Shakespeare: Text and Performance

Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts

Edited by Kiernan Ryan

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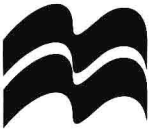

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Preface

Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts is the first book of a three-volume series designed for the third-level Open University course *Shakespeare: Text and Performance*. The focus of this first book is both on the texts of a selection of Shakespeare's plays and on the many contexts in which they have been produced, from their first performances to contemporary reproductions. In *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts*, we introduce nine of Shakespeare's plays: *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard II, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Measure for Measure, King Lear* and *The Tempest*. This selection is designed to include examples of the four main dramatic genres in which Shakespeare wrote – comedy, history, tragedy and romance – and to span the whole course of his professional career as a playwright. In addition to the nine chapters on the plays, there are two short intervals, one describing the original theatrical contexts of the plays, and the other discussing the different textual versions of the plays available to us.

Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts is best read in conjunction with the other two books for the course. The second book, *Shakespeare 1609: 'Cymbeline' and the 'Sonnets'*, looks at two texts on the margins of the established canon of Shakespeare's greatest plays. As such, it throws that canon into clear relief, and provides important points of contrast and comparison with the nine plays studied in the first book. The third book, *A Shakespeare Reader: Sources and Criticism*, also supplements *Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts*. It contains the chief dramatic and narrative sources used by Shakespeare for the nine plays, as well as a substantial collection of key Shakespeare criticism from the last 70 years.

Shakespeare: Text and Performance updates and expands the Open University's 1983 *Shakespeare* course. There are, however, significant continuities with the earlier course. The commitment of Open University teachers like Arnold Kettle, Graham Martin and Brian Stone to close reading, historical contextualization and a lively question-and-answer style of teaching is sustained throughout this course. In addition to building upon these foundations, the course emphasizes two further aspects of Shakespeare studies. In the first place, it pays detailed attention to Shakespeare in performance, on stage and on film. The question of how we are to understand the relationship between the written text and the dramatic performance is posed at all stages of the course. Secondly, the new theoretical approaches to the study of Shakespeare of the last 30 years are thoroughly integrated into the analyses of the plays. The impact of feminist thought, cultural materialism, new historicism, post-colonialism and queer theory on the study of Shakespeare in recent times has precipitated a remarkable transformation in Shakespeare studies, and each chapter gives attention to these provocative theoretical and critical interventions.

Designed both for Open University students studying *Shakespeare: Text and Performance* and the general reader seeking an accessible route into contemporary Shakespeare studies, these three course books are intended to be read together with *The Norton Shakespeare* (ed. S. Greenblatt, W. Cohen, J.E. Howard and K.E. Maus, W.W. Norton, New York and London, 1997). Quotations from Shakespeare's works in the first two books are taken from this edition and the introductions, commentary and supplementary primary material are referred to extensively. Selections of sources and criticism reproduced in the second volume and the Reader consciously avoid repeating material contained in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

Open University courses undergo many stages of drafting and review, and thanks are accordingly due to a number of people for their invaluable contributions to the final product: Lizbeth Goodman and Stephen Regan, who chaired the course through most of its development; Robert Doubleday and Roberta Wood, who were the course managers for the duration; Julie Bennett and Gill Marshall, who were the course editors; Caroline Husher, who was the graphic designer; Robert Gibson, who was the compositor; Tony Coulson, who was the picture researcher; and Pat Phelps, who was the course secretary. Finally, Kiernan Ryan, the external adviser and editor, and Michael Scott, the course assessor, gave sage guidance at crucial moments in the evolution of the course.

David Johnson
Course Chair

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Chapter 1

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Penny Rixon

Aims

The aims of this introductory chapter are twofold: to help you understand one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, and to open up some of the fundamental issues involved in Shakespeare studies. By the end of this chapter you should have a thorough knowledge of the characters, settings, themes and ideas in the play, and thus be able to contribute with confidence to discussion of its meaning. You should also be clear about why the play is classified as a comedy. More generally, you should have a firmer grasp of the fact that Shakespeare's plays were written for performance, and that any discussion of their meaning needs to consider the range of choices available to performers. Finally, you should have some understanding of the way that social and political concerns of Shakespeare's world are embedded in the play, while recognizing that subsequent interpretations, whether in academic writing or stage and film performance, will be shaped by the concerns of the community that constructs them.

