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THE *Folger Library* GENERAL READER'S *Shakespeare*

Edited by
LOUIS B. WRIGHT and VIRGINIA A. LAMAR

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Illustrated with material in the Folger Library Collections

LOUIS B. WRIGHT, General Editor. Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library from 1948 until his retirement in 1968, Dr. Wright has devoted over forty years to the study of the Shakespearean period. In 1926 he completed his doctoral thesis on "Vaudeville Elements in Elizabethan Drama" and subsequently published many articles on the stagecraft and theatre of Shakespeare's day. He is the author of *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (1935), *Religion and Empire* (1942), *The Elizabethans' America* (1965), and many other books and essays on the history and literature of the Tudor and Stuart periods, including *Shakespeare for Everyman* (1964). Dr. Wright has taught at the universities of North Carolina, California at Los Angeles, Michigan, Minnesota, and other American institutions. From 1932 to 1948 he was instrumental in developing the research program of the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery. During his tenure as Director, the Folger Shakespeare Library became one of the leading research institutions of the world for the study of the backgrounds of Anglo-American civilization.

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

By

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS

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Preface

This edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is designed to make available a readable text of one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. In the centuries since Shakespeare many changes have occurred in the meanings of words, and some clarification of Shakespeare's vocabulary may be helpful. To provide the reader with necessary notes in the most accessible format, we have placed them on the pages facing the text that they explain. We have tried to make these notes as brief and simple as possible. Preliminary to the text we have also included a brief statement of essential information about Shakespeare and his stage. Readers desiring more detailed information should refer to the books suggested in the references, and if still further information is needed, the bibliographies in those books will provide the necessary clues to the literature of the subject.

The early texts of all of Shakespeare's plays provide only inadequate stage directions, and it is conventional for modern editors to add many that clarify the action. Such additions, and additions to entrances, are placed in square brackets.

All illustrations are from material in the Folger Library collections.

L. B. W.
V. A. L.

February 1, 1958

A Fairy Fantasy

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies and has long been a favorite for amateur production, especially on the campuses of women's colleges, where Titania, Oberon, Puck, and the other fairies are wont to frisk and frolic about Commencement time. The play has the lilt and spirit of youth, and the romantic poetry has the freshness and fragrance of spring flowers. The time of its action is not midsummer, as the title might suggest, but about May Day, and the title merely alludes to the gay madness proverbially associated with the rites of Midsummer's Eve, or those of May Day, for that matter. The play is a fantasy of folklore and fairies, a medley of poetry, song, and dance, with vivid contrasts between the dainty folk in Titania's train and the "rude mechanicals" in Bottom's company. It has some of the qualities of the masque, a favorite form of light entertainment at court or at celebrations in the houses of the nobility.

Internal evidence indicates that Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the wedding of some great personage, but that personage's identity has escaped literary historians. Scholars have guessed that it might have been written for the wedding of William

Stanley, Earl of Derby, and Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford, which took place in the presence of Queen Elizabeth at her palace at Greenwich on January 26, 1595. An elaborate compliment to the Queen in Act II, Scene i, the "fair Vestal, throned by the West," suggests that she was present when the play was first presented. Since other references make 1595 seem a likely date for the production of the play, the Earl of Derby's wedding is at least a possible occasion.

The masque was a favorite type of entertainment for such occasions, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Shakespeare's nearest approach to that form of spectacle in which Ben Jonson became a master. In a book entitled *The Court Masque,* Miss Enid Welsford suggests the relations between regular drama and the masque: "The drama is a story with crisis and dénouement; the masque is an invention moving upon a hinge, or, to put it another way, it is the logical working out of an idea which has to be taken for granted. The hinge of a masque was as a rule some riddling compliment of the sovereign, or an actual event, which was represented as taking place in Olympus or Arcadia, or as being so magnificent an affair that divinities were brought down to celebrate it" (p. 256). The masque was an elaborate show that emphasized spectacular elements, costume, and scenic devices rather than dramatic plot and poetry. Music, dancing, and pageantry were its concomitants. Normally it had allegorical figures—gods, goddesses, shepherds, shepherdesses, and other creatures of fancy beautifully costumed who sang, danced, and paraded before the guests. These creations had as foils a contrasting group known

as the antimasque, who might be anything from satyrs to earthy yokels comically attired.

