



Appropriating Shakespeare

A Cultural History
of *Pyramus and Thisbe*

Louise Geddes

Shakespeare • British Literature

The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press Series on Shakespeare and the Stage

Series Editors: Peter Kanelos, Valparaiso University, and Matthew Kozusko, Ursinus College

Appropriating Shakespeare: A Cultural History of Pyramus and Thisbe argues that the vibrant, transformative history of Shakespeare's play-within-a-play from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* across four centuries allows us to see the ways in which Shakespeare is used both to create and critique emergent cultural trends. Because of its careful distinction between "good" and "bad" art, *Pyramus and Thisbe's* playful meditation on the foolishness of overreaching theatrical ambition is repeatedly appropriated by artists seeking to parody contemporary aesthetics, resulting in an ongoing assessment of Shakespeare's value to the time. Beginning with the play's own creation as an appropriation of Ovid, designed to keep the rowdy clown in check, *Appropriating Shakespeare* is a wide-ranging study that charts *Pyramus and Thisbe's* own metamorphosis through opera, novel, television, and, of course, theater. This unique history illustrates *Pyramus and Thisbe's* ability to attract like-minded, experimental, genre-bending artists who use the text as a means of exploring the value of their own individual craft. Ultimately, what this history reveals is that, in excerpt, *Pyramus and Thisbe* affirms the place of artist as both consumer and producer of Shakespeare.

Louise Geddes is assistant professor of English at Adelphi University.

FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS

For orders please contact

Rowman & Littlefield

800-462-6420

www.rowman.com

ISBN 978-1-68393-044-0



9 781683 930440

90000

GEDDES
Appraisals
Shakespeare



Appropriating Shakespeare

A Cultural History of *Pyramus and Thisbe*

Louise Geddes



FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Madison • Teaneck

Published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
Copublished by The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

Copyright © 2017 by Louise Geddes


All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN 978-1-68393-044-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-68393-045-7 (electronic)

 The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Appropriating Shakespeare

Shakespeare and the Stage

The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press Series on Shakespeare and the Stage publishes scholarly works on the theatrical dimensions of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Both individual studies and collections of previously unpublished essays are welcome.

Series Editors: Peter Kanelos (Valparaiso University, peter.kanelos@valpo.edu) and Matthew Kozusko (Ursinus College, mkozusko@ursinus.edu).

Publications in Shakespeare and the Stage Series

- Louise Geddes, *Appropriating Shakespeare: A Cultural History of Pyramus and Thisbe* (2016)
- Travis Curtright, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Persons* (2016)
- Joseph Candido, *The Text, the Play, and the Globe: Essays on Shakespeare and His World in Honor of Charles R. Forker* (2016)
- Catherine Loomis and Sid Ray, *Shaping Shakespeare for Performance: The Bear Stage* (2015)
- Cary Mazer, *Double Shakespeares: Emotional-Realist Acting and Contemporary Performance* (2015)
- R. S. White, *Avant-Garde Hamlet: Text, Stage, Screen* (2015)
- Kathryn M. Moncrief, Kathryn R. McPherson and Sarah Enloe, *Shakespeare Expressed: Page, Stage, and Classroom in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (2013)

Related Recent Publications

- Kristine Johanson, *Shakespeare Adaptations from the Early Eighteenth Century: Five Plays* (2013)
- Laury Magnus and Walter W. Cannon, *Who Hears in Shakespeare?: Shakespeare's Auditory World, Stage and Screen* (2011)
- Peter Kanelos and Matt Kozusko, *Thunder at a Playhouse: Essaying Shakespeare and the Early Modern Stage* (2010) (Susquehanna University Press)
- James C. Bulman, *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance* (2008)
- Frank Occhiogrosso, *Shakespearean Performance: New Studies* (2008)
- Paul Menzer, *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage* (2006). (Susquehanna University Press)
- Nancy Taylor, *Women Direct Shakespeare In America: Productions From The 1990s* (2004)
- James E. Hirsh, *Shakespeare And The History Of Soliloquies* (2003)
- Hardin L. Aasand, *Stage Directions In Hamlet: New Essays and New Directions* (2002)
- Susan Young, *Shakespeare Manipulated: The Use of the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare in Teatro Di Figura in Italy* (1996)

