

A MIDSUMMER
NIGHT'S DREAM

The RSC Shakespeare

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A Midsummer Night's Dream

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The RSC Shakespeare

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

A MIDSUMMER
NIGHT'S DREAM

Edited by
Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen

Introduced by Jonathan Bate

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare is the poet of double vision. The father of twins, he was a mingler of comedy and tragedy, low life and high, prose and verse. He was a countryman who worked in the city, a teller of English folktales who was equally versed in the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. His mind and world were poised between Catholicism and Protestantism, old feudal ways and new bourgeois ambitions, rational thinking and visceral instinct. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of his truly essential works because nowhere else is his double vision more apparent than in this play's movement between the city and the wood, day and night, reason and imagination, waking life and dream.

MAGICAL THINKING

Wood, night, imagination, dream. These are the co-ordinates of the second form of sight, which is best described as magical thinking. It is the mode of being that belongs to visionaries, astrologers, 'wise women' and poets. It conjures up a world animated with energies and spirit forces; it finds correspondences between earthly things and divine. The eye that sees in this way rolls 'in a fine frenzy', as Theseus says, glancing 'from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven'. It 'bodies forth / The forms of things unknown', 'turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.'

Magical thinking answers a deep human need. It is a way of making sense of things that would otherwise seem painfully arbitrary – things like love and beauty. An ugly birthmark on a baby would be explained away by the suggestion that the infant might be a 'changeling child', swapped in the cradle by some

night-tripping fairy. The sheer chance involved in the process of what we now call sexual chemistry may be rationalized in the story of the magic properties of the juice of the flower called love-in-idleness. And in a world dependent on an agricultural economy, bad harvests were somehow more palatable if explained by the intervention of malicious sprites upon the vicissitudes of the weather.

In the age of candle and rush-light, nights were seriously dark. The night was accordingly imagined to be seriously different from the day. The very fact of long hours of light itself conferred a kind of magic upon Midsummer Night. This is the night of the year when magical thinking is given full rein. For centuries, the summer solstice had been a festive occasion celebrated with bonfires, feasting and merrymaking.

Theseus and Hippolyta never meet Oberon and Titania. In the original performance, the respective roles were likely to have been doubled. The contentious king and queen of fairies thus become the dark psychological doubles of the betrothed courtly couple. The correspondence inevitably calls into question the joy of the match between Athenian and Amazon. Oberon actually accuses Titania of having led Theseus 'through the glimmering night' when he deserted 'Perigenia whom he ravishèd', of having made the day duke break faith with a succession of paramours. Shakespeare loves to set up an antithesis, then knock it down. Here he implies that there is ultimately no sharp distinction between day and night: the sexual ethics of Theseus are perhaps as dubious as those of the adulterous child-possessor Titania.

Authority figures, representatives of the day world of political power, win little sympathy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For the lovers, the forest may be a place of confused identity, but at least it is an escape from the patriarchal match-making of Egeus. In the audience, the characters with whom we engage most warmly are neither monarchs nor lords, but the mischief-making Robin Goodfellow and the ineffable weaver, Bottom. Each in his way is an embodiment of the theatrical spirit that animates everything that is most gloriously Shakespearean. Always a man of the theatre,

Shakespeare lives in a world of illusion and make-believe that hits at deepest truths; he knows that his world is fundamentally sympathetic to those other counter-worlds which we call dream and magic.

Robin the Puck compares the mortals to fools in a fond pageant: he has a right to think of himself as author of the play, since it is his dispensing of the love juice that fuels the plot. As for Bottom, at one level he is a bad actor. In both rehearsal and performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', it becomes clear that he does not really understand the rules of the theatrical game. But at a deeper level, he is a true dramatic genius: he is gifted with the child's grace to suspend his disbelief. As Pyramus, he puts up a pretty poor performance; as Ass, it is another matter. The comic deficiency of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' is that the actors keep telling us that they *haven't* become their characters. The Assification of Bottom is, by contrast, akin to those brilliant assumptions of disguise – Rosalind becoming Ganymede in *As You Like It*, Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night* – through which Shakespeare simultaneously reminds us that we are in the theatre (an actor is always in disguise) and helps us to forget where we are (we willingly suspend our disbelief). In that forgetting, we participate in the mystery of magical thinking. With Bottom himself, we in the audience may say 'I have had a most rare vision.'