The similarity of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the spirit of the masque is obvious, but as always in Shakespeare, his genius transcends conventions, and he writes a poetic drama instead of a stereotyped pageant. And with consummate skill he weaves three separate elements of the play together to give it unity. The main plot concerns the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta and the love story of Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia, and Helena. To provide entertainment at the wedding, the Athenian artisans plan to give the play of Pyramus and Thisby. The story of the quarrel of Oberon and Titania and of the activities of the fairies parallels the main plot; but by making Puck the instrument for solving the problems of the earthly lovers and increasing the confusions and comedy of the artisans, the author brings the groups together in an organic whole.

Although our main interest may be in the fairy passages and the burlesque humor of the artisans, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not merely an entertaining spectacle like any number of masques that endured for a night and long since have been forgotten. Shakespeare always provides a meaning and a significance deeper than the surface ripples of mere entertainment. His plays are filled with commentary on life and love, and in this play from his early period, he treats the whimsical and irresponsible aspects of love, the midsummer madness that has no explanation except the whims of men and women or the deviltry of Robin Goodfellow. But Shakespeare contemplates these moods and qualities in no spirit of criticism or reproof. Love can make men and women do many foolish things, but

the author and his audience laugh gaily at such folly and accept it as the norm of life. "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" Puck exclaims, but, for all of that, mortals are rather charming beings, at least on this "wedding day at night," and neither Puck nor Shakespeare shows any desire to change them. Written for a happy occasion, the play touches lightly on problems of love and marriage that receive more profound treatment in *Romeo and Juliet* and later plays.

As was suitable in an entertainment designed for a wedding, the play closes with an epithalamium as the fairies flit about doing good and making amends for any confusions they may have caused before. Oberon, now in full control of his own fairy household, gives orders:

> Now, until the break of day,
> Through this house each fairy stray.
> To the best bride-bed will we,
> Which by us shall blessed be;
> And the issue there create
> Ever shall be fortunate.

And Puck, reformed and repentant after his gay trickeries, comments:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended—
> That you have but slumb'red here
> While these visions did appear.

Thus the play ends and the wedding guests troop home humming softly one of the fairy airs.

In his treatment of the fairies, Shakespeare departed

from traditional folklore to give them a benignity that they did not always possess. Shakespeare's age believed in witches, hobgoblins, and ghosts, and to the average countryman of Warwickshire fairies connoted devils and hobgoblins rather than the "little people." Though Shakespeare's Puck might be a "shrewd and knavish sprite," playing tricks on housewives and night wanderers, he was not the terrifying Hobgoblin of popular fancy, and ever after Shakespeare he would have a disposition and a nature vastly improved. Indeed, Shakespeare's imaginative concept of the fairies as dainty beings of gauze and gossamer influenced most of the fairy literature that came after him.

The sources of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are scattered and diverse, derived from reading here and there, and indeed in part from oral tradition. The love story of Theseus and Hippolyta he may have remembered from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and he may have found facts about Theseus in Sir Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives* (1579). The tale of Pyramus and Thisby is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Various other bits and pieces in the play may have come from his desultory reading. A professional writer is likely to tuck away in his memory a wide variety of oddments that he will use at some later time.

The fairy lore is both traditional and literary in its sources. Tales of goblins and sprites were common enough, and Shakespeare could have heard about Robin Goodfellow from his nurse. Oberon, as king of the fairies, had already appeared in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and elsewhere. Robert Greene, in a play *James the Fourth* (*ca.* 1591), had employed Oberon as a charac-

ter. The source for the name Titania is not clear. For such sprites as Cobweb and Peaseblossom, Shakespeare had only to search his own imagination.