Reading and understanding the play

Presumably as a result of the notion that children will like anything with fairies and a few laughs in it, generations of schoolchildren have been introduced to Shakespeare through *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There *is* plenty in it to appeal to young people, but the rest of this chapter will attempt to persuade you not to underestimate this most sophisticated and multi-layered of comedies. Indeed, in recent years the play has become one of the prime sites of controversy in the wider debate about the nature, meaning and status of Shakespeare's drama.

You could explore many themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the main reason for making it the first of the plays to be studied in this book is the way that it draws attention to the experience of theatre itself. It is not the only one of Shakespeare's plays with a play-within-the-play, but it goes even further than *Hamlet* in its dissection of the processes of theatre, containing scenes that show the director assigning roles and rehearsing the cast as well as the end result, which in this case is a performance at court. In fact, many of the concerns of scholars working in modern performance studies – for instance, the idea of theatre as a sign system and the role of the audience in creating meaning – are actually addressed in the *Dream*.

First, however, it is important to become familiar with the play as a whole, and the next section encourages close reading of the text. Exercises to guide your reading are provided, but these are not meant to privilege one kind of critical response over another. One thing to establish at the outset is that no approach to a play can be free of bias, and you are at liberty to disagree with anything in this chapter, or in any of the others for that matter. The interpretation of the play offered here is only one response to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one which may seem alien to someone from a different generation, culture or social background, but it is hoped that, by the end of this chapter, you will have acquired a sound enough grasp of the evidence, textual and non-verbal, to make your own contribution to the debate. A whole volume on this play alone would be needed for an exhaustive commentary, so the goal here is first to cover points that often provoke questions from students, and secondly to cover those that introduce issues to be discussed at length in the second half of the chapter: what this play implies about the nature and status of the theatre in Shakespeare's world, how it handles human relationships, and exactly what kind of comedy it is. In addition, there will be some discussion of the way it reflects cultural concerns of Shakespeare's own society.

To get the most out of this chapter you should first read through the whole of Act 1. At this stage, it doesn't matter if you don't understand every word of the text. If you feel obliged to consult notes and glossaries every time you are not sure of a word, you will have a very boring time, so look up only what you need to make sense of what is going on, and concentrate on the following questions:

What are these characters doing?

What ideas are embodied in their language?

How do you respond to what is going on?

From the very beginning, try to keep the idea of performance in mind: when a character says something, think about whether the language implies that a gesture or action goes with it, and try to imagine the physical bodies speaking those words or *not speaking* at all. It's easy to forget when we're reading that characters are on stage even when silent and may be making a significant non-verbal contribution to the scene. At this point it's not important to know how Shakespeare's actors may have performed, although later in the course you will learn more about the original performers and the resources at their disposal.

What are these characters doing?

Pared down to essentials, a summary of the action might read as follows: there is an opening conversation between a man, clearly a ruler, and a rival queen whom he has conquered in battle. Their discussion of their imminent marriage is interrupted by another man, a subject of the first, who demands justice, explaining that his daughter is, contrary to the law, insisting on making her own choice of marriage partner and consequently rejecting his candidate. The ruler tells the daughter that if she continues her disobedience, the law will allow her only a choice between death and a nunnery, and she is then left alone with her preferred suitor to consider what to do. The couple decide to escape into the forest, where Athenian law is invalid, and confide their plan to another character, a girl who is in vain pursuit of the first girl's other suitor. Left alone, this young woman tells us that she intends to reveal the escape plan to the man that she adores in the hope of gaining his gratitude and enjoying his company while he pursues the fugitives. As she leaves, some humble

working men enter and begin planning an entertainment to honour the ruler's marriage celebrations. Parts are allocated and a date set for rehearsal, with the forest as the venue.

What ideas are embodied in their language?

