence that, for the time being, they have lost their common sense? What is Bottom making of him self if not an ass when he confidently proposes to take all the main parts in the tragedy? And as to the lovers, is not love and fancy one and the same thing in their eyes?

What the brief examination of the four main elements of which our comedy is composed is perhaps enough to suggest, namely that the poet did not bring them together without some other purpose than merely to please his audience, an analysis of the structure of the play may bring out more plainly. As its title implies, *Midsummer-Nights Dream* is a dream, such a dream as one might dream on the very night when, according to popular superstition, every one was more or less threatened with lunacy. But it is not altogether a dream.

It neither begins nor ends as such. It begins in a world in which people are not only wide awake, but quite normal and it ends in the same matter-of-fact atmosphere. There is a definite entrance into the dream-world, and a no less definite coming out of it. Before we enter it, we are in the everyday world of realities to which the whole of the first act belongs. Still there already one is aware of a deviation from what might be called the straight line of common sense. So long as they are in the presence of Theseus and Hippolyta, how clear-headed, singleminded and sensible Hermia is, how reasonable Lysander, protesting of their right to get married against Egeus' wish. Has not their attitude convinced the Duke that theirs is the kind oflove that should not be opposed? What is the "private schooling" he says he has for both Egeus and Demetrius if not some remonstrance fly which he means to persuade them to give up their foolish opposition? Does he not, by ordering them to come away with him, leave the lovers together free to plan their escape? But as soon as Hermia and Lysander find themselves alone, imagination reasserts its power over them and they prettily expatiate on the misfortunes that are bound to cross the course of true love, and decide to elope. Our grip on the actual seems to get loose. And this impression is deepened when suddenly Helena appears, complaining of her lover's faithlessness; she it is that, in some of the most significant lines of the play, identifies love with imagination, the power to turn things into what they are not, the power that deprives one of all judgment:

Things base and vile holding no quantity Love can transpose to form and dignity. Love looks not with the eyes. but with the
mind:
And therefore is winged Cupid painted

blind.
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgment
taste...
[I. i. 232-36]

In the next scene, in Quince's little house where his friends have all met to receive their parts, we are still in wholly real surroundings, most realistically suggested. But how strongly does fantasy sway our amateur players! Of their ability to act as well as the best professionals they have not the slightest doubt. Bottom in particular is already living in a world of dreams and delusions. So that, when the end of the first act is reached, we are ready to leave the world we know and enter another. And that other world is at once ushered in by the meeting and the dialogue of Puck and a Fairy. From this moment and throughout the long night that follows we remain in that strange unreal world where everything is different from what we are used to. We are in a wood, the wood that Lysander and Hermia were to cross on their way to the old dowager aunt's house, the wood that the Athenian artisans had chosen as a quiet convenient place for their rehearsal, a real wood therefore, not far from Athens and the palace of the most reasonable of sovereigns-but the Fairies have taken possession of it and changed it into a haunted wood.

Time within it is no longer what it is outside it: a few hours of a single night is all that lovers and mechanics seem to be there; but for them, so long as they are the victims of delusions, time indeed has stopped and when sanity is restored to them, we find that for Theseus and Hippolyta four days have elapsed. Just as the physical law of time is suspended in this dream-world, so has it nothing to do with measurable space: the wood has become illimitable; for the poor mortals that enter it, there is no coming out; they wander in it endlessly and never find an issue; they roam or rush hither and thither in it, only to lie down in the end, unutter ably weary, and lose all consciousness in sleep. For the 2nd Act, the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th, that place outside time and space is the sole scene of the action, and whatever happens in that central part of the play can only be understood in reference to its illusory character. When Demetrius, pursued by Helena, mad, as he himself says, because he has long and vainly sought for Hermia and Lysander, *wood within this wood* [II. 1. 192],-is not this quibble more than a mere pun?-appears at last, Oberon is present though invisible to them, and we cannot but connect his presence with their utterly unreasonable behaviour. Likewise, in the next scene, Lysander and Hermia seem to labour under some baneful influence: they have lost their way and rest they must. On awaking from his sleep, his eyes anointed by Puck with the juice of *Love-in idleness* [II. 1. 168], Lysander sees Helena and at once falls in love with her, forgetting Hermia. And like many a victim of delusion, he is fully persuaded that he is acting most reasonably:

The will of man is by his reason swayed
And reason says you are the worthier
maid.. .
Reason becomes the marshal to my will,
And leads me to your eyes. . .
[II. if. 115-21]

When it is the turn of the small band of Athenian artisans to come under the spell of the enchanted wood, they bring with them at first a breath of fresh air from the normal world. Their homely manners, their naive discussion of the problems of staging they must solve seem to dispel the distracting atmosphere in which Hermia has just dreamt her fearful dream and woke up to find it true. For a while they do not attract the fairies' attention. The rehearsal begins. . . and Bottom undergoes his monstrification. The dream-world, in the person of Puck, has suddenly reasserted itself. Frightened out of their wits, the simple-minded artisans scatter in all directions, while Bottom, alone unconscious of the accident which has turned him into an ass, wonders at their flight. He is the chief victim of Puck. And rightly so. For what is he when he advises Quince to explain in a prologue that they *will do no harm with their swords,* and that *Pyramus is not killed indeed* [III. 1. 18-19]. when he shows how easily Snug may prevent the lion he is to impersonate from frightening the ladies? What is Bottom the stage-manager who does his best to destroy all illusion, but an ass? For if it be foolish to be, like Lysander and Demetrius, the slaves of mere images, it is no less foolish to reduce all life to a hard and narrow common sense. But ass-headed Bottom serves another purpose, too. He is used to emphasize the idea of the power of love to lead one astray by making things seem what they are not. that idea that Helena had expressed earlier in the play. Here it is the Queen of the Fairies herself, the mother of illusions, who is made to serve as an illustration of her own powers to seduce mortals: Titania, with her instinctive preference for whatever is most refined, most delicate, in love with the portly weaver, a rude unwashed fellow, the very antithesis of refinement and delicacy!

And now what with Lysander pursuing Helena, Demetrius suddenly returning to his former love, Hermia doubly forsaken, Bottom transformed, Titania doting upon him, distraction reigns supreme in the haunted wood. How far such distraction can go is shown in the great scene of the 3rd Act, with the human passions in it rising to their climax in the deadly quarrel between the two young men, when the comedy assumes for a moment, as I said, almost a tragical aspect. But for a brief moment only, for Puck parts them, and sleep overcomes all the actors in that comedy of errors caused by the dotage of imaginary love. And in that sleep sense will De restored to them. The effect of *Love-in idleness* will be corrected by anointing their eyes *with Dian's bud,* love born of idle fancy replaced by love born of the heart, real enduring affection. With Oberon and Titania reconciled, the long night in the haunted wood comes to an end. The twittering of the morning lark is heard and in the growing light all the Fairies trip away in sober silence. At the sound of hunting-horns, Theseus and Hippolyta arrive and with them the world is fully restored to sanity. The lovers awake and their long errors appear but as idle dreams to them, and they are soon able to appreciate the full absurdity of the fate of Pyramus and Thisbe.

In the first Act, as we have seen, if owing to the Duke and his bride the outlook is generally healthy, normal and sensible, Lysander and Hermia, despite the genuineness of the love that unites them, still preserve romantic notions ultimately derived from the medieval idealisation of love, Demetrius suffers from a worse delusion and the artisans really live already in the dream-world of those who, unaware of their limitations, are guilty of presumptuousness and are likely to make fools of themselves. In the last Act, with Demetrius cured of his sickness-the word is his-and married to Helena, with

Lysander and Hermia man and wife, all trace of romantic nonsense has disappeared from the relations of the lovers towards one another. They have become sensible creatures as Theseus and Hippolyta were from the first. Reality has triumphed over unreality, the world of facts over the world of dreams, the right sort of love that leads to its natural consummation in marriage over the delusions of youthful fancy, a clear and firm apprehension of the actualities among which we must live over the vagaries of uncontrolled imagination. But if sense thus celebrates its victory over nonsense, illusions, dreams, fancies of all kinds cannot be suppressed but will sprout again and proliferate on the slip; test provocation. Let *cool reason* go to sleep, ana there they are again. After our mortals have gone to bed, the Fairies reappear, and in the dark hall of the ducal palace dimly lighted by the glow of the *wasted brands* on the hearth, hold their revels. But they have not come without a definite purpose: they will bless the house and all its inmates. For if illusions and dreams and fancies can be harmful when they stand between man and reality, hindering him from seeing it, they are a blessing too, and Bottom the weaver would be a poor miserable creature if he could never leave his loom and believe himself a wonderful actor, and if they were not a blessing the poet would never have written *Midsummer-Night's Dream* to bring home to us his conviction that they should not be mistaken for reality, to weigh, as it were, the rival claims of imagination and sober vision and decide in favour of the latter while giving the former its due. (pp. 68-79)

George A. Bonnard, "Shakespeare's Purpose in Midsummer-Night's Dream, "in Shakespeare Jahrbuch, *Vol. 92, 1956, pp. 268-79.*

Critical Essay #6

[A Midsummer Night's Dream, according to Nicoll, clearly reflects the poet's serious preoccupation with dreams and reality. Shakespeare's view of the problem of being and appearance, this critic maintains, is far from superficial, since he does not approach it as a paradox to be overcome. "Appearance and reality interplay in [A Midsummer Night's Dream] like two themes in a symphony, rising and falling, changing shape, momentarily coalescing and then, once more separate, producing contrapuntal music. " But Shakespeare, Nicoll contendsJor all his delight in ambiguities, approaches the puzzling world of fantasy in a level-headed manner. Nicoll concludes that the poet's common sense, which is represented by Bottom, "embraces the imagination as well as the ordinary real."]

The lyrical sonnet-like verse of *Romeo and Juliet* becomes more happily allied to content and mood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* This, the first of Shakespeare's great comedies, presents itself to us as a kind of amalgam of much that had gone before. The lovers' changing affections give us the situation caused by Proteus' inconstancy [in *The Two Gentlemen if Verona]:* the maze of errors reminds us of the comedy of that name, and even the world of Titania is anticipated there in Dromio's

0 for my heads! I cross me for a sinner.
This is the fairy land. 0 spite of spites!
We talk with goblins, owls and sprites.
[The Comedy of Errors, II. ii. 188-90]

For the idea of the burlesque play-within-the-play Shakespeare turns to the masque of the worthies in *Love's Labour's Lost,* and perhaps even *Romeo and Juliet* inspires the choice of the Pyramus and Thisbe theme. It is all a tissue of earlier material, and all magnificently new spun. Within the framework provided by Theseus and Hippolyta are set the four lovers, the artisans and the fairies, all bound together by the theme of errors. Through the forest the lovers blunder their distracted way, the artisans not only rehearse a playlet of errors but themselves are carried into the maze. Oberon in his wisdom tries to set things right and only succeeds in making confusion worse confounded, while for Puck the creating of error is his spirit food.

Here Shakespeare first clearly introduces another of his potent preoccupations-the concept of dream and reality: and with it he first boldly sets forth the contrast between seeming and being. From both, much of the inner quality of his later dramas, both comic and tragic, was to arise; both were to be the very stuff of his double vision, of his common-sense view of life, of his identification with the force of Nature. Appearance and reality interplay in these dramas like two themes in a symphony, rising and falling, changing shape, momen tarily coalescing and then, once more separate, producing contrapuntal music. Nothing in this world of Shakespeare's is so simple as at first glance it may appear. Gently the moonlight falls on US, and we think of the moon beloved of lovers; yet for Shakespeare the gentle loving moon is not an. If we hear HippoIyta, dreaming of her marriage to Theseus, saying

And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven. shall behold the
night
Of our solemnities
[I.1. 9-11]
we listen also to Theseus "chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon' and to
Titania's
Therefore the moon. the governess of
floods,
Pale In her anger, washes all the air.
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
[II. i. 103-05]

Like the lovers themselves we can but guess and wonder:

Demetrius: These things seem small and
indistinguishable.
Like far-off mountains turned Into
clouds.
Hermia: Methinks I see these things with
parted eye,
When everything seems double. . . .
Demetrius: Are you sure
That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep we dream.
[IV. 1. 187-94]

It is almost as though Shakespeare were deliberately invoking in these words the mood with which he wishes to invest us as we listen to his play-and perhaps that is precisely what he is attempting. His epilogue at least is consciously designed.

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this. and all is mended
That you have but slumber'd here.
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idie theme
No more yielding but a dream.
[V. I. 423-28]

Yet the theme is not so idle. after all: looked at carefully it clearly shows the maturing Shakespeare at work. Various critics have pointed out that in Theseus we have. as it were, a level-headed commentator on the action, one who Is never likely to mistake a bush for a bear. Beyond this, however, we must certainly go. We havejustseen Oberon and Titania, and it is precisely these characters whosevery existence Theseus would deny; we have just seen young lyric love, uniting with Nature's force, tri umph over man-made law, and it is precisely lyric love that Theseus would reject. Besides Theseus there Is another level-headed character-Bottom: but Bottom has a fairy's kisses on his

lips. Shakespeare's level-headedness, his sublime common sense, cannot be restricted within the ring of Theseus' practicality: it embraces the imagination as well as the ordinary real. (pp. 104-06)

Allardyce Nicoll, "Man and Society, "in his Shakespeare, *Methuen* & Co. *Ltd..* 1952, *pp. 100-32.*

Critical Essay #7

[Richman discusses Shakespeare's effective introduction of wonder into A Midsummer Night's Dream *Language, the critic explains, is instrumental in creating wonderment, and the characters from the supernatural world identify themselves by their peculiar rhetorical devices and speech mannerisms. The obviously tragic element in the play, Richman observes, is the powerful, potentially devastating, rage underlying the conflict between Oberon and Titania, a dream world confrontation with possibly dire consequences for the denizens of ordinary reality. In Richman's opinion, no director captures the sense of wonder, power and tragic rage better than Peter Brook whose 1970 production of A Midsummer Night's Dream expanded the feeling of wonder-natural in the dream realm-so it could affect the mortals in the play and even the audience.]*

[The] introduction of wonder into comedy is not original with Shakespeare. Elements of the marvelous can be found as far back as Aristophanes, preeminently in *The Birds,* and indeed can be traced even further back to the origins of comedy in ritual. In the relatively recent past of his own country, Shakespeare can find works for the stage that combine the comic with the wondrous, namely the medieval miracle plays and moralities. His immediate forerunners in comedy, [John] Lyly, [George] Peele, [Robert] Greene, and many lesser writers, often mix elements of the supernatural into their comedies. Although none of them evokes the sort of wonder that Shakespeare evokes in *Twelfth Night,* it can be argued that Peele, in *The Old Wives' Tale,* and Greene, in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay,* are making serious attempts. (pp. 94-5)

[Shakespeare's] attempts to weave wonder into comedy reach their first complete success in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* The play is remarkable for many qualities, not the least of which is verse that gives full expression to the marvels the dramatist represents. The king and queen of fairyland astonish the spectators with their language as well as their power. Titania's attendants and even Puck are creatures of a different order from the contending sovereigns of fairyland, and the difference should be made clear in production. In Shakespeare's time Oberon was played by an adult actor, Titania by the star boy, and the other fairies by children of lesser abilities. In a 1978 [Royal Shakespeare Company] production the attendant fairies were puppets, and in Peter Brook's famous production, as well as in several others not so well known, all the fairies, including Oberon, became trapeze artists.