Many members of Shakespeare's original audience, steeped as they were in the New Testament, would have recognized Bottom's account of his dream as an allusion – with the attributes of the different senses comically garbled – to a famous passage in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, in which St Paul says that the eye of man has not seen and the ear of man has not heard the glories that will await us when we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Geneva translation of the Bible, which Shakespeare knew well, the passage speaks of how the human spirit searches 'the bottom of God's secrets'. Jesus said that in order to enter his kingdom, one had to make oneself as a child. The same may be said of the kingdom of theatre. It is because Bottom has the uncynical, believing spirit of a child that he is vouchsafed his vision. At the same time, Shakespeare

himself offers a dangerously grown up image of what heaven might be like: the weaver may be innocent but the fairy queen is an embodiment of sexual experience. The 'virgin queen' Elizabeth was also known as England's 'fairy queen' and the wood in which the action takes place, with its 'nine men's morris' and English wild flowers, is more domestic than Athenian, so there must have been an inherent political risk in the representation of a sexually voracious Titania. Shakespeare perhaps introduced Oberon's apparent allusion to a chaste Elizabeth – the 'fair vestal thronèd by the west' – in order to dismiss any identification of Titania with the real-life fairy queen whom he knew would at some point be a spectator of the play.

METAMORPHOSIS

The comedy and the charm of the *Dream* depend on a certain fragility. Good comedy is tragedy narrowly averted, while fairy charm is only safe from sentimentality if attached to some potential for the grotesque. Fairies only deserve to be believed in when they have the capacity to be seriously unpleasant. Of course we laugh when Bottom wears the head of an ass and makes love to a queen, but the image deliberately courts the suggestion of bestiality.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare's favourite book and the source for the tale of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', people are driven by bestial desires and are rewarded by being transformed into animals. In Shakespeare, the ass's head is worn in play, but it remains the closest thing in the drama of his age to an actual animal metamorphosis on stage.

Ovid was rational Rome's great counter-visionary, its magical thinker. His theme is transformation, the inevitability of change. Book fifteen of the *Metamorphoses* offers a philosophical discourse on the subject, mediated via the philosophy of Pythagoras. From here Shakespeare got many of those images of transience that roll through his Sonnets, but in the *Dream* he celebrates the transfiguring and enduring power of night vision, of second sight.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

THESEUS, Duke of Athens

HIPPOLYTA, Queen of the Amazons,
betrothed to Theseus

EGEUS, an Athenian courtier,
father to Hermia

LYSANDER, in love with Hermia

HERMIA, in love with Lysander, but
ordered by her father to marry
Demetrius

DEMETRIUS, in love with Hermia,
though once a suitor to Helena

HELENA, in love with Demetrius

Peter **QUINCE**, a carpenter and
leader of an amateur dramatic
group, who speaks the
PROLOGUE to their play

Nick **BOTTOM**, a weaver, who plays
PYRAMUS in the amateur play

Francis **FLUTE**, a bellows-mender,
who plays **THISBE** in the
amateur play

SNUG, a joiner, who plays a **LION** in
the amateur play

Tom **SNOUT**, a tinker, who plays a
WALL in the amateur play

Robin **STARVELING**, a tailor, who
plays **MOONSHINE** in the
amateur play

OBERON, King of Fairies

TITANIA, Queen of Fairies

ROBIN Goodfellow, also known as
Puck, a sprite in the service of
Oberon

PEASEBLOSSOM	} fairies attendant upon Titania
COBWEB	
MOTH	
MUSTARDSEED	

PHILOSTRATE, an official in
Theseus' court

Other Attendants at the court of
Theseus; other Fairies attendant
upon Oberon

PHILOSTRATE . . . **court** in the Quarto text, he is the Master of the Revels who introduces the entertainment in the final act; in Folio, this role is taken by Egeus, leaving Philostrate a non-speaking role in the first scene.

