

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM — AN INTRODUCTION

THEMES AND ISSUES

Marriage; love & reason; men v. women — Power & submission — Illusion & reality; imagination & reason — Magic, dream, reality — Harmony & balance — The theatrical art & dramatic illusion — Fairies, elves & spirits

COMPOSITION DATE & OCCASION, CONTEXT, SOURCES

See the Cambridge introduction for a discussion of the possible date of composition. The debate among specialists rages on whether *MND* was written on the occasion of an actual aristocratic wedding, but perhaps we can agree with Foakes when he writes (p. 4) that “it is pointless to speculate further” about it, at least as far as *we* are concerned.

MND is one of the very few of Shak.'s plays that do not seem to have a direct source. It is nevertheless rife with echoes of and references to classical literature and mythology: Ovid and Plutarch mainly, but also Apuleius e.g. A comparison of those authorities with the play can raise some interesting questions; this is entirely legitimate, considering that we know for a fact that Shak. knew his myths (through Golding's and North's translations at least), and so did many among his audience.

Another background for it is English folklore: in the very era when modern scientific thought was being developed (cf. Galileo, Bacon, etc.), belief in magic and in fairies, elves, pucks *et al.* was still a common thing, not only among the popular classes (cf. James VI's obsession with witchcraft for instance). Folk festivities were still commonly observed, if only as a syncretic mixture of ancient pagan rituals and their subsequent Christianisation — for instance, Midsummer Day was officially St John the Baptist's Day (24 June).

A COMEDY, PERHAPS WITH DARK OVERTONES

As do many other Shakespearian comedies, it ends with a happy wedding or several: an image of concord and happiness. Comic catharsis, social harmony & order. In this specific case (whether intended for an actual, specific couple or not), also a more personal aspect: an epithalamium, explicitly expressed by Obe. (5.1.379–400).

Also a comedy in that it is comic = funny. The botched *Pyr. & This.*, the “rude mechanicals” in general, malapropisms, Bott. wanting to play all the roles, etc. Bott.'s ass's head, and Tit. in love with him. The four lovers' vicissitudes (manipulated by Puck and Obe.). A permeating bawdy streak: appropriate to wedding celebration + a popular comic device: the names of the artisans e.g. (“low comedy”). A pun on *ass* (“donkey”/“backside” = *arse*) is possible (4.1.23–24 e.g.) but not certain.

The dream-like quality of the *Dream*: magical, enchanting, fairy-like world; cute, glittering fairies (cf. Disney's Tinkerbell), etc. See *Tempest*, called a “romance”. See the (slightly later, mainly Jacobean) development of the *masque* (e.g. Ben Jonson's *Oberon* 1611, with actual polar bear cubs!). Also what especially fascinated the 19th century: see Mendelssohn, Fuseli, Rackham, Dadd, etc.

The “green world” (Northrop Frye, 1957): the initial conflict is born in the city (civilisation, the common, normal world), then displaced to another place outside the limits of civilisation (nature, a dream-like world: the fairies' forest) to

be resolved, then back to the city. Cf. *AYL* e.g.

Nonetheless, a darker aspect possibly: compare *R&J*, around the same date. Lovers' situation in 1.1 could easily turn into tragedy; the same later (3.2) if it weren't for Puck. See *WT*, quasi-tragic first, then comic. Ambiguous status of Hipp. (1.1.16–17: "I wooed thee with my sword": is she really willing?). Thes. a not entirely positive figure, a chequered past concerning women. Paul Cantor: Lys. & Her. seem almost to relish the possibility of their being star-crossed lovers in 1.1.

☛ At first glance, a conventional comedy, despite perhaps a slight ambiguity not uncommon for Shak. Order & harmony are re-established at the end after a period of controlled chaos outside the city.

THE MODALITIES OF ORDER: A LOVE COMEDY

A love story between the two final couples: Lys. & Herm., Dem. & Hel.; a love triangle eventually resolved; the obstacles are overcome and "Jack shall have Jill" (4.1.461). The *senex iratus* Egeus is thwarted and love conquers all. Also the joyful (but is it? see below) marriage of Thes. & Hipp. and the end of the lovers' / domestic quarrel between Obe. & Tit. The tragic love story of Pyr. & This. may serve as a counterpoint to it, emphasising the happy ending; anyway, it is played in such a way as to be comical.

Question: can the two couples be told apart? See Cantor (no, deliberately) v. Brooks or Hunt (different archetypes).

MND insists on the discrepancy between love and reason: see 3.1.120 e.g. It affirms the difference between love and fancy, or *loving* and *doting* (an unreasonable obsession / fixation). Hel. dotes on Dem., both young men dote (if only because of Obe.'s magic) on Hel., Tit. dotes on Bott., which cures her of her doting on the changeling. (See *R&J*, where Rom. first dotes on Rosalind, then falls in love with Jul.)