On the Web at <http://www.fdu.edu/fdupress>

Acknowledgments

Appropriating Shakespeare: A Cultural History of Pyramus and Thisbe is a project that has evolved over a few years and continued to grow as more appropriations have emerged. I have numerous colleagues and friends to thank for helping me through this process. The initial work for this book was on the Beatles' adaptation and was the product of Russell Jackson's Folger Shakespeare Institute seminar and my first postdissertation research project. My thanks to Russell for helping me understand the importance of theater as a site of Shakespearean transformation. Thanks also to the folks at the Folger, who encouraged me to mine the card catalogs when we reached the end of Hamnet, directing me toward the unexplored corners of their considerable archive. I am also grateful to the numerous conferences and seminars, including Peter Holland's seminar on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, at the 2010 Shakespeare Association of America conference and the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference.

Thanks are owed to those who have read and listened to me think through ideas—in particular, Rich McCoy and Mario DiGangi, who continue to support my work. I am also grateful to Ruth Garcia for her constructive criticism throughout this process. Due appreciation, too, are the series editors, Peter Kanelos and Matt Kozusko, who have patiently guided me through the process of writing my first monograph; the director of Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Harry Keyishian; and editor June Schlueter. I am indebted to my institution, which has generously given me time and funding to complete my research. Thanks to A. J. Hartley for his efforts in helping me publish my first article, which emerged from this book. Work from this project has previously been published in *Shakespeare Bulletin* and *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*.

My thanks go to my beloved family—my parents; John, Laura, Nick, Toby, and Alex; Linda and Mike. Other friends, Marilyn, Liz, Kristen, and Bernadette, who have often endured my explaining in detail the obscure pleasures of Henry James deserve recognition.

Finally, all praise is due to Michael, Charlotte, and Tessa. Neither can my tongue conceive, nor my heart report, what you mean to me. Thank you for everything.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: “You may do it extempore”	1
1 Performance as Appropriation: Bottom, Celebrity, and the Early Modern Clown	11
2 “The Taste of the Present Times”: Challenging Parody in the Eighteenth Century	37
3 “I have a passion for good prose”: Transmedial Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century	61
4 “Know that I, one Ringo the Drummer Am”: Mass Media and the Authenticity of Subculture	87
5 As We Like It: <i>Pyramus and Thisbe</i> in the Twenty-first Century	111
Epilogue: “It must be your imagination, then”	121
Bibliography	123
Index	139
About the Author	145

Introduction

“You may do it extempore”

On June 18, 1763, George Coleman sent a series of production notes on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to David Garrick, offering advice on how to redact the play for production as a mock opera. Famously, he suggested the omission of the “palpable gross play” of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, on the grounds that it did not accord “to the taste of the present times.” Coleman’s excision, the first explicit acknowledgment of the perceived incompatibility of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at large, marked an attempt at segregation that was consistent with the penchant for “improving” Shakespeare in accordance with what the artists of the eighteenth century wanted him to be. Moreover, Coleman’s criticism of the play-within-a-play recognizes the extent to which the “taste of the present times” impacts representations of Shakespeare. Certainly, the lyricism of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has borne witness to the intersection between Shakespeare’s play and trending aesthetic form. Particularly, the play’s relationship to musical form, most notably opera, shows a certain flexibility in terms of what we constitute as Shakespeare, but it seems that this is only half the story. The omission of *Pyramus and Thisbe* did not mean that the play simply vanished—in fact, quite the opposite occurred. *Pyramus and Thisbe* has enjoyed a vibrant life of its own, existing in a surprising variety of forms.