Of course, there is a lot more to Act 1 than this brief narrative conveys. Take the first seventeen lines: they supply the necessary information that Theseus and Hippolyta are preparing for their wedding, but the language is also subtly alerting us to key ideas, even if we are not entirely conscious of them. For instance, the repeated mention of the moon introduces one of the most important motifs of the play. The moon had a particularly rich set of associations for a sixteenth-century audience, not least because of the way Elizabeth I's propaganda machine had exploited the link between the Virgin Queen and the chaste moon goddess of classical mythology, Diana. In addition, the 'silver bow' simile introduces a recurring motif linked with the notion of Cupid's agency in provoking love and also hints at Hippolyta's former identity as Queen of the Amazons, a race of female warriors noted for their ferocious skill in archery.

The contrast between Theseus's perception of the waiting period as interminable and Hippolyta's belief that the wedding will be here in no time can lead us down two different paths. If we believe that the Amazon is entering the marriage reluctantly, we may think her speech an expression of regret that so little time as an independent being is left to her. On the other hand, the exchange suggests that perception may be unreliable, a theme that will assume great importance in the play as a whole. In fact, the notion is picked up again in Helena's speech at the end of Scene 1, where she seems to be implying that our emotions can make something appear to be what it is not: 'Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity' (1. 1. 232–3).

The simile in lines 5–6 touches on a darker side of human relationships: the comparison is between the delaying moon and the wished-for death of a stepmother who has been keeping the heir from enjoying a decent income, reminding us that relationships breed hatred as well as love. It may even have offered any political dissidents in Shakespeare's audience a secret laugh at the expense of the old Queen, who would not name her successor and then die with dignity, but who insisted on presiding over a society that was visibly stagnating.

The fact that the play is a comedy doesn't mean that it ignores pain, suffering and evil: in the first act, for example, we have the repeated references to the harsh penalties facing Hermia and an acknowledgement of Helena's suffering as a result of Demetrius's treachery. These explicit concerns are reinforced by a recurring strain of language that links love with pain. For example:

> Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,
> And won thy love doing thee injuries.
>
> (1. 1. 16–17)

> And by that fire which burned the Carthage queen
> When the false Trojan under sail was seen.
>
> (1. 1. 173–4)

Bottom and company refer to a play well known to contemporary audiences as being about a pair of lovers doomed to die because of parental opposition to their relationship. The most dramatic instance is in Lysander's speech, which paints a bleak picture of human beings adrift in a cruel universe, able at best to experience only an illusion of happiness:

> Or if there were a sympathy in choice,
> War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
> Making it momentany as a sound,
> Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
> Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
> That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
> And, ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!',
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up.
> So quick bright things come to confusion.
>
> (1. 1. 141–9)

Of course, in performance you can adopt strategies which play down the seriousness, but just looking at the language of this first scene might raise doubts about whether the play is a comedy at all.

The language of the second scene sounds very different. For one thing, there is a change of medium: whereas the courtiers used both blank verse and rhyming couplets, the workmen speak in prose. In part, this change follows the convention of giving poetry to characters high in the social scale and prose to lesser mortals, but it's as well not to rely too much on such crude generalizations, because one of Shakespeare's great strengths is the versatility with which he handles both verse and prose. It is important to realize also that Bottom's prose is no closer to the way people spoke in real life than Theseus's poetry. The change merely signals that a different response is called for. The men may appear to speak in a much more literal way than their 'betters', but their language is artfully exploited for comic purposes. For example, Bottom's attempts to use an impressively wide vocabulary ironically express the truth when he gets the words wrong, as in 'there we may rehearse most *obscenely*' (1. 2. 87–8, emphasis added), when he probably means something like 'seemly', while Quince's joke about French crowns a few lines earlier suggests an earthier alternative to the elevated notions of love proclaimed in Scene 1. The joke is actually lost on most modern audiences, because it relies on a point which Shakespeare's contemporaries would have picked up instantly: that hair loss is a symptom either of syphilis itself or of the treatment for it. You probably wouldn't know that unless you had looked up the relevant editorial note, which brings us to the third question.

How do you respond to what is going on?