For the artisans, Shakespeare drew on his own memory of yokels and craftsmen he had known at Stratford or had observed in the byways of London. Bottom, the weaver, Quince, the carpenter, Flute, the bellows-mender, and all the rest may have been domiciled in Athens but they are authentically English, and the humor is the robust humor that comes from intimate contact with simple folk. However closely people may live in cities, the countryman and small townsman usually acquire a more accurate understanding of the vagaries of human nature, and they almost always possess a keener capacity for observation, than the city dweller. No city slicker could have created Bottom—or Falstaff. The humor of witty byplay and the wisecrack may emanate from urban sophisticates, but the humor that originates in the idiosyncrasies of human nature, particularly the earthy humor illustrated by the Bottoms and the Falstaffs, is likely to have its source in the mind of one who has observed closely the people who make up the population of the small town and the countryside.

HISTORY OF THE PLAY

A Midsummer Night's Dream has had a long and interesting stage history. How great was its popularity when Shakespeare's company performed it in the playhouse, the records do not show, but the title page of the First Quarto, printed in 1600, declared that it had been "sundry times publicly acted." In 1598, Francis

Meres, a young preacher, in a volume called *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury,* listed it among the comedies for which Shakespeare was famed. We know of a performance on Sunday, September 27, 1631, in the house of John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln. The Puritans made an uproar because a bishop had allowed a heathen play to be performed on his premises on a Sunday.

During the period after 1642 when the Puritans kept the theatres closed, a short skit, or droll as it was called, based on the artisans' parts appears to have been acted in private. This droll was printed in 1661, and again in 1672, as *The Merry Conceited Humors of Bottom the Weaver.* It enjoyed considerable popularity and was even performed in Germany.

After the Restoration of Charles II, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was one of the Shakespearean plays that had a revival. Samuel Pepys saw it at the King's Theatre on September 29, 1662, and commented in his *Diary* that it was "the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life." In 1692 Henry Purcell, one of the great composers and musicians of the period, prepared an operatic version of the play with the title *The Fairy Queen,* which was produced at Dorset Garden. In 1716 Richard Leveridge, another musician, made a burlesque of Italian opera out of the artisans' portions of the play. This piece enjoyed considerable popularity as an afterpiece, a comic bit performed at the end of any full-length play. In 1723 Charles Johnson made an adaptation from *As You Like It* called *Love in a Forest* and gilded the lily by adding in the last act a portion of the Pyramus and Thisby episode from *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Various other adaptations were seen during the eighteenth and early nine-

teenth centuries. David Garrick put on a version at Drury Lane that left out the artisans, who violated his sense of decorum and propriety.

While English performances were still being given in abbreviated and garbled versions, the great German Shakespearean Ludwig Tieck in 1827 revived Shakespeare's true text for a performance in Berlin. For this performance, Mendelssohn composed music that has endured in popularity from that day to this. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the play has been performed for the most part as Shakespeare wrote it, but in the 1930's Max Reinhardt staged a performance at Los Angeles, California, in the Hollywood Bowl, that outdid anything in the eighteenth century for pretentious nonsense. The hillside back of the Hollywood Bowl was strung with electric wires so that thousands of blue lights signifying fairies could glow and flicker at the proper time. Three hundred wedding guests carrying lighted flambeaux wound down from the hills to take part in the play. Reinhardt's motion-picture version was planned on the same scale, and the poetry of Shakespeare was lost in a wilderness of stage effects. Despite such occasional deviations from good taste, most modern productions have tried to retain the spirit of Shakespeare's theatre, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* remains an important item in Shakespearean repertory theatres and is a frequent choice for amateur productions.