The primary aim of this book is to tell the story—brief, but hopefully not tedious—of the history of Shakespeare’s *Pyramus and Thisbe* in production and adaptation. Since the sixteenth century, not only has the playlet been staged independently of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* enough times to merit study as a stand-alone text, but it has also developed a transmedial identity, its metacritical content facilitating use in a wide variety of aesthetics by its ability to engage with the forms representing it. What this history reveals is that, in excerpt, *Pyramus and Thisbe*’s cultural malleability embodies the “creative

collision”¹ at the heart of the appropriative act and stages Peter Quince’s own anxieties about the threat of unruly performance that he attempts to mitigate through a superfluous narration of theater’s craft, both before and throughout the performance. Quince’s promise of structural invisibility—“All for your delight / We are not here” (5.1.114–15)²—becomes the irony upon which the history of *Pyramus and Thisbe* rests. Moreover, during *Pyramus and Thisbe*, Theseus’s repeated defense of imagination, which unambiguously places the burden of appreciation on Hyppolita’s investment, suggests an interdependence between artist and audience that manifests itself in a dialogic appropriative history that lays bare the cause-and-effect creation of Shakespeare, as processed through a text whose own cultural politics, when divorced from the larger context, are often read as ambiguously Shakespearean. What is notable about the story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is the number of times it appears to turn back on itself, reconnecting with its own history, and by the way it attracts like-minded, experimental, genre-bending artists who use the text as a means of exploring the value of their own individual craft.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Mechanicals’ concern for their own performance and their anxiety about the craft of staging *Pyramus and Thisbe* allow a space for the juxtaposition between “good” and “bad” performance that engenders Shakespeare’s successful parody. In spite of the playlet’s terrible verse, the structure of the piece demands detailed and careful performance. The actor playing Bottom must be convincing in order for his Pyramus to fail, as the “final meaning of irony or parody rests on the recognition of the superimposition of these levels” (Hutcheon 34). Because the comedy is structured around the Mechanicals’ protean aspirations, it also requires the audience’s complicity in gently mocking the aesthetic trends that the performers strive for. As parody, *Pyramus and Thisbe* requires the “auto-reflexivity” (Hutcheon 35) that appropriates, enjoys, and gently toys with the forms the Mechanicals use to stage their play. This unique structure endows *Pyramus and Thisbe* with tremendous potential to be used in a wide variety of formats. Moreover, in pinpointing appropriative practices at specific cultural moments, it allows us to think not only about Shakespeare’s reception but also about the ongoing acts of re-creation that put Shakespeare in conversation with the popular culture that appropriates it. The history of this particular text charts an ongoing transformative use that locates the parodic nature of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in its transcontextual movement, with each generation finding the meaning and the humor in the piece at the moment of its appropriation, articulating the adaptive impulse as one that occurs in a collision of two cultural signifiers—that of a culture first imagining the “Shakespearean text” and then reconstructing it in accordance with the taste of the present times, impressing this knowledge of what constitutes “Shakespeare” back

on the text. Moreover, the presence of the audience creates a self-awareness that generates the parody in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the lack of this critical eye, in excerpt, becomes a statement in its own right, transposing the Athenians' role of adjudicator onto the audience, reader, viewer, or user.

That performance tells a cultural history is a point that hardly needs stating. Theatrical staging offers a textual exegesis that is informed by casting choices, staging considerations, the dominant cultural aesthetic, and anticipated audience reception. Likewise, adaptation is most effectively viewed as a process in which the Shakespeare text circulates across either its adaptive medium or genre or community. Appropriation, on the other hand, creates a continually shifting center of gravity at the heart of the transformation as the text is put into a dynamic relationship with its adaptive context. As such, appropriation may be a more efficient term for this assessment of the history of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and, by extension, Shakespeare in popular (and populist) cultures, because of the implication of aggressive agency that appropriation offers. Recent criticism has called attention to the fluidity interchange between the terms "adaptation" and "appropriation,"³ and this book subscribes to the belief that appropriation is not, by nature, parasitic or derivative but instead dialogic, constituting an "exchange that involves both sharing and contested ownership" (Desmet, "Recognizing Shakespeare" 43) between the appropriation and appropriated. An adaptation, by its nature, is a politicized affirmation of Shakespeare knowledge that represents not only a specific interpretation of the text but also a statement of contribution to the communal construction of "Shakespeare." In the case of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a new work is drawn from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and then commandeered for a variety of interests and applied to a surprising breadth of media. This conscious and careful dislocation plays with the association that *Pyramus and Thisbe* has with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and, as a result, the playlet ultimately represents a continual reconfiguration of Shakespeare ontology.