Obviously there's likely to be a wide range of answers here, but it's interesting to think about how far we are affected by the main event in Scene 1. Were you deeply moved by the cruelty Hermia seems about to suffer? Might a sixteenth-century spectator have responded differently? Of course, for many modern audiences the idea of a father having the power 'to leave the figure or disfigure it' is abhorrent, if not incredible, whereas in Shakespeare's time the father's power over the family was seen, by the dominant class at least, as one of the main props of social order. In this case, however, the father is going well beyond what most sixteenth-century

thinkers would sanction, and the kind of legalistic language used by some of the participants suggests that we are meant to see Athens as unreasonably rigorous, particularly since Hermia is not trying to form a connection with someone socially or morally undesirable. In Shakespeare's society, among the best-selling products of the newly dominant print culture were books advising people how to conduct human relationships, and these contemporary conduct books generally insisted that, important though parental approval was, no parent should ever pressure a child into marrying someone he or she couldn't love.

What is more, performance considerations are important here because of Hippolyta. She says nothing after the first few lines, so she is a very good example of a character who may be overlooked by a reader but cannot be overlooked by a theatre company, which has to decide how she will react to what goes on. In performance her role can make a great deal of difference to the audience's response to the scene. While remembering that no dramatic character has any existence outside the fabric of the play, we should note that Hippolyta's silence has led many directors and performers to give her a more positive role in the scene then her language suggests. For example, a director who wants to generate indignation at the kind of treatment suffered by Hermia can ask Hippolyta to register steadily growing fury and use body language to suggest that she is not going to let Theseus enforce the law without a fight. In two fairly recent productions (Adrian Noble, 1994 and Jonathan Miller, 1996) Stella Gonet and Angela Down made one feel that Theseus was in for a distinctly uncomfortable time once out of the public eye, and thus prepared the audience for his decision to override the law in Act 4; while Clare Benedict (English Shakespeare Company (ESC), 1997), looked so desolate as she left the stage that one felt that harder men than Theseus would have capitulated. Similarly, there is potential variation in our response to Egeus. Even if we feel that what he is doing is monstrous, we will probably be less involved if he is portrayed as a ridiculous old buffer who has lost his temper and is unlikely to get his own way in the long run than if he is cold, rational, and evidently someone with a lot of influence.

Another factor that may be affecting your response is your knowledge that this play belongs to the genre of comedy. We'll be exploring in more detail later what that word encompasses, but at present it's as well to note that, in the same way as you suspend your compassion when Tom batters Jerry in cartoons, you may be disengaging yourself from an emotional response to the seriousness of events in Scene 1 because subconsciously you expect that all the obstacles will somehow be removed by the end of the play. Not everyone will be able to do this, however, and some may find this first scene uncomfortable.

Bearing in mind the points made above, the next step is to read Act 2. As before, you will need to make sure that you understand who does what to whom – some people find it helpful to write a brief summary – but the focus of the discussion will be on the following questions:

> To what extent does Shakespeare establish the fairies as a different species from the human beings in the play?
>
> How would you present the fairies (using costume, movement, lighting and any other means you can think of), if you were staging the play for a modern audience?
>
> How do you respond to the further developments in the lovers' story?

To what extent does Shakespeare establish the fairies as a different species from the human beings in the play?

In one way, the fairies are all too human. Their capacity for envy, spite and destructive pettiness is apparent in the quarrel over the changeling child, and although Titania spells out the dire consequences of that quarrel for human beings, neither she nor Oberon is prepared to compromise. Indeed, seeing that he can't get the boy by fair means, Oberon turns immediately to the foulest, devising a plot that will torment and degrade his consort:

> 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.
>
> (2. 2. 36–40)

Puck's favourite leisure activity is humiliating people, and there is a hint that his fun may go beyond harmless practical jokes in 'Mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm' (2. 1. 39). At the same time, he does recognize the authority of the Fairy King, who is also capable of unsolicited acts of kindness: witnessing the misery of an individual human, a complete stranger, he determines to use his power to make her happy. The words that spring to mind to describe the fairies' actions are 'capricious', 'unpredictable', and therefore, given their superhuman powers, 'dangerous' as well. Titania's long speech describing the devastation wrought by 'our dissension' graphically underlines the extent of their capacity for damage, particularly when you remember that in a predominantly agricultural society, unseasonable weather meant that people starved to death. In fact, people *had* been starving in the mid-1590s as a result of poor harvests caused by bad weather, and there was widespread unrest in the country as a result. Some critics think that cynics in the audience might have seen a parallel here between Titania and an English monarch too preoccupied with 'self affairs' to care about her hungry subjects.