The manner in which the fairies' verse contrasts with the verse of their king and queen suggests differences of degree and kind. The fairies and Puck characteristically speak in tetrameter or pentameter couplets. They exult in and exalt the diminutive. Their verse is full of dewdrops, cowslips, longlegged spinners, and hedgehogs. The mischiefs in which Puck delights are typically farcical pranks tempting lusty horses, humiliating old ladies, or spoiling the beer. Oberon and Titania speak mostly in blank verse that grows ever more majestic. In describing and enacting their continuing quarrel, the king and queen make clear that their discord is reflected in all sublunary nature. Shakespeare is here varying a rhetorical device that he uses throughout his career. But Titania and Oberon are not mortals like Romeo or Richard II, who imagine all nature to be

participating in their grief and rage. Rather these are the very spirits of nature, the originals of natural turbulence. What they describe is not an imagined but an actual result of their anger.

To express this turbulence, the playwright gives Oberon and Titania verse that employs striking rhythmic and figurative resources. The ear encounters inverted iambs and spondees, which force strongly stressed syllables into direct align ment with each other. There is also frequent enjambment and a flexible use of the caesura, which occurs often in the middle of a foot and occasionally in the middle of an inverted foot. The rhythm of a line like "Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose" [II. i. 108] has a twofold effect: the juxtaposition of strongly stressed syllables forces the speaker to retard: accented syllables and the caesura, all occurring in surprising places, create an impression of emotional agitation. Moreover, the prosopopoeia [personification] and antonomasia [substitution of an epithet for a proper name] in these speeches invest the unseasonal prodigies with human passion and torment:

The human mortals want their winter
here; No night is now with hymn or carol blest;
Therefore the moon, the governess of
floods,
Pale in her anger washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter,
change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed
world,
By their increase, now knows not which is
which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.
[II, i. 101-17]

A key to Titania's speech can be found in a word near its end that Shakespeare typically charges with many meanings. The fairy queen speaks of "the mazed world," calling to mind her earlier reference to "the quaint mazes in the wanton green" [II. i. 99]. The world in its confusion has become literally and figuratively a maze, a labyrinth in which no right path can be found. But the word takes on also its second sense of "amazed," that is, astonished, struck with wonder by the alterations. The speech in performance will stand or fall on the actress's ability to convince the audience of her character's astonishment and shame that she and Oberon are damaging the natural world. To be sure, they are

engaged in a farcical love-brawl, but love that is capable of such effects is a great and terrible passion that evokes a Sidney an admiration. The rage and power of Oberon and Titania stir potentiality tragic responses. Peter Brook's recognition and manipulation of these responses may constitute his famous production's greatest achievements.

No Shakespearean comedy offers wider scope to the imagination of directors, designers, and actors, and in no Shakespearean comedy is it more necessary to observe Bruno Walter's admonition to se lect from among the limitless imaginative possibilities those essential to the playas a whole. Although many of the play's scenes require spectacular visual display and startling or hilarious stage business. the second-act quarrel between Oberon and Titania must guide the audience to focus on language and passion. The director's principal responsibility in this scene is to find actors who possess the talent to speak verse with beauty and power, Having found and worked with such actors. the director must insure that the scenery, lighting, and costumes aid the spectators' response without competing for their attention.

Peter Brook notes that certain *of* Shakespeare's scenes-most often the prose scenes-can be "enriched by our own invention. The scenes need added external details to assure them of their fullest life," But Brook warns that passages in verse require a different sort of treatment.

Shakespeare needs verse because he is trying to say more, to compact together more meaning. We are watchful. Behind each visible mark on paper lurks an invisible one that is hard to seize. Technically. we now need less abandon. more focus, less breadth, more intensity.

Surely no director has given the supernatural elements *in A Midsummer Night's Dream* a fuller and more astonishing life than Peter Brook, yet, true to his own dictum. Brook stilled his acrobatic fairies during Oberon's great speeches, and Alan Howard delivered those speeches unforgettably. I cannot now read or hear "I know a bank where the wild thY1I1.e blows" [II. i. 249] without recalling Howard's slow, deliberate cadences.

But Brook did not adhere to his own doctrine in staging Titania's speech. Sarah Kestelman was an intensely sensual Titania. Her crimson feather bed was the only object *of* color in the stark white brightly lit set. But she gave the impression that she was nothing mbre than a sexually indulged creature who was somehow responsible for creating the problem that the charming and authoritative Oberon had to solve. In an interview for the *New York Times.* Brook discussed the most extraordinary. demonic notion of Oberon having his queen fornicate with a physically repellent object, the ass. And why *does* Oberon *do* it? Not out of sadism, anger or revenge, but out *of* genuine love. It is as though in a modern sense a husband secured the largest truck driver for his wife to sleep with to smash her illusions about sex and to alleviate the difficulties in their marriage. This assessment *of* the couple's marital relations was reflected in Brook's staging *of* their quarrel. While Titania spoke, Oberon stroked her leg. His action commanded the audience's attention, draw ing it away from her words. To the spectators, she seemed to be merely talking about the weather while Oberon generated the scene's true erotic power. The sense of natural turbulence growing out of the fairies'

domestic discord was lost. More important, Sarah Kestelman's Titania was diminished into a creature of sensuality without power. The effect was astonishing, but it was astonishment different in kind and quality from the wonder that arises out of Titania's verse. Brook's production was ruled by its Oberon and its Puck, but Titania's scenes were less enriched by a sense of her magnitude than they could have been, Something of the wonder that Titania's words create remain with her throughout the play. Although she is bewitched into a ridiculous amour, she never fully loses her original stature. Funny as they are, there is a peculiar power in her scenes with Bottom. Much of this power is drawn from her speeches in the second act, and some of it accrues from the astonishing manner in which Oberon introduces the magic herb that will bring about her dotage. Like his consort, he employs striking rhythmic and figurative devices:

Thou rememb'rest
Since once I sat upon a promontoxy,
And heard a mermald on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious
breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song.
And certain stars shot madly from their
spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music.
[II. i. 148-54]

Oberon invests the herb with the power of the musfu he is describing, The playwright diverts attention from the fact that the fahy kinR: is actually playing a rather petty and cruel practical joke on his wife. The diversion by no means mitigates the laughter that the trick will bring about but it suggests that the device and its accompanying laughter contain elements *of* wonder. Although what happens to Titania is similar in kind to what happens to the quartet *of* human lovers, it is raised to a greater order *of* magnitude.

Even the human lovers, foolish, passionate, and ridiculous in their pain, are not untouched by wonder. When Theseus's huntsman wakes them after they have been released from their enchantments, they are still enraptured by the fading memory *of* the dream they have shared. "Methinks I see these things with parted eye. / When everything seems double" [IV. 1. 188-89], "And I have found Demetrius like ajewel, / Mine own. and not mine own" [IV. i 191-92], Lysander's line to Theseus suggests to directors and actors how all four lovers should speak and act in this scene: "My lord, I shall reply amazedly, / Half sleep, half waking" [IV. i. 146-47]. After the jangling couplets and farcical stage business *of* their protracted quarrel, the lovers' quiet scene of awakening possesses a startling beauty.

Even Bottom is moved to wonder after his fashion at his night's adventures. Twisting Biblical phrases about the wondrous works of God, he lists the particular incapacities of the various human senses and faculties to conceive or report his vision. The speech is funny, but if the actor plays it quietly and convinces the audience of the character's genuine amazement, wonder will mix with the laughter. Bottom realizes that his dream is good enough to be made into a ballad to grace the end of the tragedy that he and his

companions plan to perform at the duke's wedding. What better thing can come at the end of a tragedy than something that moves wonder?

All five of the humans whose lives have been touched by love-in-idleness sense that they have traveled to terrain that lies on the far side of reason. Theseus maps and then dismisses this terrain in his famous speech toward the play's end. But that speech takes on reverberations for the audience that go beyond his conscious intentions because the spectators have seen and dwelt for a time with the fairies, and he has not. Even in Brook's production, in which Theseus dreamed himself into Oberon, Alan Howard's Theseus gave the impression that his conscious mind was tendering a stringent warning to his half-conscious fantasies. The rich counterpoint between Theseus's skepticism and the spectators' memory of the magic can be strengthened in production if, while the actor is talking urbanely about lovers and madmen, his bearing and movement recall those of Oberon and the lighting subtly reminds the audience of the haunted grove.

Albertus Magnus asserts that wonder can be called forth in one who is in suspense as to a cause, the knowledge of which will make him know instead of wonder. It follows from this assertion that reason can dispel wonder. If reason finds out the cause of a seeming miracle, then reactions proper to a miracle are no longer either necessary or possible. As Guildenstem argues in Tom Stoppard's play *[Rosencrantz and GuildenstemAre Dead*]which owes more than its plot to Shakespearethe miraculous unicorn shrinks to a horse with an arrow in its forehead. Now Theseus is using his reason with just such an intent when he ascribes the lovers' wonder to their amorous fancies. But Hippolyta speaks for the audience's larger experience when she raises a caveat that Theseus never answers:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy
But howsoever strange and admirable.
[V. i. 23-7]

Her last word. . . makes clear that she partakes of the lovers' wonder. The playwright contrives his action and his verse so that the spectators share her response. (pp, 97-102)

David Richman. '1ntroduction: Wonder, .. *in his* Laughter, Pain, and Wonder: Shakespeare's Comedies and the

Audience in the Theater. *University of Delaware Press, 1990, pp. 89-120.*

Critical Essay #8

[The immense expanses created by Shakespeare's extraordinary poetic imagination, Van Doren affirms, are vast enough to house the fairy realms and the world Q/ ordinary reality, including all the peculiar manifestations Q/ either place. The critic then examines the dramatist's ability to describe the separate and often quite dissimilar regions of the play's universe by drawing on the rich resources of poetry. Particularly in the supernatural sphere. Shakespeare's descriptions reach a remarkable geographic precision and undeniable suggestiveness. Referring to the playwright's depiction Q/ both worlds, Van Doren further observes that the "poetry of the play is dominated by the words moon and water. "As a result of their enormous allusive potential, these images engender an entire network of interlocking symbois which greatly enrich the text. In Van Doren's opinion, this fundamental poetic symbolism affects the entire universe of the play. 'Moon," Van Doren concludes, "water, and wet flowers conspire to extend the world of A Midsummer Night's Dream' until it is as large as all imaginable life. That is why the play is both so natural and so mysterious]

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" shines like "Romeo and Juliet" in darkness, but shines merrily. Lysander, one of the two nonentities who are its heroes, complains at the beginning about the brevity of love's course, and sums up his complaint with a line which would not be out of place in "Romeo and Juliet":

So quick bright things come to confusion.
[I. I. 149]

This, however, is at the beginning. Bright things will come to clarity in a playful, sparkling night while fountains gush and spangled starbright betrays the presence in a wood near Athens of magic persons who can girdle the earth in forty minutes and bring any cure for human woe. Nor will the woe to be cured have any power to elicit our anxiety. The four lovers whose situation resembles so closely the situation created in "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" will come nowhere near the seriousness of that predicament; they will remain to the end four automatic creatures whose artificial and pretty fate it is to fall in and out of love like dolls, and like dolls they will go to sleep as soon as they are laid down. There will be no pretense that reason and love keep company, or that because they do not death lurks at the horizon. There is no death in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." and the smiling horizon is immeasurably remote.

Robin Goodfellow ends the extravaganza with an apology to the audience for the "weak and idle theme" (V. i 427J with which it has been entertained. And Theseus, in honor of whose marriage with Hippolyta the entire action is occurring, diSmisses most of it as a fairy toy, or such an airy nothing as some poet might give a local habitation and a name (V. i. 17J, But Robin is wrong about the theme, and Theseus does not describe the kind of poet Shakespeare is. For the world of this play is both veritable and large. It is not the tiny toy-shop that most such spectacles present, with quaint little people scampering on dry little errands, and with small music squeaking somewhere achiIdish accompaniment. There is room here for mortals no less than for fairies; both classes are

at home, both groups move freely in a wide world where indeed they seem sometimes to have exchanged functions with one another, For these fairies do not sleep on flowers. Only Hermia can remember lying upon faint primrose-beds [I. i 215J. and only Bottom in the action as we have it ever dozes on pressed posies [III. i. 162]. The fairies themselves-Puck, Titania. Oberon-are too busy for that, and too hardminded. The vocabulary of Puck is the most vernacular in the play; he talks of beans and crabs, dew-laps and ale, three-foot stools and sneezes [II. 1. 42-57]. And with the king and queen of fairy-land he has immense spaces to travel. The three of them are citizens of all the universe there is, and as we listen to them the farthest portions of this universe stretch out, distant and glittering, like facets on a gem of infinite size. There is a specific geography, and the heavens are cold and high.