THE TEXT

A Midsummer Night's Dream was licensed for printing on October 8, 1600, and was printed in the same year with the title: *A Midsommer nights dreame. As*

it hath beene sundry times publickely acted, by the Right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants. Written by William Shakespeare. Imprinted at London, for Thomas Fisher, and are to be soulde at his shoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart, in Fleetestreete. 1600. This is known as the First Quarto. A Second Quarto "Printed by Iames Roberts, 1600," is a pirated edition of the First Quarto, but is falsely dated and was really printed in 1619. The next printing of the play was in the First Folio, the collected edition of 1623. The text of the First Quarto has relatively few errors and corruptions. The copy for the First Folio printing of the play appears to have been a corrected version of the Second Quarto, which may have been used as a prompt copy for a revival of the play in 1619. The present edition is based on the First Quarto with corrections suggested by variant readings in the First Folio.

THE AUTHOR

AS EARLY AS 1598 Shakespeare was so well known as a literary and dramatic craftsman that Francis Meres, in his *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury,* referred in flattering terms to him as "mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare," famous for his *Venus and Adonis,* his *Lucrece,* and "his sugared sonnets," which were circulating "among his private friends." Meres observes further that "as Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage," and he mentions a dozen plays that had made a name for Shakespeare. He concludes with the remark "that the Muses would speak

with Shakespeare's fine filed phrase if they would speak English."

To those acquainted with the history of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, it is incredible that anyone should be so naïve or ignorant as to doubt the reality of Shakespeare as the author of the plays that bear his name. Yet so much nonsense has been written about other "candidates" for the plays that it is well to remind readers that no credible evidence that would stand up in a court of law has ever been adduced to prove either that Shakespeare did not write his plays or that anyone else wrote them. All the theories offered for the authorship of Francis Bacon, the Earl of Derby, the Earl of Oxford, the Earl of Hertford, Christopher Marlowe, and a score of other candidates are mere conjectures spun from the active imaginations of persons who confuse hypothesis and conjecture with evidence.

As Meres' statement of 1598 indicates, Shakespeare was already a popular playwright whose name carried weight at the box office. The obvious reputation of Shakespeare as early as 1598 makes the effort to prove him a myth one of the most absurd in the history of human perversity.

The anti-Shakespeareans talk darkly about a plot of vested interests to maintain the authorship of Shakespeare. Nobody has any vested interest in Shakespeare, but every scholar is interested in the truth and in the quality of evidence advanced by special pleaders who set forth hypotheses in place of facts.

The anti-Shakespeareans base their arguments upon a few simple premises, all of them false. These false premises are that Shakespeare was an unlettered yokel

without any schooling, that nothing is known about Shakespeare, and that only a noble lord or the equivalent in background could have written the plays. The facts are that more is known about Shakespeare than about most dramatists of his day, that he had a very good education, acquired in the Stratford Grammar School, that the plays show no evidence of profound book learning, and that the knowledge of kings and courts evident in the plays is no greater than any intelligent young man could have picked up at second hand. Most anti-Shakespeareans are naïve and betray an obvious snobbery. The author of their favorite plays, they imply, must have had a college diploma framed and hung on his study wall like the one in their dentist's office, and obviously so great a writer must have had a title or some equally significant evidence of exalted social background. They forget that genius has a way of cropping up in unexpected places and that none of the great creative writers of the world got his inspiration in a college or university course.

William Shakespeare was the son of John Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, a substantial citizen of that small but busy market town in the center of the rich agricultural county of Warwick. John Shakespeare kept a shop, what we would call a general store; he dealt in wool and other produce and gradually acquired property. As a youth, John Shakespeare had learned the trade of glover and leather worker. There is no contemporary evidence that the elder Shakespeare was a butcher, though the anti-Shakespeareans like to talk about the ignorant "butcher's boy of Stratford." Their only evidence is a statement by gossipy John Aubrey, more than a century after William Shakespeare's birth,