How would you present the fairies (using costume, movement, lighting and any other means you can think of), if you were staging the play for a modern audience?

Directors in the latter part of this century have tended to feel that the malign element is not well served by costuming the fairies in gauze wings and tutus, although that was the fashion in Victorian times, and that kind of approach persisted for quite a long time in amateur productions. Though few have gone as far in the other direction as George Devine (1954) in presenting the fairies as nightmarish visions with talons and reptilian faces, there has been a strong tradition in the last 50 years of using costume and body language to stress that they are an alien race.

Moreover, the text, if you attend to it carefully, does emphasize their difference from human beings. One of the characteristics repeatedly stressed is their diminutive size: in this scene, the Fairy who accosts Puck implies this point in his/her first speech with its list of miniaturized tasks, and talks of elves creeping into acorn cups to hide; while Oberon describes a snake's skin as 'Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in' (2. 1. 256). Other non-human characteristics are the Elizabethan equivalent of supersonic speed – 'I do wander everywhere / Swifter than the moonës sphere' (6–7) – and the ability to make oneself invisible at will.

So how would you represent all this on stage, where you don't have access to the kinds of cinematic special effects that would allow you to take Shakespeare at his word and present credible fairies that *could* hide in an acorn cup? If you had problems answering this question, you are not alone: in the play's production history the fairies have traditionally given the most trouble. We don't know how Shakespeare's own company dealt with them, but the later seventeenth century began a tradition of taking his references to size as literally as is possible, and thus casting children in most of the fairy parts, a fashion which persisted for some 300 years, but has mercifully now been abandoned.

If size is no problem, what about speed and agility? Would you cast athletes who look as though they could beat the 100 metre sprint record, if not quite put a girdle round the earth in 40 minutes? Or an acrobat like Robert Lepage's Puck, Angela Laurier (1992), who could contort her body in ways that seemed almost inhuman? Are you going to make the fairies fly? Nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century productions regularly used flying apparatus, but modern productions tend to avoid this kind of machinery, although Peter Brook employed gantries, trapezes and stilts very successfully to give the fairies an extra dimension in which to move (Figure 1).

And what about representing someone becoming invisible, as Oberon does at line 186 of Act 2, Scene 1? Shakespeare's actor may have donned a special robe as a visual signal when speaking this line, while productions of the early twentieth century experimented with various kinds of torches, but more recent productions have tended simply to rely on the words to stimulate the audience's imagination. If you haven't had much experience of theatrical production, it will take a while for you to become familiar with this approach to Shakespeare. Maybe these problems didn't trouble you because you have seen a production that found effective ways of solving them, or because you take for granted the fact that the theatre works a magic of its own, which has nothing to do with literal reality. I'll take up the latter point in more detail in my discussion of Act 3.

We are still a long way from exhausting the decisions that need to be made about the fairies. There is plenty to say about casting, because in the play's performance history theatrical practice has varied considerably, not least with regard to the number of roles involved. Earlier periods had hordes of fairies in Titania's train, but economic pressures mean that modern theatres must make do with the bare minimum, or even fewer if cuts are made in the text. Gender is another variable. In the nineteenth century, the Fairy was normally a woman and her first speech was sung, but by 1970 ideas had changed so much that Brook preferred to eliminate the character, distributing the lines among Moth, Mustardseed, Cobweb and Peaseblossom, who were played by three men and one woman. Miller (1996) gave the speech to Peaseblossom, a brisk manservant with a strong northern accent, who delivered his lines in the manner of a put-upon employee recounting a tiresome day at work, while the ESC (1997) split the lines among a nightmarish group of predatory males on stilts. Puck was also an adult male in this production, as he was for Miller, Noble (1994) and Tara Arts (1997), but in the nineteenth century the role was almost always played by a female, often a child, and adult women were cast by Kenneth Branagh (1990) and Lepage (1992). Oberon too was a 'principal boy' role in the Victorian period, when elaborate musical arrangements were given to the character, but the role now seems to be an exclusively male one. So how about casting a man as Titania? (If your instinct is to reject this suggestion as ridiculous, you might want to think carefully about how you would support an argument against it.)