We might go further affirming the value of the playlet to critical study: *Pyramus and Thisbe*, by facilitating a constant shift from genre to genre, media to media, attaches itself to an intersection between Shakespeare and the dominant artistic ideology, becoming not so much an example of appropriation but a methodology through which we might explore Shakespeare's own place as an agent of culture. By drawing attention to its audience, *Pyramus and Thisbe* foregrounds the receptive component of adaptation; the force of the comedy is drawn from the moment at which the literary text collides with the culture using it and as such allows for an examination of the appropriative impulse. The narration of drama that occurs through Peter Quince's interminable prologues and Bottom's interjections facilitates a reading of *Pyramus and Thisbe* that claims an interpretive authority over its source and, no matter

how poorly executed it may be, asserts the place of artist as both consumer and producer of Shakespeare.

In spite of the playlet's obsession with its own aesthetic, the simple joy of Shakespeare's *Pyramus and Thisbe* is located in the fact that the players are, quite simply, no good. This failure is well documented by Theseus and the lovers, and this device of the surrogate audience keeps the actual audience at a critical distance. If, as Linda Hutcheon supposes, parody is foregrounded on the delicate balance "between complicity and distance" (32), then appropriators must navigate this potential detachment by shaping the audience, either by intervening between the play and its spectators using Shakespeare's own dramaturgy or changing the nature of the text to lean more toward homage in an even more complex use of Shakespeare's artisans. In either case, appropriation of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is further politicized because it requires our alignment with Theseus's drawing us into his class critique, and our resistance to the aristocrats' scorn must be mediated for the comedy to succeed. Shakespeare's triumph is to harness this power of performance so that we, like Hyppolita, are moved and, in being so, turn our censorious eye on those who would condemn *Pyramus and Thisbe*'s artistry, thus highlighting the ridiculousness of the form they ape. In such an instance, the playlet suggests, our bad workmen might be correct in blaming their tools.

Because of Shakespeare's bardolatrous history, a claim to appropriative authority, particularly when combined with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s high-reaching Mechanicals, must necessarily look at historical attempts to construct a high/low aesthetic binary. Shakespeare's rise to respectability, which is reasonably traced back to Garrick and the Stratford Jubilee of 1769, is emblematic of a larger history that, in the twenty-first century, continues to seek a claim for the "solar unassailability" (Wilson 95) of Shakespeare through assimilation into literary culture, represented by consecration in print. Yet the ongoing presence of *Pyramus and Thisbe* as a freestanding text suggests otherwise and supports more recent claims to the authority of transmedial appropriation. The eighteenth-century acceptance of Shakespeare is unabashedly conditional, as Colman's caustic dismissal illustrates (nor was such censure restricted to working-class characters, as Nahum Tate's *King Lear* revision proves). The era's propensity for "improving" Shakespeare ad hoc exemplifies the trend that elevated Shakespeare to the national poet, even as many plays retained the imperfection that marked their association with the troublesome rustic Stratfordian—Shakespeare the man was subordinated to Shakespeare the Poet. *Pyramus and Thisbe*'s status as broad slapstick comedy, lacking poetry or noble characters, acts as a microcosm of the disparity in absorbing the man into the poet, a bifurcation that, as this book illustrates, was not fully reconciled until the rise of mass media and globalized Shake-

speare in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The piece's low clowning, deliberately bad verse, and broad character sketches have traditionally resisted literariness, depending instead on the physicality of performance to provide the sketch with the nuance that verse can impart toward its reader through the page. By epitomizing "bad" art, *Pyramus and Thisbe* demands that its interpreters clarify their definition of "bad" art, which, by implication, also defines what is "good," rendering any appropriation of the text a meta-critical statement. By directly engaging in common culture, *Pyramus and Thisbe* has traditionally eschewed the correlation between "bad" and "low" culture, perpetuating a myth of cultural hierarchies that the text's presence itself deconstructs. Moreover, *Pyramus and Thisbe* represents a class-based resistance to the appropriation of Shakespeare as the embodiment of a literary hegemony that sought to diminish populist representations of mass entertainment's worth.

