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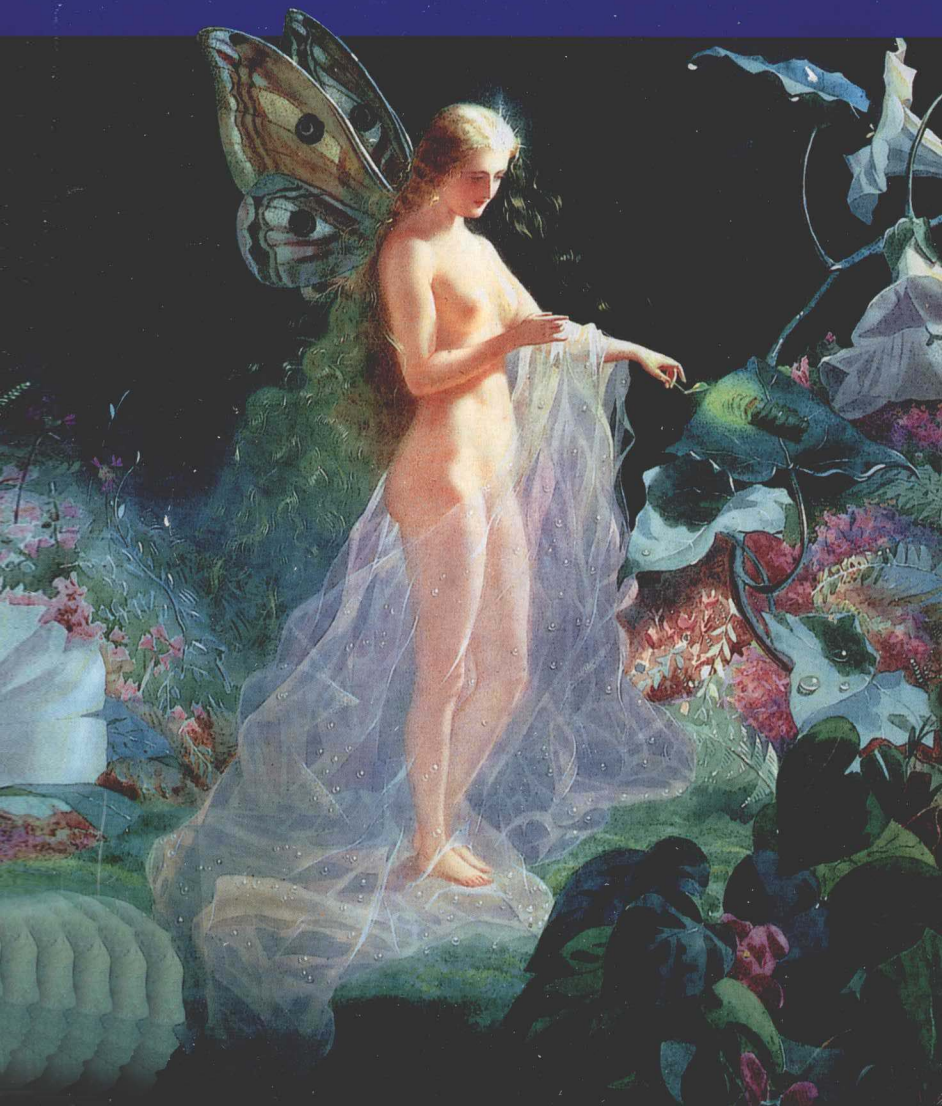
A Midsummer Night's Dream

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice* as its inaugural volumes, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

'How shall we find the concord of this discord?'
(5.1.60.)

When Samuel Pepys saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in September 1662, he remarked that he had never seen it before – 'nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life'.[1] Pepys, however, appears to have been vastly outnumbered, for over the centuries *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has proved to be one of the most popular of Shakespeare's comedies, frequently revived in the theatre, and sometimes triumphantly revived there. Certainly, the play has often served mainly as the basis for free adaptations, variously operatic and spectacular; and the incidental music composed by Mendelssohn in 1843 accompanied many such versions. R. A. Foakes says that

> the habit of treating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a musical extravaganza, with the text often heavily cut, persisted into the twentieth century. In addition to scenic spectacles and troops [*sic*] of balletic fairies – sometimes played by women, sometimes by infants – producers often allowed their fancy to run riot in 'upholstering' the play, as in the use of electric fireflies in Augustine Daly's 1888 staging, or the innovation of a fight between a spider and a wasp in Frank Benson's treatment of it in 1889.[2]