Oberon. Thou remem_'rest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermald on a dol
phin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmo
nious breath
That the rode sea grew civil at
her song.
And certain stars shot madly
ftom their spheres,
To hear the sea-mald's music?
Robin. I remember.
Oberon. That very time I saw, but thou
couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon
and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd. A certain alm he
took
At a fair vestal throned by the
west,
And loos'd his love-shaft smartly ftom his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts:
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed on,
In maiden meditation. fancy-ftee.
Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell.
It fell upon a little western flower....
Fetch me that flower, the herb I shew'd thee once. . . .
Fetch me this herb; and be thou here again
Ere the leviathan can swim a league.
Robin. I'll put a girdle round about the earth
In forty minutes.
[II. i. 148-76]

The business maybe trivial, but the world is as big and as real as any world we know. The promontory long ago; the rude sea that grew-not smooth, not gentle. not anything pretty or poetical, but (the prosaic word is one of Shakespeare's best) civil: the mermaid that is also a sea-maid: the direction west; and the cold watery moon that rides so high above the earth-these are the sias of its bigness, and they are so clear that we still respect the prowess implied in Robin's speed, nor shall we fail to be impressed by the news that Oberon has just arrived from the farthest steep of India [II. i. 69].

Dr. [Samuel] Johnson and [William] Hazlitt copied [Joseph] Addison in saying that if there could be persons like these they would act like this. Their tribute was to the naturalness of Shakespeare's supemature [John] Dryden's tribute to its charm:

But Shakespeare's magic could not copied. Within that circle none durst walk but he has an identical source: wonder that such things can be at all, and be so genuine. The explanation is the size and the concreteness of Shakespeare's setting. And the key to the structure_of that setting is the watery moon to which Oberon so casually referred.

The poetry of the play is dominated by the words moon and water. Theseus and Hippolyta carve the moon in our memory with the strong, fresh strokes of their opening dialogue:

Theseus. Now. fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
Another moon; but, 0, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes She lingers my desires,
Like to a step-dame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man's revenue.
Hippolyta. Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon. like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.
[I. i. 1-11]

This is not the sensuous, softer orb of "Antony and Cleopatra." nor is it the sweet sleeping friend of Lorenzo and Jessica. It is brilliant andorisk. silverdistant, and an occasion for comedy in Theseus's worldly thought. Later on in the same scene he will call it cold and fruitless [1. 73], and Lysander will look forward to

Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth be
hold Her silver visage in the watery glass,
Decking with liquid pearl the bladed
grass.
[I. L 209-11]

Lysander has connected the image of the moon with the image of cool water on which it shines, and hereafter they will be inseparable. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is

drenched with dew when it is not saturated with rain. A film of water spreads over it, enhances and enlarges it miraculously. The fairy whom Robin hails as the second act opens wanders swifter than the moon's sphere through fire and flood. The moon, says Titania, is governess of floods, and in anger at Oberon's brawls has sucked up from the sea contagious fogs, made every river overflow, drowned the fields and rotted the green com:

The nine men's morris is fill'd up with
mud, And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.
[II. i. 98-100]

Here in the west there has been a deluge, and every object still drips moisture. But even in the east there are waves and seas. The little changeling boy whom Titania will not surrender to Oberon is the son of a votaress on the other side of the earth:

And in the spiced Indian air, by night.
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow
sands,
Marking the embarked traders on the
flood.
[II. 1. 124-27]

The jewels she promises Bottom will be fetched "from the deep" [III.i.161].And Oberon is addicted to

treading seaside groves
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed
beams,
Turns into yellow gold his salt green
streams.
[III. iL 391-93]

So by a kind of logic the mortals of the play continue to be washed with copious weeping. The roses in Hermia's cheeks fade fast "for want of rain" [I. 1. 130], but rain will come. Demetrius "hails" and "showers" oaths on Helena [I. i. 245], whose eyes are bathed with salt tears [IT. ii, 92-3]; and Hermia takes comfort in the tempest of her eyes [I. 1. 131].

When the moon weeps, says Titania to Bottom, "weeps every little flower" [Ill. i. 199]. The flowers of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are not the warm, sweet, dry ones of Perdita's garden. or even the daytime ones with which Fidele's brothers will strew her forest grave [in *The Wmter_ Tale].* They are the damp flowers that hide among ferns and drip with dew. A pearl is hung in every cowslip's ear [II. i. 15]; the little western flower which Puck is sent to fetch is rich with juice: and luscious woodbine canopies the

bank of wild thyme where Titania sleeps-not on but "in" musk-roses and eglantine, Moon, water, and wet flowers conspire to extend the world of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" until it is as large as all imaginable life. That is why the play is both so natural and so mysterious.

Nor do its regions fail to echo with an ample music. The mermaid on the promontory with her dulcet and harmonious breath sang distantly and long ago, but the world we walk in is filled with present sound.

Theseus. Go, one of you find out the forester,
For now our observation is perform'd
And since we have the vaward of the day,
My love shall hear the music of my hounds.
Uncouple in the western valley, let them go.
Dispatch, I say, and find the forester.
We will, fair quup to the mountain's top
And mark the musical confusion
Of hounds and echo in conjunction.
Hippolyta. I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
With hounds of Sparta. Never did 1 hear
Such gallant chiding; for, besides the groves,
The skies, the fountains, every region near
Seem'd all one mutual cry. I
never heard
So musical a discord, such
sweet thunder.
Theseus. My hounds are bred out of the
Spartan kind.
So flew'd, so sanded, and their
heads are hung
With ears that sweep away the
morning dew;
Crook-knee'd, and dew-lapp'd
like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit, but match'd
in mouth like bells.
Each under each. A cry more
tuneable
Was never holla'd to. nor
cheer'd with horn,
In Crete, in Sparta. nor in Thessaly.
Judge when you hear.
[IV. i. 103-27]

Had Shakespeare written nothing else than this he still might be the best of English poets. Most poetry which tries to be music also is less than poetry. This is absolute. The

melody which commences with such spirit in Theseus'!? fifth line has already reached the complexity of counterpoint in his eight and ninth: Hippolyta carries it to a like limit in the line with which she closes; and Theseus, taking it back from her, hugely increases its volume, first by reminding us that the hounds have form and muscle, and then by daring the grand dissonance, the mixed thunder, of bulls and bells. The passage sets a forest ringing, and supplies a play with the music it has deserved.

But Shakespeare is still more a poet because the passage is incidental to his creation. The creation with which he is now busy is not a passage, a single effect; it is a play, and though this one contribution has been mighty there are many others. And none of the others is mightier than bully Bottom's.

Bottom likes music too. "I have a reasonable _ood ear," he tells Titania. "Let's have the tongs and the bones" [IV. i. 28-9]. So does he take an interest in moonshine, if only among the pages of an almanac. "A calendar, a calendarl" he calls. "Find out moonshine, find out moonshine" [Ill. 1. 53-4]. When they find the moon, those Athenian mechanics of whom he is king, it has in it what the cold fairy moon cannot be conceived as having, the familiar man of folklore. Bottom and his fellows domesticate the moon, as they domesticate every other element of which Shakespeare has made poetry. And the final effect is parody. Bottom's amazed oration concerning his dream follows hard upon the lovers' discourse concerning dreams and delusions; but it is in prose, and the speaker is utterly literal when he pronounces that it Will be called Bottom's dream because it hath no bottom [IV. i. 216]. Nor is the story of Pyramus and Thisbe as the mechanics act it anything but a burlesque of "Romeo and Juliet."

0 night, which ever art when day is
not! .. . And thou, 0 wall, 0 sweet. 0 lovely wall.
That stand'st between her father's ground
and minel
Thou wall, 0 wall, 0 sweet and lovely wall.
IV. i. 171-76]

Shakespeare has come, even this early, to the farthest limit of comedy. The end of comedy is self parody, and its wisdom is self-understanding.

Never again will he work without a full comprehension of the thing he is working at; of the probability that other and contrary things are of equal importance: of the certainty that his being a poet who can do anything he wants to do is not the only thing to be, or the best possible thing: of the axiom that the whole is greater than the part-the part in his instance being one play among many thinkable plays, or one man, himself, among the multitude that populate a world for whose size and variety he with such _ant strides is reaching respect. Bully Bottom and his friends have lived three centuries to good purpose, but to no better purpose at any time than the one they first had-namely, in their sublime innocence, their earthbound, idiot openness and charity of soul, to bring it about that their creator should become not only the finest of poets but the one who makes the fewest claims for poetry. (pp. 76-83)

Mark Van Doren, A Midsummer Night's Dream," in his Shakespeare, *Henry Holt and Company, 1939, pp. 76-83.*

Critical Essay #9

[Frye traces the literary sources if Shakespeare's play, with particular emphasis on Classical-Greek and Roman-and early Elizabethan comedy. According to Frye, Shakespeare does not follow classical models closely, but relies instead on his English predecessors, especially in the treatment if supernatural elements. The critic then touches upon possible flattering references to Queen Elizabeth in A Midsummer Night's Dream, *explaining that the references are purely textual, and that none if the characters can be associated with the monarch. Frye also comments on the title of the play, observing that, as the medieval calendar had only three seasons, the eve if May Day, when the action of the comedy takes place, really is the middle of the summer, since that season starts in March. In his discussion of the fairy world, Frye identifies the poet's sources in Classical, Celtic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon folklore and mythology. The dream world in the forest, Frye suggests, "has affinities with what we call the unconscious or subconscious part of the mind.* .. *And only this part of our mind, Frye concludes, holds the key to this wonderful and mysterious play.]*

Elizabethan literature began as a provincial development of a Continent-centred literature, and it's full of Imitations and translations from French, Italian and Latin. But the dramatists practically had to rediscover drama, as soon as, early in Elizabeth's reign, theatres with regular performances of plays on a thrust stage began to evolve out of temporary constructions in dining halls and courtyards. There was some influence from Italian theatre, and some of the devices in *Twelfth Night* reminded one spectator, who kept a diary of Italian sources. There was also the influence of the half improvised *commedia dell'arte* [Italian comedy of the 16th to the 18th centuries Improvised from standardized situations and stock characters]. . . . Behind these Italian influences were the Classical plays from which the Italian ones partly derived. For tragedy there were not many precedents, apart from the Latin plays of Seneca. whose tragedies may not have been actually intended for the stage. Seneca is a powerful influence behind Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus.* and there are many traces of him elsewhere. In comedy, though, there were about two dozen Latin plays available. six by Terence, the rest by Plautus. These had been adapted from the Greek writers of what we call New Comedy, to distinguish it from the Old Comedy of Aristophanes, which was full of personal attacks and allusions to actual people and events. The best known of these Greek New Comedy writers was Menander, whose work. except for one complete play recently discovered, has come down to us only in fragments. Menander was a sententious, aphoristic writer. and one of his aphorisms ("evil communications corrupt good manners") was quoted by Paul in the New Testament. Terence carried on this sententious style, and we find some famous proverbs in him. such as "I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me." When we hear a line like "The course of true love never did run smooth" [I. I. 1341 in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* familiar to many people who don't know the play, we can see that the same tradition Is still going strong. And later on. when we hear Bottom mangling references to Paul's epistles, we may feel that we're going around in a circle.

New Comedy, in Plautus and Terence, usually sets up a situation that's the opposite of the one that the audience would recognize as the "right" one. Let's say a young man loves a young woman, and vice versa, but their love is blocked by parents who want sultors or brides with more money. That's the first part. The second part consists of the complications that follow, and in a third and last part the opening situation is turned inside out usually through some gimmick in the plot. such as the discovery that the heroine was kidnapped in infancy by pirates, or that she was exposed on a hillside and rescued by a shepherd, but that her social origin is qulte respectable enough for her to marry the hero. The typical characters in such a story are the young man *(adulescens).* a heavy father (sometimes called *senex iratus,* because he often goes into terrible rages when he's thwarted), and a "tricky slave" *(dolosus serous).* who helps out the young man with some clever scheme. If you look at the plays of Moliere, you'll see these characters over and over again, and the tricky servant Is still there in the Figaro operas of Rossini and Mozart. . . . Often the roles of young man and young woman are doubled: in a play of Plautus, adapted by Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors,* the young men are twin brothers. and Shakespeare adds a pair of twin servants.

In Shakespeare's comedies we often get two heroines as well: we have Rosalind and Celia in *As You Like It,* Hero and Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing,* Olivia and Viola in *Twelfth Night,* Julia and Silvia in *The Two Gentlemen ofVerona,* Helena and Hermia in this play. It's a natural inference that there were two boys in Shakespeare's company who were particularly good at female roles. If so. one seems to have been noticeably taller than the other. In *As You Like It* we're not sure which was the taller one-the indications are contradictorybut here they're an almost comic-strip contrast, Helena being long and drizzly and Hermia short and spitty. Shakespeare's comedies are far more complex than the Roman ones, but the standard New Comedy structure usually forms part of their actions. To use Puck's line, the Jacks generally get their Jills in the end (or the Jills get their Jacks, which in fact happens more often). But he makes certain modifications in the standard plot, and makes them fairly consistently. He doesn't seem to like plots that turn on tricky-servant schemes. He does have smart or cheeky servants often enough, like Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice,* and they make the complacent soliloquies that are common in the role, but they seldom affect the action. Puck and Ariel [in *The Tempest]* come nearest, and we notice that neither is a human being and neither acts on his own. Then again, Shakespeare generally plays down the outwitting and baffling of age by youth: the kind of action suggested by the title of a play of [Thomas] Middleton's, *A Trick to Catch the Old-One,* is rare in Shakespeare. The most prominent example is the ganging up on Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* that lets his daughter Jessica marry Lorenzo. Even that leaves a rather sour taste in our mouths, and the sour taste is part of the play, not just part of our different feelings about stage Jews. In the late romances, especially *Pericles* and *The Winters Tale,* the main comic resolution concerns older people, who are united or reconciled after a long separation. Even in this play, while we start out with a standard New Comedy situation in which lovers are forbidden to marry but succeed in doing so all the same, it's the older people, Theseus and Hippolyta, who are at the centre of the action, and we could add to this the reconciling of Oberon and Titania. In the Roman plays there's a general uniformity of social rank: the characters are usually ordinary middle-class peo?,le with their servants. The set tings are also unlform and consistent: they're not "realistic," but

the action is normally urban, taking place on the street in front of the houses of the main characters, and there certainly isn't much of mystery, romance, fairies, magic or mythology (except for farcical treatments of it like Plautus's *Amphitryon),* . . . (We know that the highbrows in Shakespeare's time] thought that Classical precedents were models to be imitated, and that you weren't writing according to the proper rules if you introduced kings or princes or dukes into come dies, as Shakespeare is constantly doing, or if you introduced the incredible or mysterious, such as fairies or magic. Some of Shakespeare's younger contemporaries, notably Ben Jonson, keep more closely to Classical precedent, and Jonson tells us that he regularly follows nature, and that some other people like Shakespeare don't. Shakespeare never fails to introduce something mysterious or hard to believe into his comedies, and in doing so he's following the precedents set, not by the Classical writers, but by his immediate predecessors.