Recent attention to the role that new media plays in the evolution of Shakespeare's advocates for the recognition of "such practices in which the adaptation displaces, revisions, and reshapes the source" (Fischlin 6) implicitly assumes a newness to such practices that *Pyramus and Thisbe*'s history would refute. The vibrancy of twenty-first century appropriative discourse, with its emphasis on dialogic, can, and should, inform the past. The canonicity of artists, writers, and practitioners who have historically engaged with *Pyramus and Thisbe*, such as Garrick, Henry James, Louisa May Alcott, and Louis Armstrong, seems to encourage the language of homage but, by implicating the shared language of authorship that suggests an "original" that is honored or explored, misses the vital aspects of appropriation. The twenty-first century era of "post fidelity" (Lanier 27) allows for an interrogation of "ethics and value" (26) in appropriative study—one that *Pyramus and Thisbe* is well positioned to critique. The playlet's awareness of its embodiment as failed art demands recognition of the interpretive act, and this book aims to look at the trajectory across the centuries to establish a transmedial value to *Pyramus and Thisbe* that speaks to the evolution of a variety of Shakespeares, appropriated according to need, and that point back at the culture producing them.

The line of critical inquiry that examines Shakespeare's place as a vehicle for popular culture through appropriative discourse is an area that has quite rightly come to prominence alongside the increasing interest in twenty-first-century digital media studies. The online archive has facilitated widespread accessibility to Shakespeare that has changed the contours of performance study, source study, and more widespread assumptions about textual stability. The Internet has allowed performers a global stage on which to present their work, not only rendering their cultural production more immediately relevant but also creating a transcultural network of performance that encourages the

everyday user to read the work more directly according to its cultural context, facilitated by search engines such as Google or archives such as YouTube. Moreover, social media sites such as Tumblr, Reddit, and Facebook actively promote the ongoing creation of user-generated Shakespeare, with passionate amateurs exploiting their own niche audience in pursuit of their own interests. Such aggressively contemporary interpretations render explicit the correlation between the meaning of a text and its platform, making the genre the subject of debate, often at the expense of the comfortable idea of textual stability.

As always, Shakespeare, by his unchallenged status as a titanic literary monument, occupies a unique place in this discussion. Recent critical movements in Shakespeare studies, such as the shift toward understanding Shakespeare's presence in popular culture, the emergence of presentism as a serious scholarly approach, and the rise of performance theory, have gone far to break down scholarly distinctions between "original" Shakespearean texts and the creative iterations that exist through appropriative use—and with good reason. The advent of Shakespeare studies "in performance" recognizes the culturally unmoored nature of contemporary performance, as it reflects not only on the tastes of our times but also on the subjectivity of a given epoch, challenging the notion of Shakespeare as a fixed and autonomous entity.

However, in spite of this accelerating field of performance-oriented critical study and the rise in appropriation studies that rightly views the processes as transformative, the iconography of Shakespeare is of such great influence that a binary of high/low continues to sustain itself. As long as Shakespeare continues to thrive as a valued aesthetic signifier, popular performers will seek to capitalize on cultural revenue accrued by engaging with Shakespeare, and the idea of Shakespeare continues to be distinct from the everyday practice that is visualized in performance. The rise of "user-generated performance" in twenty-first-century Internet culture has in large part facilitated this change of status for subculture, or perhaps the transition from subculture to the more pluralistic counterculture of populist Shakespeare. Online Shakespeares have facilitated a leveling of cultural differences and have facilitated the shattering of the concept of the ruling aesthetic monolith, instead highlighting the thousand cracks in a hegemony, through which new forms of expression can seep out. Online users can subvert the stability of cultural signification by the flattening of chronological hierarchies by fetishizing and appropriating past cultures (both "high" and "low") for current countercultural intentions; at this moment in history, we bear witness to the practical application of postmodernism. What online cultures make irreducibly clear is the futility of trying to segregate what is established and its underground counterpart.

Chapter 1 argues for Shakespeare's own appropriative use of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, examining both the medieval heritage of the playlet and Shake-