In contrast, in 1914 Harley Granville Barker offered a controversial production which was innovatory both in its modernism and in its conservatism. It restored the full text, used an apron stage (imitating Elizabethan practice), and used male actors for Oberon and Robin (previously, these rôles had often been assigned to

women).[3] But probably the most important production in the 20th Century was Peter Brook's at London in 1970: this soon became legendary for its originality, verve and vitality; it was a great success with the public and with most (though certainly not all) of its reviewers.[4] It proved that what, on the page, may appear trivial or clumsy can, in a good production, appear profound and delicate, fantastic and enchanting, eerie and erotic.

Certainly, if you want gritty realism, you'll find little of it in the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Instead, you find fairies, autocrats, rural buffoons, and a bizarre mixture of ancient and modern, of what is supposedly the legendary Grecian past and rural Elizabethan England. It's a surrealistic world in which the magic wielded in the inner action extends onwards and outwards to what probably was a real-life wedding. Layers on layers, worlds within worlds: there is a recessive quality created by the craftily hierarchical plotting; and at the centre of the plot is that gross breach of hierarchy, when Bottom, his head transformed into that of an ass, is embraced in moonlight by Titania, queen of immortals.

The moon is the tutelary deity of this play. In every act, the planet is present or is invoked, whether directly or indirectly – invoked more frequently than in any other Shakespeare play. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the word 'moon' is used 28 times;[5] in other plays it appears most frequently in *Love's Labour's Lost* (ten times), *The Taming of the Shrew* (eight times) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (again eight times). The reasons for the predominance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are evident. Most of the action takes place at night; more importantly, Shakespeare exploits thematically the moon's associations. Sometimes the moon is associated with chastity, because Diana, the lunar goddess, was the virgin huntress. (A nun will live 'a barren sister . . . , / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon'.) Sometimes it is associated with marriage: for a traditional superstition held that the time of the new moon was a propitious time for weddings.[6] (Hippolyta assures Theseus that soon the planet 'like to a silver bow / New-bent in heaven' will shine, so that their nuptials may proceed.) Another superstition held that to sleep in moonlight might induce madness: the very word 'lunacy' connotes the influence of Luna, the moon. Theseus will equate lovers and poets with lunatics. Above all, here as in

Shakespeare's works generally, the moon, which is never stable but moves through the skies, waxing and waning, is the planet of mutability, presiding over change. The moon-goddess herself was protean, manfesting herself as Luna, Phoebe or Cynthia in the sky, Diana or Lucina on earth, and Proserpina and Hecate when in Hades or visiting the earth.[7] So this play is about metamorphoses, 'translations', transformations. Just like the 'far-off mountains turnèd into clouds', the ruthless laws which, at the beginning of the action, seem as rigid as iron are transformed, towards the end, into conventions as soft as chocolate teapots.[8] Young people who seem devoted to each other will, by enchantment, be converted into quarrelsome, angry and jealous rivals. Bottom, endearingly self-assured but sometimes asinine in character, has his head transformed into that of an ass – 'Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.' And, although the moon has presided symbolically over much of the action, it becomes demeaningly burlesqued as one of the *dramatis personae*, performed by Starveling, in the play-within-a-play, 'Pyramus and Thisby'.

Early in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, social and conceptual hierarchies are firmly established, only to be the more strikingly breached and confused before the eventual clarifications and restoration of order. At the base of the social ladder are Bottom and his fellows; above them are the lovers, subject to the intended control of Egeus and the jurisdiction of Theseus; and beyond them, as influential observers and manipulators, are proud Oberon and his henchman, Robin. Shakespeare was no socialist and hardly a democrat (indeed, you'd have difficulty in finding one in his era),[9] but there's plenty to gratify one's sense of sympathy with the under-dog. The 'Pyramus and Thisby' drama may predictably collapse into buffoonish farce; yet, from the point of view of theatre audiences, it is usually a comic peak of the action: Bottom and Company are more successful than they ever realise. Their play about tragic misreadings of the situation makes an ironic commentary on the misreadings and misunderstandings that have taken place in the action involving the fugitive lovers. Bottom is treated derisively by Oberon and Robin; but he has the last laugh. Converted into an ass-headed grotesque who delights the deluded Titania, he enjoys bliss with her in her bower. Whether that bliss seems sexual, non-sexual, or sexual-and-more will depend on

your interpretation of the text and/or on the nature of the production that you see. Peter Brook's production made the central moment of the play the ecstatic joy as the tumescent Bottom was carried aloft with Titania in an opulently crimson-feathered bed: no doubt about it, sexual orgasm was imminent.[10] But when Bottom later tries to recall the event, it is already a dream dissolving and fading from memory: he captures only a sense of the wondrous and ineffable.