These predecessors included in particular three writers of comedy, [George] Peele, [Robert] Greene and [John] Lyly. Peele's *Old Wives' Tale* is full of themes from folk tales: in Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* the central character is a magician, and in his *James IV;* while there's not much about the Scottish king of that name, there's a chorus character called Oberon, the king of the fairies; in Lyly's *Endimion* the main story retells the Classical myth of Endymion, the youth beloved by the goddess of the moon. These are examples of the type of romance-comedy that Shakespeare followed. Shakespeare keeps the three-part structure of the Roman plays, but immensely expands the second part, and makes it a prolonged episode of confused identity. Sometimes the heroine disguises herself as a boy; sometimes the action moves into a charmed area, often a magic wood like the one in this play, where the ordinary laws of nature don't quite apply.

If we ask why this type of early Elizabethan comedy should have been the type Shakespeare used, there are many answers, but one relates to the audience. *A Midsummer Nights Dream* has the general appearance of a play designed for a special festive occasion, when the Queen herself might well be present. In such a play one would expect an oc casional flattering allusion to her, and it looks as though we have one when Oberon refers to an "imperial votaress" in a speech to Puck. The Queen was also normally very tolerant about the often bungling attempts to entertain her when she made her progressions through the country, and so the emphasis placed on Theseus's courtesy to the Quince company may also refer to her, even if he is male. But if there were an allusion to her, it would have to be nothing more than that.

Even today novelists have to put statements into their books that no real people are being alluded to, and in Shakespeare's day anything that even looked like such an allusion, beyond the conven tional compliments, could be dangerous. Three of Shakespeare's contemporaries did time in jail for putting into a playa couple of sentences that sounded like satire on the Scotsmen coming to England in the train of James I, and worse things, like cutting off ears and noses, could be threatened. I make this point because every so often some director or critic gets the notion that this play is really all about Queen Elizabeth, or that certain characters, such as Titania, refer to her. The conse quences to Shakespeare's dramatic career if the Queen had believed that

she was being publicly represented as having a love affair with a jackass are something we fortunately don't have to think about.

An upper-class audience is inclined to favour ro   mance and fantasy in its entertainment, because the idealizing element in such romance confirms its own image of itself. And whatever an upperclass audience likes is probably going to be what a middle-class audience will like too. If this play was adapted to, or commissioned for, a special court performance, it would be the kind of thing Theseus is looking for at the very beginning of the play, when he tells his master of revels, Philostrate, to draw up a list of possible entertainments. One gets an impression of sparseness about what Philostrate has collected, even if Theseus doesn't read the whole list: but however that may be, the Peter Quince play has something of the relation to the nuptials of Theseus that Shakespeare's play would have had to whatever occasion it was used for. We notice that the reason for some of the absurdities in the Quince play come from the actors' belief that court ladies are unimaginably fragile and delicate: they will swoon at the sight of Snug the joiner as a lion unless it is carefullY explained that he isn't really a lion. The court ladies belong to -the Quince players' fairyland; Shakespeare knew far more about court ladies than they did, but he also realized that court ladies and gentlemen had some affinity, as an audience, with fairy land.

This play retains the three parts of a normal comedy that I mentioned earlier: a first part in which an absurd, unpleasant or irrational situation is set up; a second part of confused identity and personal complications; a third part in which the plot gives a shake and twist and everything comes right in the end. In the opening of this play we meet an irrationallaw, of a type we often do meet at the beginning of a Shakespeare comedy: the law of Athens that decrees death or perpetual imprisonment in a convent for any young woman who marries with out her father's consent. Here the young woman is Hermia. who loves Lysander, and the law is invoked by her father, Egeus, who prefers Demetrius. Egeus is a senile old fool who clearly doesn't love his daughter, and is quite reconciled to seeing her executed or imprisoned. What he loves is his own possession of his daughter, which carries the right to bestow her on a man of his choice as a proxy for himself. He makes his priorities clear in a speech later in the play:

They would have stol'n away, they would,
Demetrius,
Thereby to have defeated you and me:
You of your wife, and me of my consent,
Of my consent that she should be your
wife.
[IV. i. 156-59]
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Nevertheless Theseus admits that the law is what Egeus says it is, and also emphatically says that the law must be enforced, and that he himself has no power to abrogate it. We meet this situation elsewhere in Shakespeare; at the beginning of *The Comedy of Errors,* with its law that in Ephesus all visitors from Syracuse are to be

beheaded, and in *The Merchant ofVenice,* with the law that upholds Shylock's bond. In all three cases the person in authority declares that he has no power to alter the law, and in all three cases he eventually does. As it turns out that Theseus is a fairly decent sort, we may like to rationalize this scene by assuming that he is probably going to talk privately with Egeus and Demetrius (as in fact he says he is) and work out a more humane solution. But he gives Hermia no loophole: he merely repeats the threats to her life and freedom. Then he adjourns the session:

Come, my Hippolyta-what cheer, my
love?
[I. i. 122]

which seems a clear indication that Hippolyta portrayed throughout the play-as a person of great common sense, doesn't like the set-up at all.

We realize that sooner or later Lysander and Hermia will get out from under this law and be united in spite of Egeus. Demetrius and Helena. who are the doubling figures, are in an unresolved situation: Helena loves Demetrius, but Demetrius has only, in the Victorian phrase, trifled with her affections. In the second part we're in the fairy wood at night, where identities become, as we think, hopelessly confused. At dawn Theseus and Hippolyta. accompanied by Egeus, enter the wood to hunt. By that time the Demetrius-Helena situation has cleared up, and because of that Theseus feels able to overrule Egeus and allow the two marriages to go ahead. At the beginning Lysander remarks to Hermia that the authority of Athenian law doesn't extend as far as the wood, but apparently it does; Theseus is there, in full charge, and it is in the wood that he makes the decision that heads the play toward its happy ending. At the same time the solidifying of the Demetrius-Helena relationship was the work of Oberon. We can hardly avoid the feeling not only that Theseus is overruling Egeus's will, but that his own will has been overruled too, by fairies of whom he knows nothing and in whose existence he doesn't believe.

If we look at the grouping of characters in each of the three parts, this feeling becomes still stronger. In the opening scene we have Theseus, Egeus, and an unwilling Hippolyta in the centre, symbolizing parental authority and the inflexibility oflaw, with three of the four young people standing before them. Before long we meet the fourth, Helena. In the second part the characters are grouped in different places within the wood, for the most part separated from one another. In one part of the wood are the lovers; in another are the processions of the quarrelling king and queen of the fairies; in still another Peter Quince and his company are rehearsing their play. Finally the remaining group, Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus, appear with the sunrise. In the first part no one doubts that Theseus is the supreme ruler over the court of Athens: in the second part no one doubts that Oberon is king of the fairies and directs what goes on in the magic wood.

In the third and final part the characters, no longer separated from one another, are very symmetrically arranged. Peter Quince and his company are in the most unlikely spot, in the middle, and the centre of attention: around them sit Theseus and Hippolytaand the four now reconciled lovers. The play ends: Theseus calls for a retreat to bed, and then

the fairies come in for the final blessing of the house, forming a circumference around all the others. They are there for the sake of Theseus and Hippolyta. but their presence suggests that Theseus is not as supremely the ruler. This own world as he seemed to be at first.

A Midswnmer Night's Dream seems to be one of the relatively few plays that Shakespeare made up himself, without much help from sources, Two sources he did use were tragic stories that are turned into farce here. One was the story of Pyramus and This be from Ovid, which the Quince company is attemptiIlg to tell, and which is used for more than just ttie Quince play. The other was Chaucer's *Knight's Tale,* from which Shakespeare evidently took the names of Theseus, Hippolyta and Philostrate, and which is a gorgeous but very sombre story of the fatal rivalry of two men over a woman. So far as this theme appears in the play, it is in the floundering of Lysander and Demetrius after first Hermia and then Helena. bemused with darkness and Puck's love drugs. [We know] of the relation of the original Pyramus and Thisbe story *toRomeo and Juliet,* and the theme of the *Knight's Tale* appears vestigially in that play too, in the fatal duel of Romeo and Paris. [We know] also of the role of the oxymoron as a figure of speech in *Romeo and Juliet,* the self-contradictory figure that's appropriate to a tragedy of love and creath. That too appears as farce in this play, when Theseus reads the announcement of the Quince play:

Merry and tragical? Tedious and brief?
That is hot ice, and wondrous strange
snow!
How shall we find the concord of this discord?
IV. L 58-60]

Why is this play called *A Midsummer Night's Dream?* Apparently the main action in the fairy wood takes place on the *eve* of May Day; at any rate, when Theseus and Hippolyta enter with the rising sun, they discover the four lovers, and Theseus says:

No doubt they rose up early to observe
The rite of May.
[IV. i. 132-33]

We call the time of the summer solstice. in the third week of June, "midsummer:' although in our calendars it's the beginning of summer. That's because originally there were only three seasons, summer, autumn and winter: summer then included spring and began in March. A thirteenthcentw:y song begins "sumer is i-cumen in," generally modernized, to keep the metre, as "summer is a-coming in," but it doesn't mean that: it means "spring is here:' The Christian calendar finally established the coloration of the birth of Christ at the winter solstice, and made a summer solstice date (June 24) the feast day of John the Baptist. This arrangement, according to the Fathers, symbolized John's remark in the Gospels on beholding Christ: "He must increase. but I must decrease:' Christmas Eve was a beneficent time, when evil spirits had no power; St. John's Eve was perhaps more ambiguous, and there was a common phrase, "midsummer madness," used by Olivia in *Twelfth Night,* a play named after the opposite

end of the year. Still, it was a time when spirits of nature, whether benevolent or malignant, might be supposed to be abroad. There were also two other haunted "eves," of the first of November and of the first of May. These take us back to a still earlier time, when animals were brought in from the pasture at the beginning of winter, with a slaughter of those that couldn't be kept to feed, and when they were let out again at the beginning of spring. The first of these survives in our Hallowe'en, but May Day eve is no longer thought of much as a spooky time, although in Germany, where it was called "Walpurgis night," the tradition that witches held an assembly on a mountain at that time lasted much longer, and comes into Goethe's *Faust* In Fact the scene with the witches is followed by something called "The Golden Wedding of Oberon and Titania." which has nothing to do with Shakespeare's play, but perhaps indicates a connection in Goethe's mind between it and the first of May,

In Shakespeare's time, as Theseus's remark indicates, the main emphasis on the first of May fell on a sunrise service greeting the day with songs. All the emphasis was on hope and cheerfulness. Shakespeare evidently doesn't want to force a specific date on us: it may be May Day eve, but all we can be sure of is that it's later than St. Valentine's Day in mid-February, the day when traditionally the birds start copulating, and we could have guessed that anyway. The general idea is that we have gone through the kind of night when spirits are powerful but not necessarily malevolent. Evil spirits, as we learn from the opening scene of *Hamlet,* are forced to disappear at dawn, and the fact that this is also true of the Ghost of Hamlet's father sows a terrible doubt in Hamlet's mind. Here we have Puck, or more accurately Robin Goodfellow *the* puck. Pucks were a category of spirits who were often sinister, and the Puck of this play is clearly mischievous. But we are expressly told by Oberon that the fairies of whom he's the king are "spirits of another sort" [III. ii. 388], not evil and not restricted to darkness.

So the title of the play simply emphasizes the difference between the two worlds of the action, the waking world of Theseus's court and the fairy world of Oberon. Let's go back to the three parts of the comic action: the opening situation hostile to true love, the middle part of dissolving identities, and the final resolution. The first part contains a threat of possible death to Hermia. Similar threats are found in other Shakespeare comedies: in *The Comedy of Errors* a death sentence hangs over a central character until nearly the end of the play. This comic structure fits inside a pattern of death, disappearance and return that's far wider in scope than theatrical comedy. We find it even in the central story of Christianity, with its Friday of death, Saturday of disappearance and Sunday of return. Scholars who have studied this pattern in religion, mythology and legend think it derives from observing the moon waning, then disappearing, then reappearing as a new moon.

At the opening Theseus and Hippolyta have agreed to hold their wedding at the next new moon, now four days off. They speak of four days, although the rhetorical structure runs in threes: Hippolyta is wooed, won and wed "With pomp, with triumph and with revelling" [I. i. 19]. (This reading depends also on a reasonable, if not certain, emendation: "new" for "now" in the tenth line.) Theseus compares his impatience to the comedy situation of a young man waiting for someone older to die and leave him money. The Quince company discover from an almanac that there will be moonshine on

the night that they will be performing, but apparently there is not enough, and so they introduce a character called Moonshine. His appearance touches off a very curious reprise of the opening dialogue. Hippolyta says "I am aweary of this moon: would he would change!" [V. 1. 251], and Theseus answers that he seems to be on the wane, "but yet, in courtesy. . . we must st_y the time" (V. i. 25455]. It's as though this ghastly play contains in miniature, and caricature, the themes of separation, postponement, and confusions of reality and fantasy that have organized the play surrounding it.