Act 1 [Scene 1]

running scene 1

Enter Theseus, Hippolyta, with others [Philostrate and attendants]

THESEUS Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
 Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
 Another moon: but O, methinks, how slow
 This old moon wanes; she lingers my desires,
 5 Like to a stepdame or a dowager
 Long withering out a young man's revenue.

HIPPOLYTA Four days will quickly steep themselves in
 nights,

Four nights will quickly dream away the time.
 And then the moon, like to a silver bow
 10 New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
 Of our solemnities.

THESEUS Go, Philostrate,

Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments,
 Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,
 15 Turn melancholy forth to funerals:
 The pale companion is not for our pomp.

[Exit Philostrate]

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,
 And won thy love doing thee injuries.
 But I will wed thee in another key,

20 With pomp, with triumph and with revelling.

Enter Egeus and his daughter Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius

EGEUS Happy be Theseus, our renowned duke.

THESEUS Thanks, good Egeus: what's the news with thee?

EGEUS Full of vexation come I, with complaint
 Against my child, my daughter Hermia.

1.1 *Location: Athens* **Theseus** mythical Duke of Athens who conquered the Amazons **Hippolyta** mythical Queen of the Amazons, captured by Theseus **2 apace** quickly **Four happy days** the action actually extends over two days and the intervening night **4 lingers** draws out/keeps waiting **5 Like to** like **stepdame** stepmother **dowager** widow **6 withering out** i.e. using up **young man's revenue** i.e. her son's inheritance **7 steep** soak, be suffused in **9 moon** . . . **bow** Diana was goddess of hunting and the moon **10 New-bent** ready to be strung or to let an arrow loose **11 solemnities** ceremonies, celebrations **14 pert** lively **16 pale companion** melancholy fellow **pomp** splendid display, ceremony **17 with my sword** Hippolyta was captured during Theseus' campaign against the Amazons **18 injuries** wrongs **20 triumph** public celebration **Hermia** name of Aristotle's disreputable mistress; may be derived from 'Hermione' (daughter of Helen of Troy) **Lysander** derived from 'Alexander' (another name for Paris, who carried off Helen of Troy) **Demetrius** a villainous Demetrius appears in North's Plutarch and in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

25 Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
 This man hath my consent to marry her.
 Stand forth, Lysander. And my gracious duke,
 This man hath bewitched the bosom of my child.—
 Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes,
 30 And interchanged love-tokens with my child.
 Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung,
 With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
 And stol'n the impression of her fantasy
 With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits,
 35 Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats — messengers
 Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth —
 With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart,
 Turned her obedience, which is due to me,
 To stubborn harshness.— And, my gracious duke,
 40 Be it so she will not here before your grace
 Consent to marry with Demetrius,
 I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:
 As she is mine, I may dispose of her;
 Which shall be either to this gentleman
 45 Or to her death, according to our law
 Immediately provided in that case.

THESEUS What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid,
 To you your father should be as a god,
 One that composed your beauties, yea, and one
 50 To whom you are but as a form in wax
 By him imprinted and within his power
 To leave the figure or disfigure it.
 Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

HERMIA So is Lysander.

55 **THESEUS** In himself he is.
 But in this kind, wanting your father's voice,
 The other must be held the worthier.

HERMIA I would my father looked but with my eyes.

THESEUS Rather your eyes must with his judgement look.

60 **HERMIA** I do entreat your grace to pardon me.
 I know not by what power I am made bold,
 Nor how it may concern my modesty

32 **feigning** singing softly/deceitful/joyful/desirous/longing 33 **stol'n** . . . **fantasy** cunningly imprinted
 yourself in her imagination 34 **gauds** showy playthings **conceits** trinkets 35 **knacks** knock-knacks
trifles insignificant tokens **nosegays** small bouquets of flowers **sweetmeats** confectionery
 36 **prevailment** persuasion, influence **unhardened** inexperienced, yielding 37 **filched** stolen 40 **Be it**
 so if 46 **Immediately** directly 52 **disfigure** alter/erase 56 **kind** respect **wanting** lacking **voice**
 approval 58 **would** wish 62 **concern** benefit