> 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.

So, at the centre of the action, lies a lacuna and an enigma: an undefined union of a beautiful immortal with a buffoonish mortal wearing an ass's head, in a glorious breach of hierarchy. Oberon thought he was punishing Titania, but it makes the play morally better if we think that Oberon has been cuckolded by Bottom. Both Titania and Bottom are, at the time, subject to the magic inflicted on them by Oberon via Robin; therefore, if the couple, instead of suffering the intended humiliation, enjoy an extreme of bliss, that serves Oberon and Robin right. There's no need to worry about whether the bliss was sexual *or* innocent, for that seems to be a false disjunction in this case: it's not a matter of 'either/or' but of, at least, 'both/and'. 'Mortal grossness' has been sublimated.

One of the most attractive features of the play is its combination of fantasy and common sense, of airy feyness and solid substance. When the beautiful Titania falls in love with the transmogrified Bottom, the fantastic event evokes a familiar reality. 'I wonder what she sees in him?' is a remark sometimes heard at a wedding, and 'He's making an ass of himself' can sometimes be heard at a reception. Desire indeed unites strange bed-fellows and reminds us of legendary incongruities. In ancient legend, Midas's ears became those of an ass; Circe, the seductive enchantress, turned men into swine; and Apuleius's Lucius became an asinine sexual athlete. Such stories illustrate the perennial recognition that the borderline between the human and the bestial is shifting and variable. People's

sexual desires and appetites can subvert reason and may result in exultation, but they may also reveal our kinship with brutes. Shakespeare's variation on this theme, in the person of Bottom, suggests not only a metaphor made literal (this man 'is but an ass' in his imperturbable folly; the asinine head offers a tangible representation of the intangible quality), but also the possibility of a transcendent rather than a demeaning experience: desire may open a gateway to the ineffable. If we look at the confusions of Hermia, Lysander, Helena and Demetrius (those confusions induced when Robin drips the drug into the wrong person's eyes), we see that what is given comic acceleration and heightening is, yet again, a familiar truth: love is fickle; lovers may vehemently swear constancy, but all too often infidelities ensue. While extolling the uniqueness of their particular objects of desire, people in love behave predictably and interchangeably. Ultimately, in the play, the artificially-induced confusion is artificially resolved; the course of true love does eventually seem to run smooth. But what has been presented in comic and even farcical form is a perennial reality which may bear tragic consequences. In addition, as Judith Buchanan remarks, the flow of action contains undercurrents of violence:

> [M]ost of the acts, or threatened acts, of aggression in the play are committed by men on women (Theseus' wooing of Hippolyta with his sword, Egeus' insistent call for the death of his own daughter, Oberon's desire to exact physical and psychological revenge on Titania, Demetrius' rape threat to Helena) . . . [11]

Titania, in turn, is quite prepared to hold Bottom captive – and a gagged captive at that: 'Tie up my love's tongue: bring him silently'. The very climate of the region has (we are told) been thrown into turmoil by the dissension between Oberon and Titania. Modes of disruption and aggression precede the eventual assurance that 'all shall be well' and the reconciliation of the differing groups.

The characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are, of course, bizarrely diverse. We encounter (among others): a king and queen of the fairies who control the climate; a puck (a kind of goblin) and lesser fairies of variable sizes (some being too minute to be

accurately represented on stage); rustics who seem to be denizens of the rural England of Shakespeare's day; a 'duke' who rules Athens and is supposed to be the heroic Theseus of ancient Greek legend; and his fiancée, who is a queen of the mythical Amazons. The allusions span thousands of years: Hecate, Cupid, Diana, Hercules, Ariadne, Corin, Phillida, English folk-lore, nuns in convents, the nine-men's morris, a fowler firing his gun at choughs. The flora and fauna evoke Shakespeare's Warwickshire far more than legendary Attica, but nevertheless include lions and apes. The weather is supposed to be in a state of oppressive turmoil, with fields flooded in summer; yet the night depicted is so clement that lovers can sleep in the open air. Robin imposes a fog on mortals, but later becomes their floor-sweeper. Culturally, geographically, chronologically and meteorologically, therefore, the play might appear so muddled as to strain credulity to breaking-point. In practice, it is this very muddle that yields much of the pleasure: customary categories are breached, confused and blended; metamorphoses are at work in our mental filing-systems; logic takes a holiday; and finally in the play there is a partial restoration of the familiar which leaves an enduring sense of its partial subversion.