According to the indications in the text, the night in the wood should be a moonless night, but in fact there are so many references to the moon that it seems to be still there, even though obscured by clouds. It seems that this wood is a fairyland with its own laws of time and space, a world where Oberon has just blown in from India and where Puck can put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes. So it's not hard to accept such a world as an antipodal one, like the world of dreams itself, which, although we make it fit into our wakingtime schedules, still keeps to its own quite different rhythms. A curious image of Hermia's involving the moon has echoes of this; she's protesting that she will never believe Lysander unfaithful:

I'll believe as soon
This whole earth may be bored, and that
the moon
May through the centre creep, and so dis
please
Her brother's noontide with th'Antipodes.
[III. ii. 52-5]

A modem reader might think of the opening of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." The moon, in any case, seems to have a good deal to do with both worlds. In the opening scene Lysander speaks of Demetrius as "this spotted and inconstant man" [I. i. 110], using two common epithets for the moon, and in the last act Theseus speaks of "the lunatic, the lover and the poet" [V. 1. 7], where "lunatic" has its full Elizabethan force of "moonstruck."

The inhabitants of the wood-world are the creatures of legend and folk tale and mythology and abandoneabelief. Theseus regards them as projections of the human imagination, and as having a purely subjective existence. The trouble is that we don't know the extent of our own minds, or what's in that mental world that we half create and half perceive. . . The tiny fairies that wait on Bottom Mustardseed and Peaseblossom and the restcome from Celtic fairy lore, as does the Queen Mab of Mercutio's speech [in *Romeo and Juliet],* who also had tiny fairies in her train. Robin Goodfellow is more Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic. His propitiatory name, "Goodfellow," indicates that he could be dangerous, and his fairy friend says that one of his amusements is to "Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm" [II. i. 39]. A famous book a little later than Shakespeare, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy,* mentions fire spirits who mislead travellers with illusions, and says "We commonly call them pucks." The fairy world clearly would not do as a democracy: there has to be a king in charge like Oberon, who will see that Puck's rather primitive sense of humour doesn't get too far out of line.

The gods and other beings of Classical mythology belong in the same half-subjective, half autonomous world. I've spoken of the popularity of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for poets: this, in Ovid's opening words, is a collection of stories of "bodies changea. to new forms." Another famous Classical metamorphosis is the story of Apuleius about a man turned into an ass by enchantment, and of course this theme enters the present play when Bottom is, as Quince says, "translated." In Classical mythology one central figure was the goddess that Robert Graves, . . . calls the "white goddess" or the "triple will," This goddess had three forms: one in heaven, where she was the goddess of the moon and was called Phoebe or Cynthia or Luna; one on earth, where she was Diana, the virgin huntress of the forest, called Titania once in Ovid; and one below the earth, where she was the witchgoddess Hecate. Puck speaks of "Hecate's triple team" at the end of the play. References to Diana and Cynthia by the poets of the time usually involved some allusion to the virgin queen Elizabeth (they always ignored Hecate in such contexts). As I said, the Queen seems to be alluded to here, but in a way that kicks her upstairs, so to speak: she's on a level far above all the "lunatic" goings-on below. Titania in this play is not Diana: Diana and her moon are in Theseus's world, and stand for the sterility that awaits Hermia if she disobeys her father, when she will have to become Diana's nun, "Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" [I. 1. 73]. The wood of this play is erotic, not virginal: Puck is contemptuous of Lysander's lying so far away from Hermia, not realizing that this was just Hermia being maidenly. According to Oberon, Cupid was an inhabitant of this wood, and had shot his erotic arrow at the "imperial votaress," but it glanced off her and fell on a white flower, turning it red. The parabola taken by this arrow outlines the play's world, so to speak: the action takes place under this red and white arch. One common type of Classical myth deals with a "dying god," as he's called now, a male figure who is killed when still a youth, and whose blood stains a white flower and turns it red or purple. Shakespeare had written the story of one of these gods in his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis,* where he makes a good deal of the stained flower:

No flower was nigh, no grass, herb, leaf, or
weed,
But stole his blood and seem'd with him to
bleed.
[1055-56]

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is another such story: Pyramus's blood stains the mulberry and turns it red. In Ovid's account, when Pyramus stabs himself the blood spurts out in an arc on the flower. This may be where Shakespeare got the image that he puts to such very different use.

Early in the play we come upon Oberon and Titania quarrelling over the custody of a human boy. and we are told that because of their quarrel the weather has been unusually foul. The implication is that the fairies are spirits of the elements, and that nature and human life are related in many ways that are hidden from ordinary consciousness. But it seems clear that Titania does not have the authority that she thinks she has: Oberon puts her under the spell of having to fall in love with Bottom with

his ass's head, and rescues the boy for his own male entourage. There are other signs that Titania is a possessive and entangling spirit-she says to Bottom:

Out of this wood do not desire to go;
Thou shalt remain here. whether thou
wilt or no.
[III. i. 152-53]

The relationship of Oberon and Titania forms a counterpoint with that of Theseus and Hippolyta in the other world. It appears that Titania has been a kind of guardian spirit to Hippolyta and Oberon to Theseus. Theseus gives every sign of settling down into a solidly married man, now that he has subdued the most formidable woman in the world, the Queen of the Amazons. But his record before that was a very bad one, with rapes and desertions in it: even as late as T.S. Eliot we read about his "perjured sails." Oberon blames his waywardness on Titania's influence, and Titania's denial does not sound very convincing. Oberon's ascendancy over Titania, and Theseus's over Hippolyta, seem to symbolize some aspect of the emerging comic resolution.

Each world has a kind of music, or perhaps rather "harmony," that is characteristic of it. That of the fairy wood is represented by the song of the mermaid described by Oberon to Puck. This is a music that commands the elements of the "sublunary" world below the moon: it quiets the sea, but there is a hint of a lurking danger in it, a siren's magic call that draws some of the stars out of their proper spheres in heaven, as witches according to tradition can call down the moon. There is danger *ev* erywhere in that world for mortals who stay there too long and listen to too much of its music. When the sun rises and Theseus and Hippolyta enter the wood, they talk about the noise of hounds in this and other huntings. Hippolyta says;

never did I hear
Such gallant chiding; for, besides the
groves,
The Skies, the fountains, every region
near
Seem'd all one mutual cry; I never heard
So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.
[IV. i. 114-18]

It would not occur to us to describe a cry of hounds as a kind of symphony orchestra, but then we do not have the mystique of a Renaissance prince about hunting. Both forms of music fall far short of the supreme harmony of the spheres described in the fifth act of *The Merchant of Venice:* Oberon might know something about that, but not Puck, who can't see the "imperial votaress." Neither, probably, could Theseus.

So the wood-world has affinities with what we call the unconscious or subconscious part of the mind; a part below the reason's encounter with objective reality, and yet connected with the hidden creative powers of the mind. Left to Puck or even Titania, it's a world of illusion, random desires and shifting identities. With Oberon in charge, it

becomes the world in which those profound choices are made that decide the course of life, and also. . . the world from which inspiration comes to the poet. The lovers wake up still dazed with metamorphosis: as Demetrius says:

These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.
[IV. 1. 186-87]

But the comic crystallization has taken place, and for the fifth act we go back to Theseus's court to sort out the various things that have come out of the wood.

Theseus takes a very rational and common-sense view of the lovers' story, but he makes it clear that the world of the wood is the world of the poet as well as the lover and the lunatic. His very remarkable speech uses the words "apprehend" and "comprehend" each twice. In the ordinary world we apprehend with our senses and comprehend with our reason: what the poet apprehends are moods or emotions, like joy, and what he uses for comprehension is some story or character to account for the emotion:

Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy
[V. i. 18-20]

Theseus is here using the word "imagination" in its common Elizabethan meaning, which we express by the word "imaginary," something alleged to be that isn't. In spite of himself, though, the word is taking on the more positive sense of our "imaginative," the sense of the creative power de veloped centuries later by [William] Blake and [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge. So far as I can make out from the *OED [Oxford English Dictionary],* this more positive sense of the word in English practically begins here. Hippolyta is shrewder and less defensive than Theseus, and what she says takes us a great deal further:

But all the story of the night. told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so togeth
er,
More witnesseth than fancy's images.
And grows to something of great constan cy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.
[V. 1. 23-7]

Theseus doesn't believe their story, but Hippolyta sees that something has happened to them, whatever their story. The word "transfigured" means that there can be metamorphosis upward as well as downward, a creative transforming into a higher consciousness as well as the reduction from the conscious to the unconscious that we read about in Ovid. Besides, the story has a consistency to it that doesn't sound like the disjointed snatches of incoherent minds. If you want disjointing and incoherence, just listen to the play that's coming 1.J.p. And yet the Quince play is a triumph of sanity in its

way; it tells you that the roaring lion is only Snug the joiner, for example. It's practically a parody of Theseus's view of reality, with its "imagina tion" that takes a bush for a bear in the dark. There's a later exchange when Hippolyta complains that the play is silly, and Theseus says:

The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them
[V. i. 211-12]

Hippolyta retorts: "It must be your imagination, then, and not theirs," Here "imagination" has definitely swung over to meaning something positive and creative. What Hippolyta says implies that the audience has a creative role in every play; that's one reason why Puck, coming out for the Epilogue when the audience is supposed to applaud, repeats two of Theseus's words:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended.
[V. i. 423-24]

Theseus's imagination has "amended" the Quince play by accepting it, listening to it, and not making fun of the actors to their faces. Its merit as a play consists in dramatizing his own social position and improving what we'd now call his "image" as a gracious prince. In itself the play has no merit, except in being unintentionally funny. And if it has no merit, it has no authority. A play that did have authority, and depended on a poet's imagination as well, would raise the question that Theseus's remark seems to deny: the question of the difference between plays by Peter Quince and plays by William Shakespeare. Theseus would recognize the difference, of course, but in its social context, as an offering for his attention and applause, a Shakespeare play would be in the same position as the Quince play. That indicates how limited Theseus's world is, in the long run, a fact symbolized by his not knowing how much of his behaviour is guided by Oberon.

Which brings me to Bottom, the only mortal in the play who actually sees any of the fairies, One of the last things Bottom says in the play is rather puzzling: "the wall is down that parted their fathers [V. i. 351]. Apparently he means the wall separating the hostile families of Pyramus and Thisbe.

This wall seems to have attracted attention: after Snout the tinker, taking the part of Wall, leaves the stage, Theseus says, according to the Folio: "Now is the morall downe between the two neighbours" [ef. V. i. 207]. The New Arden editor reads "mural down," and other editors simply change to "wall down." The Quarto, just to be helpful, reads "moon used," Wall and Moonshine between them certainly confuse an already confused play. One wonders if the wall between the two worlds of Theseus and Oberon, the wall that Theseus is so sure is firmly in place, doesn't throw a shadow on these remarks.

Anyway, Bottom wakes up along with the lovers and makes one of the most extraordinary speeches in Shakespeare, which includes a very scrambled but still

recognizable echo from the New Testament, and finally says he will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of his dream, and "it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom" [IV. 1. 215-16], Like most *of* what Bottom says. this is absurd: like many absurdities in Shakespeare it makes a lot of sense. Bottom does not know that he is anticipating by three centuries a remark *of* Freud: "every dream has a point at which it is unfathomable; a link, as it were with the unknown." When we come to *King Lear* , we shall suspect that it takes a madman to see into the heart of tragedy and perhaps it takes a fool or clown, who habitually breathes the atmosphere of absurdity and paradox to see Into the heart of comedy. "Man," says Bottom. "is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream" [IV. 1. 206-07]. But it was Bottom the ass who had the dream. not Bottom the weaver, who is already forgetting it. He will never see his Titania again, nor even remember that she had once loved him, or doted on him, to use Friar Laurence's distinction [in *Romeo and Juliet].* But he has been closer to the centre of this wonderful and mysterious play than any other of its characters, and it no longer matters that Puck thinks him a fool or that Titania loathes his asinine face. (pp. 34-50)

Northrop Frye. .'A *Midsummer Night's Dream" in his* Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, *edited by Robert Sandier. Yale University Press, 1986. pp. 34-50.*

Critical Essay #10

[Yates discusses the origins of Shakespeare's fairy world. arguing that the "Elizabethan fairies are not. . . manifestations of folk or popular tradition. " According to this critic, the characters inhabiting the dream world of Shakespeare's play stem from either Arthurian legend or the Christian variant of Cabala. a Jewish interpretation of the Scriptures based on the mystical value of words. In her further discussion of A Midsummer Night's Dream *Yates focuses on the "imperial theme," explaining that the poet's references to an "imperial votaries" who resists Cupid's arrows should be viewed in the context of a cult of Queen Elizabeth I. According to Yates, Shakespeare pictures Elizabeth as a Vestal Virgin whose triumph over Cupid affirms her exalted status.]*

Shakespearean fairies are related to the Fairy Queen [in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen]* through their loyalty and through their fervent defence of chastity. . . . They are defenders of chastity. of a chaste queen and her pure knighthood. They are enjoined to perform a white magic to safeguard her and her orderof knighthood from evil Influences.

These Elizabethan fairies are not, I believe, manifestations of folk or popular tradition. Their origins are literary and religious, in Arthurian legend and in the white magic *of* Christian Cabala. The use *of* fairy imagery in the queen cult was begun in the Accession Day Tilts [jousts], and relates to the chi valric imagery of the Tilts. As taken up by Spenser in The *Faerie* Queene, the fairy imagery was Ar thurian and chivalric. and also an expression *of* pure white magic. a Christian Cabalist magic. The Shakespearean fairies emanate from a similar atmosphere; they glorify a pure knighthood serving the queen and her imperial reform, To read Shakespeare's fairy scenes without reference to the contemporary build-up of the Virgin Queen as the representative of pure religion is to miss their purpose as an affirmation 0f adherence to the Spenserian point of view, a very serious purpose disguised in fantasy. The supreme expression of the Shakespearean fairyland is *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* This play was first printed in 1600: it was probably written for a private performance at a wedding. perhaps in 1595 or thereabouts. This magical play about enchanted lovers is set in a world of night and moonlight, where fairies serve a fairy king and queen. Into the magic texture is woven a significant portrait of Queen Elizabeth I.