- In such a presence here to plead my thoughts:
 But I beseech your grace that I may know
 65 The worst that may befall me in this case,
 If I refuse to wed Demetrius.
- THESEUS** Either to die the death or to abjure
 Forever the society of men.
 Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,
 70 Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
 Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
 You can endure the livery of a nun,
 For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,
 To live a barren sister all your life,
 75 Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
 Thrice blessèd they that master so their blood,
 To undergo such maiden pilgrimage.
 But earthlier happy is the rose distilled
 Than that which withering on the virgin thorn
 80 Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness.
- HERMIA** So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,
 Ere I will yield my virgin patent up
 Unto his lordship, whose unwishèd yoke
 My soul consents not to give sovereignty.
- 85 **THESEUS** Take time to pause, and by the next new
 moon —
 The sealing day betwixt my love and me,
 For everlasting bond of fellowship —
 Upon that day either prepare to die
 For disobedience to your father's will,
 90 Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would,
 Or on Diana's altar to protest
 For aye austerity and single life.
- DEMETRIUS** Relent, sweet Hermia.— And, Lysander, yield
 Thy crazèd title to my certain right.
- 95 **LYSANDER** You have her father's love, Demetrius:
 Let me have Hermia's. Do you marry him.
- EGEUS** Scornful Lysander! True, he hath my love;
 And what is mine my love shall render him.

63 **presence** the duke/assembled people/ceremonial place 67 **die the death** be executed 68 **society**
 company 70 **Know of** learn from **blood** passions 72 **livery** clothing (and lifestyle) 73 **aye** always
mew'd confined 78 **earthlier happy** i.e. more happy on earth **distilled** whose essence is extracted for
 perfume 80 **single blessedness** i.e. celibacy 82 **Ere** before **virgin patent** privilege of virginity 83 **his**
lordship i.e. Demetrius 86 **sealing day** i.e. wedding day 90 **would** wishes 91 **Diana** Roman goddess of
 chastity and the moon **protest** vow 92 **aye** ever 94 **crazed** flawed/unsound/mad **title** claim
 96 **Do** i.e. why don't 98 **render** give to

And she is mine, and all my right of her
 I do estate unto Demetrius.

100 **LYSANDER** I am, my lord, as well derived as he,
 As well possessed: my love is more than his,
 My fortunes every way as fairly ranked,
 If not with vantage, as Demetrius',
 105 And, which is more than all these boasts can be,
 I am beloved of beauteous Hermia.
 Why should not I then prosecute my right?
 Demetrius, I'll avouch it to his head,
 Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,
 110 And won her soul: and she, sweet lady, dotes,
 Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
 Upon this spotted and inconstant man.

THESEUS I must confess that I have heard so much,
 And with Demetrius thought to have spoke thereof,
 115 But, being over-full of self-affairs,
 My mind did lose it. But, Demetrius, come,
 And come, Egeus, you shall go with me.
 I have some private schooling for you both.
 For you, fair Hermia, look you arm yourself
 120 To fit your fancies to your father's will,
 Or else the law of Athens yields you up —
 Which by no means we may extenuate —
 To death or to a vow of single life.—
 Come, my Hippolyta. What cheer, my love?—
 125 Demetrius and Egeus, go along:
 I must employ you in some business
 Against our nuptial and confer with you
 Of something nearly that concerns yourselves.

EGEUS With duty and desire we follow you.

Exeunt all but Lysander and Hermia

130 **LYSANDER** How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale?
 How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

HERMIA Belike for want of rain, which I could well
 Beteem them from the tempest of mine eyes.

LYSANDER Ay me, for aught that I could ever read,
 135 Could ever hear by tale or history,

100 estate unto bestow upon 101 derived descended 102 possessed propertyed, i.e. affluent
 103 fairly nobly/equally 104 with ... Demetrius' superior to those of Demetrius 107 prosecute pursue
 108 avouch declare head i.e. face 109 Made love to wooed Helena perhaps named after Helen of
 Troy 110 dotes is infatuated 112 spotted (morally) stained 115 self-affairs personal matters
 116 lose forget 118 schooling admonition/advice 119 look be sure arm prepare 120 fancies
 desires 122 extenuate moderate 125 go come 127 Against in preparation for 128 nearly that that
 closely 132 Belike probably 133 Beteem grant 134 aught anything, whatever