Figure 1 *Oberon (Alan Howard) puts Titania (Sara Kestelman) to sleep with his wand whilst Puck (John Kane) looks on in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of* A Midsummer Night's Dream *directed by Peter Brook, 1970. Photo: Joe Cocks Studio Collection, Shakespeare Centre Library.*

One complicating factor, at least since Frank Dunlop's 1967 production, has been the question of whether to double Hippolyta with Titania and/or Theseus with Oberon. Brook's adoption of this device established a new orthodoxy, one no doubt welcomed by theatre management because it is cheaper and by actors because the doubled roles are more fulfilling. So whereas a pre-Dunlop director would be expected to justify the decision to double, I suspect the reverse is now true. Clearly, the decision is an important one, and we will come back to its implications later.

However the fairies are represented, they are beginning to have a devastating effect on some of the human beings who have wandered into their domain, which brings me to the final question about this act.

How do you respond to the further developments in the lovers' story?

Perhaps you thought that Helena's betrayal of her bosom friend's escape plot was getting its just reward when Demetrius spurned her. Alternatively, you may have excused treacheries motivated by desperation and felt sympathy for the misery she expresses in 2. 2. 94–105. Again, there is a range of possibilities in performance, but I think Shakespeare has made it quite difficult for a director who wants to wring real emotion out of this scene. Helena may be suffering, but the way she expresses herself in 2. 2. 94–105 gives ample scope to the actor who wants to play her as ridiculous: for example, Doon Mackichan (Miller, 1996) got a huge laugh by inspecting herself in the mirrored set, turning with a flounce to the audience and delivering 'No, no; I am as ugly as a bear' with a kind of petulant self-pity. Considered objectively, Lysander's behaviour is astoundingly cruel, but we are not encouraged to consider it objectively. The preposterousness of his change is emphasized by the way he shares a rhyming couplet with Helena:

HELENA Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake.

LYSANDER [*awaking*] And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake.

(2. 2. 108–9)

And his language in the ensuing speeches is so extreme as to keep reminding us that he is under a magic spell. Moreover, his claims to be now exercising reason are so patently ridiculous that it is difficult to resist laughing at him, although the line 'Of all be hated, but the most of me' (2. 2. 148) can strike a darker note, as can Hermia's terror as she wakes from the nightmare.

The crucial point is that, although this scene deals with potentially tragic material – the misery of unrequited love, betrayal and the death of love – unless the director works very hard, we are not going to feel deeply. When you study *Hamlet*, you are likely to react very differently to the central character's rejection of Ophelia.

Now let's move on to Act 3. This time discussion will focus on the following questions:

> What kind of assumptions do Bottom and his fellows make about the experience of theatre, and how do you respond to their ideas?
>
> To what extent does a darker note intrude into this middle act?
>
> Do you think that the comic spirit of the play is threatened by anything that happens?

It is worth noting here that the workmen, briefly introduced in Act 1, Scene 2 as artisans and comic players, are identified as 'clowns' in the stage directions to Act 3, Scene 1. Robin refers to them as 'rude mechanicals' (3. 2. 9), which explains why the term 'mechanicals' continues to be used as a collective term for the workmen.

What kind of assumptions do Bottom and his fellows make about the experience of theatre, and how do you respond to their ideas?

As far as this question is concerned, Bottom is clearly aware of the dangers of putting on a show for those in power, and before rehearsal begins he wants some points clarified. The first one – the problem of violence on stage – pinpoints a topic that is still of great concern today, although we probably don't share the mechanicals' masculine perspective. Bottom fears that the very appearance of an unsheathed sword on stage, let alone the enacting of suicide, will terrify the ladies, while Snout and Starveling, returning to the problem raised in the earlier rehearsal about the effects of the lion roaring, now doubt whether they ought to include the creature at all. On one level, the fun proceeds from our knowledge that these actors are never going to be remotely frightening. On a deeper level, the scene opens up the crucial question of the difference between real life and artistic representation, asking us whether witnessing a suicide on stage is the same as seeing a man kill himself in real life. The next problems, raised by the fledgling director this time, are first, how to represent the moon shining, and then how to deal with the fact that some scenes require a wall, when walls – even prop walls – are not portable. The assumptions underlying this part of the discussion are less clear-cut, but I think the workmen are implying that if something is important to the plot, it must be literally represented on the stage, otherwise the audience will not believe in what's going on.