Oberon, the fairy king, describes how he once saw Cupid, all armed, flying between the cold moon and the earth:

A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal, throned by the West
And loos'd his love shaft smartly from his
bow.
As it should pierce a hundred thousand
hearts. But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft Quench'd in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon, And the imperial votaress passed on, In maiden meditation, fancy free.
[II. i. 157-64]

BOOKRAGS

Shakespeare's picture of Elizabeth as a Vestal Virgin, a chaste Moon who defeats the assaults of Cupid, an 'imperial votaress', is a brilliant summing up of the cult of Elizabeth as the representative of imperial reform. A well-known portrait of Elizabeth presents the imagery in visual form. Elizabeth holds a sieve, emblem of the chastity of a Vestal Virgin; behind her rises the column of empire: the globe beside her shows the British Isles surrounded by shipping, alluding to her enthronement 'in the West'. It is a portrait of the Virgin of imperial reform, of which Shakespeare gives a verbal picture in the lines just quoted, using the same imagery. (pp. 148-49)

[Both] the 'Sieve' portrait and Shakespeare's wordpicture in the *Dream* are Triumphs of Chastity. . . and the triumph refers both to purity in public life and in private life, to Elizabeth both in her public role as the representative of pure imperial reform, and in her private role as a chaste lady. It is exactly in such a role that Spenser presents Elizabeth, so he tells Raleigh in the letter to him published with *The Faerie Queene.* As Glorianashe is a most royal queen or empress, as Belphoebe she is a most chaste and beautiful lady. Shakespeare's wordpicture presents Gloriana-Belphoebe, the Virgin of pure Empire, enthroned by the West, the chaste lady who triumphs over Cupid. The appearance in the sky of the *Dream* of this Spenserian vision strikes the key-note of the magical-musical moonlight of the play. The moon is Cynthi_ the Virgin Queen, and the words 'the chaste beams of the watery moon' might also allude to Walter Raleigh's cult of her as Cynthi_ Puns on 'Walter', pronounced 'Water', were usual in referring to Raleigh. Spenser was following Ra leigh, so he says, in the 'Luna' book of *The Faerie Queene.* Hence the allusions of the Shakespearean lines would be both to Elizabeth as Spenser's Gloriana-Belphoebe, and also to Raleigh's cult of her as Cynthi_ adopted by Spenser. Thus the complex phenomenon which floats in the night sky of the *Dream* relates the play to the Spenserian dream-world, the Spenserian magical cult of the Imperial Virgin, with its undercurrent of Christian Cabal (pp. 149-50)

Frances A. Yates, "Shakespearean Fairies, Witches, Melancholy: King Lear and the Demons, " *in her* The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, 1979. *Reprint by Ark Paperbacks,*

1983,pp.147-57.

Critical Essay #11

[Priestley identifies Bottom as "the most substantial figure" in A Midsummer Night's Dream *, describing him as earthy, quick-witted, and emphasizing his ability to laugh at the inhabitants of the fairy world. Bottom's humor, Priestley asserts, is not fully conscious; rather, he symbolizes a peculiarly English variety of a man of the people: ignorant, uncouth, but a brilliantly perceptive and profound humorist, ever ready to castigate the foibles of his fellow human beings, or, for that matter, supernatural creatures. Bottom, the critic remarks, is also a kind of comical everyman, a character symbolizing the irrepressible comical genius of humankind Finally, he is also a poet, "wearing the head of an ass (as we all must do at such moments), the beloved of an exquisite immortal. . . coming to an hour's enchantment while the moon climbs a hand's breadth up the sky-and then, all 'stolen hence,' the dream done and the dream lift to wonder." Bottom's journey through the supernatural realm epitomizes "the destiny of poets, who are themselves also weavers. "For further commentary on Bottom's character, see the ex cerpts by Wolfgang Clemen, Jack A. Vaughn, Jan Kott, George A. Bonnard, Mark Van Doren, and Northrop Frye.]*

On any reasonable chronology of Shakespeare's plays, Bottom is the first of his great comic figures. Once we are through the door of Peter Quince's house, when all the company is assembled there, we are at last in the presence of one of the foolish Immortals; we come to celebrate a staggering feat of parturition, for here, newly created, is a droll as big as a hill. Before this, Shakespeare has shown us through a little gallery of amusing figures, but we have seen no one of the stature of "sweet bully Bottom" [IV. ii. 19]. In *The Comedy ofErrors,* the two Dromios and the rest are nothing but odd curves in a whimsical design. The comedians of *Loves Labours Lost* are well enough in their way; the picked and spruce Don Armado, Holofernes with his "golden cadence of poesy" *[Loves Labours Lost,* IV. ii. 122], Sir Nathaniel and Moth, all capping one another's fantastic phrases; but they are little more than quaint shadows that caper for an hour or so on the sunlit lawns of that park in Navarre and then flit out of mind when the sun goes down. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Speed and Launce (and the dog) are not so much individual creations as lively examples of an admired formula for comic relief, the Elizabethan equivalents of our crosstalk red-nosed gentry. Bottom is neither a curve nor a shadow nor a formula, but a gigantic individual creation, the first of the really great comic figures. (pp. 1-2)

Bottom is easily the most substantial figure in the piece. This is not saying a great deal, because *A Midsummer Nights Dream* has all the character of a dream: its action is ruled by caprice and moonlit madness; its personages appear to be under the spell of visions or to walk and talk in their sleep; its background is shadowy and shifting, sometimes breaking into absolute loveliness, purple and dark green and heavy with the night scent of flowers, but always something broken, inconsequent, suddenly glimpsed as the moon's radiance frees itself for a little space from cloud and foliage: and the whole play, with its frequent talk of visions, dreams, imagination, antique fables and fairy toys, glides past like some lovely hallucination, a masque of strange shadows and voices heard in the night. The characters are on three different levels. There are first the

immortals, who have nothing earthy in their composition and are hardly to be distinguished from the quivering leaves and the mist of hyacinths, tiny creatures spun out of cobwebs and moonshine. Then there are the wandering lovers, all poetry and imagination, driven hither and thither by their passionate moods. Lastly there is Bottom (and with him, of course, his companions), who is neither a flickering elf nor a bewildered passionate lover, but a man of this world, comfortably housed in flesh, a personage of some note among the artisans of Athens and, we have no doubt, in spite of certain unmistakable signs of temperament in him, a worthy dependable householder. We suspect that he has, somewhere in the background, a shrewish wife who spends her time alternately seeing through her husband and being taken in by him, for he is essentially one of those large, heavy-faced, somewhat vain and patronising men, not without either humour or imagination, who always induce in women alternating moods of irritation and adoration. Among his fellow artisans, Bottom is clearly the ladies' man, the gallant. He it is who shows himself sensitive to the delicacy of the sex in the matter of the killing and the lion, and we feel that his insistence upon a prologue, "a device to make all well" [Ill. 1. 16], is only the result of his delicacy and chivalry. Snout and Starveling, who hasten to agree with him, are simply a pair of whimpering poltroons, who have really no stomach for swords and killing and raging melodrama and are afraid of the consequences if they should startle the audience. But Bottom, we feel, has true sensibility and in his own company is the champion of the sex: he knows that it is a most dreadful thing to bring in the lion, that most fearful wild-fowl, among ladies, and his sketch of the prologue has in it the true note of artful entreaty: *"Ladies,* or, *Fair Ladies,-would wish you,-or, I would request you,-or, I would entreat you,-not to fear, not to tremble: my life* for *yours* [Ill. 1. 39-42]". Such a speech points to both knowledge of the sex and long practice, and given friendly circumstances, the speaker might be a very dangerous man. We should like to see Bottom making love among his own kind: the result would have startled some of his critics. As it is, we only see him, crowned with an ass's head, suddenly transformed into the paramour of the queen of the fairies, and even in a situation so unexpected, so remote from his previous experience, he acquits himself, as we shall see, very creditably. What would happen if one of the gentlemen who call friend Bottom "gross, stupid, and ignorant," let us say the average professor of English literature, suddenly found himself in the arms of a very beautiful and very amorous fairy, even if his head were not discoverable by immediate sight but only by long acquaintance to be that of an ass? He would probably acquit himself no better than would Snout or Starveling in similar circum stances, and Shakespeare took care to wave away his Snouts and Starvelings and called the one man to that strange destiny, that "most rare vision" [IV. 1. 205], who was worthy of the occasion. Bottom, as [William] Hazlitt said, is a character that has not had justice done him: he is "the most romantic of mechanics."

Against the background of the whole play, which is only so much gossamer and moonlight, the honest weaver appears anything but romantic a piece of humorous, bewildered flesh, gross, earthy. He is a trades-unionist among butterflies, a ratepayer in England. Seen thus, he is droll precisely because he is a most prosaic soul called to a most romantic destiny. But if we view him first among his own as sociates, we shall see that he is the only one of them who was fit to be "translated." Puck, who was responsible for the transformation, described him as "the shallowest thickskin of that

barren sort" [Ill. ii. 13], the biggest fool in a company of fools: but Puck was no judge of character. Bottom, though he may be the biggest fool (and a big fool is no common person), is really the least shallow and thickskinned of his group, in which he shows up as the romantic, the poetical, the imaginative man, who naturally takes command. We admit that he is conceited, but he is, in some measure, an artist. and artists are notoriously conceited. The company of such tailoring and bellows-mending souls would make any man of spirit conceited. Old Quince, who obviously owes his promotion to seniority and to nothing else, is nominally in charge of the revels, but the players have scarcely met together and Quince has scarcely had time to speak a word before it is clear that Bottom. and Bottom alone, is the leader. Quince ("Good Peter Quince" [I. ii. 8], as Bottom, with easy contempt and patronage, calls him) is nothing but a tool in the hands of the masterful weaver, who directs the whole pro ceedings, the calling of the roll of players, the description of the piece, the casting of the parts, and so forth, step by step. The other members of the company not having a glimmer of imagination, the artist amon_ them, the man of temperament, takes charge. And he alone shows any enthusiasm for the drama itself, for the others are only concerned with pleasing the Duke; if they do badly, if they should, for example, frighten the ladies, they may be hanged, whereas if they do well, they may receive a little pension. (pp. 2-6) When the players are first met together and the parts are being given out, it is not just Bottom's conceit that makes him want to play every part himself. Of all those present, he is the only one who shows any passion for the drama itself, the art of acting, the enthralling business of moving and thrilling an audience. The others are only concerned with getting through their several tasks in the easiest and safest manner, with one eye on the hangman and the other on the exchequer. But the creative artist is stirring in the soul of Bottom; his imagination is catching fire; so that no sooner is a part mentioned than he can see himself playing it, and playing it in such a manner as to lift the audience out of their seats. He is set down for the principal part, that of the lover, but no sooner has he accepted it, seeing himself condoling and moving storms ("That will ask some tears in the true performing ofit: if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms, I will condole in some measure" [I. ii. 25-8]), than he regrets that he cannot playa tyrant, for he is familiar with Ercles' vein and even shows the company how he would deal with it. Then when Thisbe is mentioned, he sees himself playing her too, speaking in a monstrous little voice. The lion is the next part of any importance, and though it consists of nothing but roaring, Bottom has no doubt that he could make a success of that too, by means of a roar that would do any man's heart good to hear it, or, failing that, if such a full-blooded performance should scare the ladies, a delicately modulated roar that would not shame either a suckling dove or a nightingale. Even when he is finally restricted to one part, that of Pyramus, he alone shows an eagerness to come to grips with the details of the part, particularly in the matter of beards, undertaking as he does "to discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfect yellow" [I. ii. 93-6]. All this shows the eagerness and the soaring imaginatidn of the artist, and if it shows too an unusual vanity, a confidence in one's ability to play any number of parts better than any one else could play them, a confidence so gigantic that it becomes ridiculous, it must be remembered that vanity and a soaring imagination are generally inseparable. It is clear that a man cannot play every part, cannot be lover, tyrant, lady, and lion at once;

but it is equally clear that every man of imagination and spirit ought to want to play every part. It is better to be vain, like Bottom, than to be dead in the spirit, like Snug or Starveling. If it is a weakness to desire to play lover, lady, and lion, it is a weakness of great men, of choice, fiery, and fantastic souls who cannot easily realise or submit to the limitations pressing about our puny mortality. The whole scene, with our friend, flushed and triumphant, the centre of it, is droll, of course, but we really find it droll because we are being allowed to survey it from a height and know that the whole matter is ridiculous and contemptible. These fellows, we can see, should never have left their benches to follow the Muses. But to the gods, the spectacle of Bottom, soaring and magnificent, trying to grasp every part, would be no more ridiculous than the spectacle of Wagner perspiring and gesticulating at Bayreuth: they are both artists, children of vanity and vision, and are both ridiculous and sublime. We can see how droll Bottom is throughout this scene because Shakespeare, having seated us among the gods, has invited us to remark the droll aspects of the situation; but to Flute and Starveling Bottom is a man to be admired and wondered at, and probably to Flute's eldest son (that promising young bellows-mender), to whom he has condescended on one or two occasions, our droll weaver is the greatest man in the world, a hero and an artist, in short, a Wagner. We have but to seat ourselves again among the gods to see that "the best in this kind are but shadows" [V. i. 211], at once droll, heroic, and pitiful, capering for a little space between darkness and darkness.