One of the most memorable, and memorably-ironic, speeches in the whole of Shakespeare is uttered by Theseus in the final act:

> I never may believe
> These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.
> The lunatic, the lover and the poet
> Are of imagination all compáct.
> One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
> That is the madman. The lover, all 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 airy nothing

> A local habitation and a name.
> Such tricks hath strong imagination
> That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
> Or in the night, imagining some fear,
> How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

One obvious function of this speech is to vent scepticism – not just the character's, but the audience's lurking scepticism, which here finds voice in Theseus's words. 'Antique fables, . . . fairy toys': that's what anyone might think on reading a plot-summary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. According to Theseus, both the poet and the lover are no better than the lunatic: all three let imagination prevail over reality. The lover, deluded fellow, thinks that a swarthy gypsy is as beautiful as Helen of Troy; the poet gives shape to 'airy nothings': thus both are deranged; and all are no better than the fearful night-walker who thinks a bush is a bear. If, however, the scepticism of Theseus (together with the element of scepticism haunting the audience's response to the play) here gains expression, it does so in order to be subverted ironically. In the first place, who is saying this? Why, the fictional Theseus, who had once been personally aided by the Queen of Fairies; an imaginary hero, product of a poet (and of many story-tellers in the past), and here played by an actor. So, the more convincingly authoritative the Duke's words seem, the more thoroughly they are mocked by the situation. In Theseus' world, immortals intermingle with mortals; and, if lovers' delusions have been portrayed, they are delusions which we (deluded into suspending some disbelief) have watched with sympathy as well as amusement. As Hippolyta says, the lovers' stories seem consistent, expressing 'something of great constancy', and, moreover, something 'strange and admirable' – unfamiliar and to be wondered at, not dismissed. In that respect, Bottom's response was wiser than Theseus's.

> 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.

Whereas Theseus is reductively dismissive, Bottom in these

words recognises the reality of experiences which transcend expression and comprehension. His phrasing involves muddled recollection of I Corinthians 2:9-10:

> The eye hath not seen, and the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.
>
> But God hath opened them unto us by his spirit. For the spirit searcheth all things, yea the bottom of God's secrets.[12]

Bottom himself is clearly the appropriate person to plumb secrets to their bottom. He certainly hasn't plumbed *God*'s secrets, for the fantasia in which he is involved has a predominantly non-Christian metaphysic; but his muddled phrasing is a way of conveying an experience that eluded words. Indeed, the very muddle – expressing a synaesthesia or confusion of the senses – is entirely apt in this play of metamorphoses and confusions. The changes and entanglements are present not only at the level of plot and characterisation but also here, for a moment, at the level of the very vocabulary: so his comic malapropisms briefly glow with symbolism. Instead of giving to 'airy nothing' a 'local habitation and a name', Bottom has evoked 'airy something' by his failure to define a recollection. Of course, Theseus, in the very act of denigrating the poet as a mere fantasist, had uttered splendid lines of poetry, rhetorically resonant, rhythmically cumulative, and sensuously seductive in the patterns of alliteration and assonance. As elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare delights in conceptual paradox.

A paradox of a kind that frequently occurs in his plays is found in the epilogue, when the audience is addressed by a Robin who is a speaking 'shadow', simultaneously the fictional puck and an actor appealing for applause for the show. He becomes a hybrid entity, part fantasy and part substance, rather as Bottom was a mixture of ass and man. He points out that the performance may be treated by any discontented patrons as a communal – and inconsequential – dream. The postulate that the play may be 'inconsequential' has been amply refuted by cultural history, for its theatrical and critical 'consequences' continue to this day; and, in both the world of the theatre and the arena of critical wrangling, the prestige of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues to grow. The continuing