As any company must, they devise solutions to their problems. Starveling first suggests that they 'leave the killing out', a joke that would have had an added resonance for the educated members of the original audience, who knew that humanists had criticized the popular theatre for representing violence on stage instead of having it related by a messenger, as the Greeks did. Bottom's suggestion will let them have their cake and eat it, however: he will adapt the convention of the Prologue to explain to the audience that what they are watching is make-believe, so no-one really gets hurt; and just in case that doesn't work, Snug must avoid wearing an illusionistic costume, and interrupt his mauling with a gentle speech reminding them that he is really a human being. As far as the lighting is concerned, for a moment it looks as though they will opt for a kind of realism – 'the moon may shine in at the casement' (3. 1. 49–50) – but that solution is rejected in favour of the starkly non-realist idea of turning the moon into a character. Quince's brainwave gives Bottom the solution to the scene-change problem also, and Wall is born.

So what we have here, although the mechanicals don't recognize it as such, is a debate about different notions of theatrical representation. At one point, it is assumed that there is no boundary between reality and representation; at another, that reality isn't convincing enough in a theatre, so a sign system must be devised in order to communicate the key ideas to the audience. It's as well to remember that in Shakespeare's non-realist theatre, there was no scenery to speak of and no artificial lighting was used, so for his contemporaries the humour lies in the fact that these poor amateurs can't see that simply imagining a wall or moonlight – or a character becoming invisible – presents no problem, as long as the language itself offers adequate cues. For modern audiences, used to sophisticated lights that can simulate moonlight and walls that can sprout from the stage or glide from the wings, but also

familiar with studio theatre and low-budget fringe productions, the effect of the joke is different: we probably focus more on the mechanicals' absurd over-confidence in their powers as actors. In both cases, laughter surely proceeds from the audience's sense of superiority to these poor bunglers: *we* are much too sophisticated to blur the line between the theatrical world and the real one, and *we* don't require realistic scenery or lighting as long as the production spells out the rules of the game it wants us to play.

But is the laugh perhaps on us? As we watch these inadequate actors planning a potential flop, how many of us remember that Quince, Bottom and Co. are, on a different level, accomplished actors compelling our participation in a make-believe world? When an actor enters, disguised not as a lion but as an ass, yet still asserting that he is Bottom the weaver, how many of us preserve the distinction between the real world and the illusory one? Even when Shakespeare has Puck remind us of what he is in real life – 'I'll be an auditor – / An actor, too, perhaps, if I see cause' (3. 1. 67–8) – we still believe in him as the goblin rather than the performer playing that goblin. Shakespeare is opening up complex questions about the nature of theatrical experience here, and perhaps one of the themes that is beginning to emerge is that real magic for late-sixteenth-century Londoners is what takes place in a theatre. After all, they (and we) are quite prepared to believe a normal-sized actor when s/he suddenly whisks us into a miniature world where a bee's honey sac makes a decent meal:

> The honeybags steal from the humble-bees,
> And for night tapers crop their waxen thighs
> And light them at the fiery glow-worms' eyes
> To have my love to bed, and to arise;
> And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
> To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.
>
> (3. 1. 150–5)

It is almost as though Shakespeare is saying that the real magic is the fact that he can make the audience believe in anything, even as he shows them exactly how he is doing it (Figure 2).

To what extent does a darker note intrude into this middle act?

The fairies' magic *can* have a sinister tinge, although once again it's as well to remember that it all depends on how Act 3 is staged. The workmen's terror as Puck swoops among them can be funny, but if the production uses sound and special effects to bring to life Puck's descent into brutishness – 'Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn' (3. 1. 99) – a more troubling effect is likely. Similarly, if Bottom remains stoutly unmoved by Titania, the result is less disturbing than if, as some directors have chosen, he shows real fear. The Queen *can* be played as malevolent, particularly when she says, 'Out of this wood do not desire to go' (134), or as so infatuated as to be ridiculous. One of her comments shifts, though only for a moment, into a different, and much darker, key. As she carries Bottom off to her bower, she says:

> The moon, methinks, looks with a wat'ry eye,
> And when she weeps, weeps every little flower,
> Lamenting some enforcèd chastity.
>
> (3. 1. 179–81)