Once Bottom is metamorphosed, we no longer see him against the background of his fellow artisans but see him firmly set in the lovely moonlit world of the elves and fays, a world so delicate that honey bags stolen from the bees serve for sweetmeats and the wings of painted butterflies pass for fans, and here among such airy creatures, Bottom, of course, is first glimpsed as something monstrous, gross, earthy. It would be bad enough even if he were there in his own proper person, but he is wearing an ass's head and presents to us the figure of a kind of comic monster. Moreover, he is loved at first sight by the beautiful Titania, who, with the frankness of an immortal, does not scruple to tell him so as soon as her eyes, peering through enchantments, are open. A man may have the best wit and the best person of any handicraftsman in Athens and yet shrink from the wizardries of such a night, being compelled to wear the head of an ass, deserted by his companions, conjured into fairyland, bewilderingly promoted into the paramour of the fairy queen and made the master of such elvish and microscopic attendants as Peas-blossom and Cobweb and Moth. But Bottom, as we have said, rises to the occasion, ass's head and all; not only does he not shrink and turn tail, not only does he accept the situation, he contrives to carry it off with an air: he not only rises to the occasion, he improves it. Now that all the whimsies under the midsummer moon are let loose and wild imagination has life dancing to its tune, this is not the time for the Bottom we have already seen, the imaginative, temperamental man, to come forward and dominate the scene, or else all hold upon reality is lost: that former Bottom must be kept in check, left to wonder and perhaps to play over to himself the lover and the lion: this is the moment for that other, honest Nick Bottom the weaver, the plain man who is something of a humorist, good solid flesh among all such flimsies and whimsies, madness and moonshine. Does the newly awakened lovely creature immediately confess that she is enamoured of him, then he carries it off bravely, with a mingled touch of wit, philosophy, and masculine complacency: "Methinks, mistress, you should

have little reason for that: and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowa-days: the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends. Nay, I can gleek upon occasion" [III. i. 142-46]. And we can see the ass's head tilted towards the overhanging branches, as he gives a guffaw at his "gleeking" and takes a strutting turn or two before this astonishing new mistress.

But nothing takes him by surprise in this sudden advancement. His tone is humorous and condescending, that of a solid complacent male among feminine fripperies. When his strange little servitors are introduced to him, the Duke himself could not carry it offbetter: "I shall desire you of more ac quaintance, good Master Cobweb: if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you"-then turning regally to the next: "Your name, honest gentleman?" Good Master Mustard-seed is commiserated with because "that same cowardly, giantlike ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your House" [III. i. 182-93]: all are noticed and dispatched with the appropriate word: it is like a parody of an official reception. In the next scene, we discover him even more at his ease than before, lolling magnificently, embraced by his lady and surrounded by his devoted attendants, who are being given their various duties. "Monsieur Cobweb, good monsieur" -and indeed there was probably something very Gallic about this Cobweb-"get your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipp'd humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good monsieur, bring me the honey-bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, monsieur: and, good monsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not. I would be loth to have you overflown with a honey-bag, signior" [IV. 1. 10 16]. Bottom is clearly making himself at home in Elfland; he is beginning to display a certain fastidiousness, making delicate choice of a "red-hipp'd humble-bee on the ,top of a thistle." And if Puck won the first trick with the love philtre and the ass's head, we are not sure that Bottom is not now winning the second, for every time he addresses one of his attendants he is scoring off Elfland and is proving himself a very waggish ass indeed. Even his remarks on the subject of music ("I have a reasonable good ear in music: let us have the tongs and the bones" [IV. 1. 28-9]) and provender ("I could munch your good dry oats. Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay: good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow" [IV. i. 31-4]) have to our ears a certain consciously humorous smack, as if the speaker were not quite such an ass as he seems but were enjoying the situation in his own way, carrying the inimitable, if somewhat vulgar, manner of the p;reat Bottom, pride of handicraftsmen, even into the heart of Faerie.

If he shows no surprise, however, and almost contrives to carry off the situation in the grand manner, we must remember that he, like Titania is only dreaming beneath the moon-coloured honeysuckle and musk roses; the enamoured fairy and all her attendant sprites are to him only phantoms bright from the playbox of the mind, there to be huddled away when a sudden puff of wind or a falling leafbrings the little drama to an end: and so he acts as we all act in dreams, who may ourselves be "translated" nightly by Puck and sent on the wildest adventures in elfin woods for all we know to the contrary. When Bottom awakes, yawning and stiff in the long grass, his sense of wonder blossoms gi gantically, and the artist in him, he who would play the tyrant, the lover, the damsel, and the lion, leaps to life: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream,- past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream" [IV. i. 204-07]. So fiery and eager is that wonder and poetry in him

which all the long hours at Athenian looms have not been able to wither away, as he stands crying in ecstasy in the greenwood, that we cannot be surprised that his style, which he very rightly endeavours to heighten for the occasion, should break down under the stress of it: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" [IV. i. 211-14]. But no matter: the dramatic enthusiast in him now takes command: Peter Quince (whom we did not suspect of authorship) shall write a ballad of this dream, to be called Bottom's Dream, and it shall be sung, by a newly resurrected Pyramus, at the end of the coming play; and off he goes, his head humming with plans, back to the town to put heart into his lads. There he plays Pyramus as Pyramus was never played before: takes charge of the whole com pany, does not scruple to answer a frivolous remark of the Duke's, and finally speaks the last word we hear from the handicraftsmen. We learn nothing more of him, but perhaps when the lovers were turning to their beds and the fairies were dancing in the glimmering light, Bottom, masterful, triumphant, was at Peter Quince's with the rest, sitting over a jug or two and setting his fellow players agape with his tale of the rare vision. There was a poet somewhere in this droll weaver and so he came to a poet's destiny, finding himself wearing the head of an ass (as we all must do at such moments), the beloved of an exquisite immortal, the master of Cobwebs and Peas-blossoms, coming to an hour's enchantment while the moon climbs a hand's-breadth up the sky-and then, all "stolen hence," the dream done and the dreamer left to wonder. Such is the destiny of poets, who are themselves also weavers.

It is a critical commonplace that these Athenian clowns are very English, just as the setting that frames them is exquisitely English: and it follows very naturally that the greatest of them is the most English. There is indeed no more insular figure in all Shakespeare's wide gallery than Bottom. A superficial examination of him will reveal all those traits that unfriendly critics of England and Englishmen have remarked for centuries. Thus, he is ignorant, conceited, domineering: he takes himself and his ridiculous concerns seriously and shows no lightness of touch: knowing perhaps the least, he yet talks the most, of all his company: he cannot understand that his strutting figure is the drollest sight under the sky, never for one instant realises that he is nothing but an ignorant buffoon; the soulless vulgarity of his conduct among the fairies smells rank in the nostrils of men of taste and delicacy of mind; in short, he is indeed the "shallowest thick skin of that barren sort" [III. ii. 13], lout-in-chief of a company of louts. But something more than a superficial examination will, as we have partly seen, dispose of much of this criticism, and will lead to the discovery in Bottom of traits that our friendly critics have remarked in us and that we ourselves know to be there. Bottom is very English in this, that he is something of a puzzle and an apparent contradiction. We have already marked the poetry and the artist in him, and we have only to stare at him a little longer to be in doubt about certain characteristics we took for granted. Is he entirely our butt or is he for at least part of the time solemnly taking us in and secretly laughing at us? Which of us has not visited some rural tap-room and found there, wedged in a corner, a large, round-faced, wide-mouthed fellow, the local oracle; and, having listened to some of his pronouncements, have laughed in our sleeves at his ignorance, dogmatism, and conceit: and yet, after staying a little longer and staring at the creature's large, solemn face, a face perilously close to vacuity, have noticed in it certain momentary twinkles and creases that have suddenly left us a little dubi ous about our

hasty conclusions? And then it has dawned upon us that the fellow is, in his own way, which is not ours nor one to which we are accustomed, a humorist, and that somewhere behind that immobile and almost vacuous front, he has been enjoying us, laughing at us, just as we have been enjoying him and laughing at him. It is an experience that should make us pause before we pass judgment upon Bottom, who is the first cousin of all such queer characters, rich and ripe per sonages who are to be found. chiefly in hostelries but now and then carrying a bag of tools or flourishing a paint-brush, in almost every comer of this England, which is itself brimmed with puzzling contradictions, a strange mixture of the heavy butt and the conscious humorist. Bottom is worlds away from the fully conscious humour of a Falstaff, but we cannot have followed him from Peter Quince's house to the arms of Titania and seen him in Bank Holiday humour with his Cobwebs and Mustard-seeds, without noticing that he is something more than a rustic target. He is English, and he is conceited, ignorant, dogmatic, and asinine, but there stirs within him, as there does within his fellow workmen even now, a poet and humorist. waitinp; for the midsummer moon. And lastly, he is not ahead, he has not left us, for I saw him myself, some years ago, and he had the rank of corporal and was gloriously at ease in a tumbledown estaminet near Amiens [in *As You Like It],* and there he was playing the tyrant, the lover, and the lion all at once, and Sergeant Quince and Privates Snug and Starveling were there with him. They were paying for his beer and I suspect that they were waiting, though obviously waiting in vain, to hear him cry once more: "Enough; hold or cut bow-strings" [I. ii. 111]. (pp. 8-19)

J. B. Priestley, "Bully Bottom," in his The English Comic Characters, 1925. *Reprint by Dodd, Mead and Company, 1931, pp.1-19.*

Critical Essay #12

[Boas considers the various groups of lovers in A Midsummer Night's Dream *, arguing that Shakespeare's characterization of the couples is more whimsical than serious. The critic first examines Theseus and Hippolyta's relationship, maintaining that although the playwright illustrates Theseus as a brave soldier who wins Hippolyta with his sword, the Greek ruler ultimately displays a practicality that exhibits no grasp of aesthetic beauty. In addition, Boas notes that in contrast to the generally serene fortunes of Theseus and Hippolyta, the young lovers-Lysander, Hennia, Helena, and Demetrius-are "a troubled lot" due to their "purely human failings. " The similarity of the characters' shortcomings, the critic continues, reflects an ambiguous interchangeabilityfrom onefigure to the next that contributes to the confusion of the comic entanglement in the Athenian wood. According to Boas, another pair of lovers-Oberon and Titania-add a dimension of rivalry and jealousy to love and relationships in* A Midsummer Night's Dream *. The result of the fairy couples' quarreling, the critic condends, is Oberon's "masterpiece of revenge" when he magically transforms Bottom into an ass and makes him the object if Titania's affection. The critic also explores the "Pyramus and Thisbe" episode (Act V. scene ii, asserting that the play-within-the-play not only parodies love relationships in A Midsummer Night's Dream, but also the stage conventions of Shakespeare's day.]*

In its main plot *[A Midsummer Night's Dream]* is akin to *The Comedy of Errors,* for in both cases a humorous entanglement is created out of mistakes. Already, however, Shakespere shows his extraordinary skill in devising variations upon a given theme, for here the mistakes are those of a night and not of a day, and instead of being external to the mind are internal. . . . As in *The Comedy of Errors,* also, the scene is nominally laid amid classical surroundings, but the whole atmosphere of the play is essentially English and Elizabethan.

Thus Theseus, whose marriage with Hippolyta forms the setting of the story, is no Athenian 'duke,' but a great Tudor noble. He is a brave soldier, who has wooed his bride with his sword, and, strenuous even in his pleasures, he is up with the dawn on May-morning, and out in the woods, that his love may hear the music of his hounds, 'matched in mouth like bells' [IV. i. 123], as they are uncoupled for the hunt. He is a true Tudor lord also in his taste for the drama, as shown in his request for masques and dances wherewith to celebrate his marriage. He exhibits the gracious spirit common to all Shakespeare's leaders of men in choosing, against the advice of his Master of the Revels, the entertainment prepared by Bottom and his fellows:

I will hear that play
For never anything can be amiss
When simpleness and duty tender it;
IV. i. 81-3]

and though tickled by the absurdities of the performance, he checks more than once the petulant criticisms of Hippolyta. and assures the actors at the close, with a courteous *double-entendre,* that their play has been 'very notably discharged' (V. I. 360-61]. But it

has been urged that Theseus shows the limitations of nature which are found in Shakespere's men of action. Though dramatic performances serve to while away the time, even at their best they are to him 'but shadows,' and it is he who dismisses the tale of what the lovers have experienced in the wood as 'fairy toys,' and is thus led on to the famous declaration that

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
[V. i. 7-8]

Only the practical common-sense Theseus, it has been said, would think of comparing the poet or lover to the lunatic, and Shakespere, by putting such words into his mouth, shows by a side-stroke that the man of action fails to appreciate the ideal ist nature. But such an inference from the passage is hazardous: there is a sense in which Theseus' statement is true, for the artist and the lover do collide, like the madman, with what 'cool reason' chooses to term the realities of life. The eloquent ring of the words is scarcely suggestive of dramatic irony, while the description of the poet's pen as giving to 'airy nothing a local habitation and a name' IV. i. 16-17], applies with curious exactness to Shakespere's own method in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Contrasted with the serene fortunes of Theseus and Hippolyta is the troubled lot ofhumbler lovers, due, in its origin, to purely human failings. The fickle Demetrius has shifted his affections from Helena to Hermia, whose father Egeus favours the match, but Hermia is constant to Lysander, while Helena still 'dotes in idolatry' [I. i. 109] upon her inconstant wooer. The Athenian law as expounded by Theseus. . . enforces upon Hermia obedience to her father's wishes on pain of death or perpetual maidenhood. But Lysander sug:gests escape to a classical 'Gretna Green,' seven-leagues from the town, where the sharp Athenian law does not run, and fixes a trysting-place for the following night within the neighbouring wood. That Hermia should reveal the secret to Helena, and that she in her turn should put Demetrius on the fugitive's track, merely to 'have his sight thither and back again' [I. i. 251], is a transparently clumsy device for concentrating the four 10vers on a single spot, which betrays the hand of the inunature playwright. Within the wood the power of human mo tive is suspended for that of enchantment. and at a touch of Puck's magic herb, Lysander and Demetrius are 'translated,' and ready to cross swords for the love of the erewhile flouted Helena. Thus all things befall preposterously, and reason holds as little sway over action as in a dream, though it is surely overstrained to find. . . a definitelyallegorical significance in the comic entanglement, the more so that the dramatic execution is at this point somewhat crude. Lysander and Demetrius are little more than lay figures, and the only difference between Helena and Hermia is that the latter is shorter of stature, and has a vixenish temper, of which she gives a violent display in the unseemly quarrel scene. But at last, by Oberon's command Dian's bud undoes on the eyes of Lysander the work of Cupid's flower, and the close of the period of enchantment is broadly and effectively marked by the inrush at dawn of exuberant, palpable life in the shape of Theseus' hunting party, whose horns and 'halloes' reawaken the sleepers to everyday realities. But, as in *The Errors,* out of the confusions of the moment is born an abiding result. Demetrius is henceforward true

to Helena: the caprice of magic has redressed the caprice of passion, and the lovers return to Athens 'with league whose date till death shall never end' [Ill. ii. 373].

Deep reflective power and subtle insight into character came slowly to Shakespeare, as to lesser men, but fancy has its flowering season in youth, and never has it shimmered with a more delicate and iridescent bloom than the fairy-world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Through woodland vistas, where the Maymoon struggles with the dusk, elfland opens into sight, ethereal, impalpable. spun out of gossamer and dew, and yet strangely consistent and credible. For this kingdom of shadows reproduces in miniature the structure of human society. Here, as on earth, there are royal rulers, with courts, ministers, warriors, jesters, and. in fine, all the pomp and circumstance of mortal sovereignty. And what plausibility there is in every detail, worked out with an unfaltering instinct for just and delicate gradation! In this realm of the microscopic an acorn-cup is a place of shelter, and a cast snake-skin, or the leathern wing of a rear-mouse, an ample coat: the night tapers are honey-bags of humble-bees lit at the glow-worm's eyes, and the fairy chorus, to whom the third part of a moment is a measurable portion of time, charm from the side of their sleeping mistress such terrible monsters as blindworms, spiders, and beetles black.

Over these tiny creatures morality has no sway: theirs is a delicious sense life, a revel of epicurean joy in nature's sweets and beauties. To dance 'by paved fountain or by rushy brook' III. 1. 84]. to rest on banks canopied with flowers, to feed on apricots and grapes, and mulberries, to tread the groves till the 'eastern gate all firey red' [Ill. ii, 3911 turns the green sea into gold-such are the delights which make up their round of existence. In Puck, 'the lob of spirits,' this merry temper takes a more roguish form, a gusto in the topsy-turvy. in the things that befall preposterously, and an elfin glee in gulling mortals according to their folly. With his zest for knavish pranks. for mocking practical jokes upon 'gossips' and 'wisest aunts,' this merry wanderer of the night is indeed a spirit different in sort from the ethereal dream fairies, and it is natural that Oberon's vision of Cupid all armed should be hid from his gross sight. Moonlight and woodland have for him no spell ofbeauty. but they form a congenial sphere in which to play the game of mystification and cross-purposes. Thus his very unlikeness to the other shadows marks him out as the ally and henchman of Oberon in his quarrel with the fairy queen and her court. For the love troubles of mortals have their miniature counterpart in the jealousy of the elfin royal pair, springing in the main, as befits their nature, from an aesthetic rivalry for the possession of a lovely Indian boy, though by an ingenious touch, which unites the natural and supernatural realms, a further incitement is the undue favour with which Oberon regards the 'bouncing Amazon' Hippolyta. balanced by Titania's attachment to Theseus. And as the human wooers are beguiled by the power of Cupid's magic herb, the fairy queen is in like manner victimized. But with correct instinct Shakespere makes her deception far the more extravagant. Fairyland is the world of perennial surprise, and it must be a glaringly fantastic incongruity that arrests attention there. But the most exciting canons of improbability are satisfied when Titania, whose very being is spun out of light and air and dew, fastens her affections upon the unpurged 'mortal grossness' of Bottom, upon humanity with its asinine attributes focussed and gathered to a head. To attack his queen in her essential nature, to make her whose only food is beauty lavish her endearments upon a misshapen monster, is a masterpiece of revenge on Oberon's

part. And so persuasive is the art 01 the dramatist that our pity is challenged for Titania's infatuation, with its pathetically reckless squandering of pearls before swine, and thus we hail with joy her release from her dotage, her reconciliation with Oberon, and the end of jars in fairyland, celebrated with elfin ritual of dance and song.

In designedly aggressive contrast to the dwellers in _sh_w_iliis_c_m__enoo_ spuns headed by sweet bully Bottom. Among the many forms of genius there is to be reckoned the asinine variety, which wins for a man the cordial recognition of his supremacy among fools, and of this Bottom is a choice type. In the preparation of the Interlude in honour of the Duke's marriage, though Quince is nominally the manager, Bottom, through the force of his commanding personality, is throughout the directing spirit. His brother craftsmen have some doubts about their qualifications for heroic roles, but this protean actor and critic is ready for any and every part, from lion to lady, and is by universal consent selected *asjeune premier* [lead player] of the company in the character ofPyramus, 'a most lovely gentleman-like man,' Bereft of his services, the comedy, it is admitted on all hands, cannot go forward: 'it is not possible: you have not a man in all Athens able to discharge Pyramus but he' [IV. ii. 7-8]. Fostered by such heroworship, Bottom's egregious self-complacency develops to the point where his metamorphosis at the hands of Puck seems merely an exquisitely fitting climax to a natural process of evolution. And even when thus 'translated,' he retains his versatile faculty of adaRting himself to any part; the amorous advances of Titania in no wise disturb his equanimity, and he is quite at ease with Peaseblossom and Cobweb. A sublime self-satisfaction may triumph in situations where the most delicate tact or the most sympathetic intelligence would be nonplussed. But Shakespere, in introducing his crew of patches into his fairy drama, had an aim beyond satirizing fussy egotism or securing an effect of broad comic relief. It is a peculiarity of his dramatic method to produce variations upon a single theme in the different portions of a play. *Love's Labour's Lost* is an instance of this, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is further illustration, though of a less obvi ous kind. For in the rehearsal ana setting forth of their comedy, Bottom and his friends enter a debateable domain, which, like that of the fairies, hovers round the solid work-a-day world, and yet is not of it. There is a point of view from which life may be regarded as the reality of which art, and in especial dramatic art, is the 'shadow,' the very word used by Theseus in relation to the workmen's play. Thus in their grotesque devices and makeshifts these rude mechanicals are really facing the question of the relation of shadow to substance, the inunemorial question of realism in art and on the stage. The classical maxim that 'Medea shall not kill her children in sight of the audience' [Horace, in his *As Poetical* lest the feelings of the spectators should be harrowed beyond endurance, finds a burlesque echo in Bottom's solicitude lest the ladies should be terrified by the drawing of Pyramus' sword, or the entrance of so fearful a wildfowl as your lion. Hence the necessity for a prologue to say that Pyramus is not killed indeed, and for the apparition of half Snug the joiner's face through the lion's neck, and his announcement that he is not come hither as a lion, but is 'a man as other men are' [III. i. 44]. Scenery presents fur ther difficulties, but here, as there is no risk of wounding delicate susceptibilities, realism is given full rein. The moon herself is pressed into the ser vice, but owing to her capricious nature, she is given an understudy in the person of Starveling carrying a bush of thorns and.a lanthorn. It is only the hypercriticism of the Philistine Theseus that finds fault with this

arrangement on the score that the man should be put into the lanthorn. 'How is it else the man in the moon?' (V. i. 247-48].

The 'tedious belief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe' (V. i. 56-7], is more elaborated specimen of those plays within plays, of which Shakespere had already given a sketch in *Love's Labour's Lost,* and for which he retained a fondness in all stages of his career. It is a burlesque upon the dramas of the day, in which classical subjects were handled with utter want of dignity, and with incongruous extravagance of style. The jingling metres, the mania for alliteration, the farfetched and fantastic epithets, the meaningless invocations, the wearisome repetition of emphatic words, are all ridiculed with a boisterous glee, which was an implicit warrant that. when the young dramatist should hereafter turn to tragic or classical themes, his own work would be free from such disfiguring affectations, or, at worst, would take from them only a superficial taint. And, indeed, what potency of future triumphs on the very summits of dramatic art lay already revealed in the genius which out of an incidental entertainment could frame the complex and gorgeous pagentry of *A Midsummer Night's Dream;* and which, when denied, by the necessities of the occasion, an ethical motive, could fall back for inspiration on an enchanting metaphysic, not of the schools but of the stage, whose contrasts of shadow and reality are shot, now in threads of gossamer lightness, now in homelier and coarser fiore, into the web and woof of this unique hymeneal masque. (pp. 184-90)

Frederick S. *Boas, "Shakespeare's Poems: The Early Period of Comedy,* " *in his* Shakespere and His Predecessors, 1896. *Reprint by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902, pp.* 158-96.

Adaptations

A Midsummer Night's Dream. Warner Brothers, 1935.

The classical film version of the play, directed by William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt. Featured stars include James Cagney, Mickey Rooney, Olivia de Havilland, and Dick Powell. Distributed by Key Video. 132 minutes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream. BBC, 1963.

A live television performance, with Mendelssohn's incidental music. This version features Patrick Allen, Eira Heath, Cyril Luckham, and Tony Bateman. Distributed by Video Yesteryear. 111 minutes.

A Midsummer Night's Dream. BBC, London; Time Life Videos, 1982.

Film version of Shakespeare's comedy, starring Helen Mirren, Peter McEnery, and Brian Clover. Distributed by Key Video and Time-Life Video. 120 minutes.

Further Study

Literary Commentary

Briggs, K. M. "Shakespeare's Fairies." In her *The*

Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors, pp. 44-55. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.

Suggests that the diminutive size of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was Shakespeare's invention, but demonstrates that folklore frequently presented these figures as very small.

Bryant, J. A, Jr. "Hippolyta's View." In his *Hyppolyta's View: Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare's Play,* pp. 1-18. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961.

Asserts that Shakespeare's view of poetry in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is expressed not by

Theseus but by Hippolyta, specifically, in her "something of great constancy" speech (V. i. 23-7). Bryant contends that this passage also contains echoes of the playwright's Christian view of life.

Clemen, Wolfgang. "Shakespeare's Art of Preparation. A Preliminary Sketch: A First Scene as an Example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* I, i." In his *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art: Collected Essays,* pp. 1-18. London: Methuen & Co., 1972.

Examines the dialogue, dramatic action, and imagery in the initial scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to demonstrate how Shakespeare prepares the audience "for the kind of love which is to be enacted in the play,"

Craig, Hardin. "The Beginnings: *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream." In his *An Interpretation of Shakespeare,* pp. 35-8. Columbia, Mo.: Lucas Brothers,

1948.

Extols *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "the best of Shakespeare's early comedies," maintaining that the playwright's management of the multiple plot structure was unequaled by any other Elizabethan dramatists.

Goldstein, Melvin. "Identity Crises in A Midsummer Nightmare: Comedy as Terror in Disguise." *Psychoanalytic Review* 60, No.2 (Summer 1973): 169-204.

Maintains that each character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* struggles to resolve a crisis arising from an incomplete sexual self-definition. Goldstein notes that Helena

comes to terms with her sexuality through an acceptance of animality that is a basic element of her nature.

Granville-Barker, Harley. "Preface to *A Midsummer Night's Dream."* In *More Prefaces to Shakespeare,* by Harley Granville-Barker, edited by Edward M. Moore, pp. 94-134. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Asserts that the poetry of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the predominant dramatic element in the play.

Green, Roger Lancelyn. "Shakespeare and the Fairies,"' *Folklore,* No. 73 (Summer 1962): 89-103.

Affirms that Shakespeare was one of the first authors to depict fairies in a literary work and that his delineation of their diminutive size was not only innovative but widely copied by later dramatists and fiction writers.

Hunter, G. K. *"A Midsummer Night's Dream."* In his *William Shakespeare: The Later Comedies,* pp. 7-20. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1962.

Contends that the total structural pattern of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is more important than any of its individual, constituent elements and that the play "is constructed by contrast rather than interaction,"'

Kermode, Frank. "The Mature Comedies,"' In *Early Shakespeare,* edited by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, pp. 221-27. London: Edward Arnold, 1961.

Argues that the principal themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are fantasy and the disorders of fantasy. Kermode contends that Bottom's dream, which offers an interpretation of blind love as a transcendent passion, contradicts the young lovers' belief that their nocturnal adventures have been mere fantasies.

Lewis, Allan. *"A Midsummer Night's Dream-Fairy* Fantasy or Erotic Nightmare?" *Educational Theatre*

Journal XXI, NO.3 (October 1969): 251-58.

Regards *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "a comedy of sex that is both light and dark." Although Lewis sees bitter elements in the play, he asserts that Jan Kott's interpretation is an overstatement of the sinister aspects of the drama (see excerpt in section on The Battle of the Sexes).

Quiller-Couch, Arthur. " *A Midsummer-Night's Dream.* "In his *Shakespeare's Workmanship,* pp. 7795. London: T. Fisher Uniwin, 1918.

Speculates on the processes of Shakespeare's imagination as he composed *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Quiller-Couch asserts that in this play Shakespeare first found the opportunity to give full rein to his natural gifts for poetry and humor.

Schanzer, Ernest. "The Moon and the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* " *University of Toronto Quarterly* XXIV, No.3 (April1955): 234-46.

Contends that Titania and Oberon are the fairy world's counterparts of Hippolyta and Theseus, and maintains that the quarrel between the fairy king and queen precipitates and reflects the disorder in the natural world.

Stewart, Garrett. "Shakespearean Dreamplay." *English Literary Renaissance* 11, No.1 (Winter 1981): 44-69.

Discusses the reflexive nature of language in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Stewart contends that the non sequiturs, the hesitations between exposition and awe, and the "garbled eloquence" of Bottom's speech emphasize the ambiguous nature of both drama and dreams.

Swinden, Patrick. *"AMidsummer Night's Dream.* "In his *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies,* pp. 51-64. London: Macmillan, 1973.

A general treatment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* giving particular attention to the way in which structure, discrepancies of time, and the imagery all enhance the play's central concern with the manipulation of the senses.

Vlasopolos, Anea. "The Ritual of Midsummer: A Pattern for *A Midsummer Night's Dream" Renaissance Quarterly* XXXI, No.1 (Spring 1978): 21-9.

An analysis of the Christian and pagan elements in the Midsummer ritual known as St. John's

Day. Vlasopolos demonstrates that both the play and the ritual incorporate the rite of fertility in a forest setting and the reemergence of the participants into a renewed, regenerated society that is once more in harmony with nature.

Woodberry, George E. Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* by William Shakespeare, edited by Sidney Lee, pp. ix-xxii. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare,* edited by Sidney Lee, Vol. VI. New York: George D. Sroul, 1907.

Contends that the central theme of the play is illusion and that Shakespeare explores this concern in such forms as illusions of the senses, of the heart, and of art itself.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Shakespeare for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Shakespeare for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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