Thes. & Hipp.'s union, on the other hand, is sensible and has political implications: it is a way to ensure peace between former enemies. Love it may be, but it is a form of rational love. Similarly, the concord between Obe. & Tit. ensures stability in the natural world (see below).

Thus, the love comedy may not be construed as promoting a Romantic, passionate form of love (as *R&J* perhaps does: but it is a tragedy...), despite what 19th-century audiences saw in it.

☛ For order to be restored at the end, the lovers have to be paired up nicely, but for that they have to escape the dangers of doting, to overcome the temptation of passing (merely carnal?) passion. There also has to be harmony between the ruling couples.

THE MODALITIES OF ORDER: GENDER & SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Many — not only of the feminist school of criticism — have noted that order in *MND* is essentially male, patriarchal order. All's well that ends well only when the women have accepted the men's dominance: Hipp., Her. & Hel. are married, i.e. under their husbands' authority; Tit. has yielded to Obe.'s wishes concerning the changeling, after being humiliated by his trick; Dem. has made up his mind; Thes. has given a verdict (= "extenuat[ed]" the law, as he said in 1.1.120 was impossible); only men, including Puck, seem to have any initiative. The most immediately evident exception is Egeus's preference being thwarted at the end, but it was nonetheless Her.'s going against his wishes that initiated disorder in the first place. It is worth noting that neither Her. nor Hel. has any line in the whole of Act 5, Tit. having four and Hipp. only about twenty. Some directors go as far as staging Hipp.'s role as that of a captive forced into marriage / submission — see Russell T. Davies's BBC version for example (Hipp. clearly full of hatred and in a straitjacket); that would be rather consistent with the mythological Thes., if not with anything explicit in the text: but see 1.1.122, which has been interpreted as Hipp.'s being dissatisfied with what has just happened.

Thes. to Herm. about marrying 1.1.70–78: the best a woman can hope for is to get married and have children, remaining celibate is a waste. Disorder erupts when Tit. has "forsover [Obe.'s] bed". See the moon, a feminine symbol: Diana goddess of chastity / Cynthia of fertility, maternity. The changeling may be a central figure here, even though he doesn't actually appear in the play. Obe. wants him to be his page, i.e. wants to take him away from a feminine world

where Tit. is keeping him and transfer him to a male world. Besides, some have suggested that Tit.'s "stealing" him is a way for her to fulfil maternal desires.

It's fair to say that Shak., a man of the Renaissance, never was a champion of antisexism; *Taming* is the most obvious example. The general Weltanschauung of the Renaissance was that of a hierarchical society with men at the top, women underneath, which the play shows at the end. But see Viola (*TN*), Portia (*MV*), Rosalind (*AYL*) etc., strong female protagonists; also, England was ruled by a woman (a "fair vestal" [2.1.158]). Women do have their way sometimes: Tit. has stood her ground long enough for Obe. to be forced into tricking her, Her. resists Lys. in 2.2.45ff, etc. More importantly, see 3.1.126–27: Tit. forces Bott. to stay; the social hierarchy (she is a queen, he is a man of the people, and very aptly named: "Bott. is at the bottom" Cantor) has the upper hand over the gender one (although here, she uses magic).

The question of authority, incl. political: who really rules: Thes., or Obe.? See Cantor: Thes. wants to end the play in 4.1.18–19 & 5.1.347–48, but the fairies actually do (+ they have invaded his palace). See also his remark that war is over, so young men (Dem. & Lys.) have to find another way of competing.

☛ A highly conservative (aristocratic & patriarchal) order seems to triumph in the end, although it may be a bit more ambiguous than that. Note: Ovid uses the name Titania for goddesses etc. mainly when describing them as powerful.

REASON V. FANCY, DREAM & MAGIC V. REALITY

In mythology and Plutarch's *Lives* (trans. Thomas North, 1579), Thes. is founder of Athens: traditional association with reason. See 5.1.2ff and his reaction to the play: rejects creative imagination (of the poet, the madman and the lover) as mere fancy, while Hipp. is ready to believe the lovers. In 4.1, Tit. (73), Dem. and Bott. all say that they are not sure what happened, comparing their blurred memories of the night with a dream (a "vision"); in the epilogue, Puck also suggests that we consider the whole play a dream if we wish. The title of the play insists on this fantasy aspect (the fairy-like aspect that 19th c. audiences liked), which establishes a pattern of oppositions: Athens / reason & logic / men's law / reality v. the forest / fantasy, fancy, imagination, whim / dream & magic / illusion: the *preposterous* (see Puck 3.2.121).

One has to remember that (long before Freud) dreams were seen as liable to reveal hidden truths: see Her.'s reaction in 2.2.151ff + Macbeth, Rich. III, Julius Caesar + baroque topos of life as dream (Prospero e.g.); think also of the Freddy Krueger films. Thus, cold reason as embodied by Thes. need not be presented as good in opposition to the fanciful (i.e. vain, empty, illusory) presented as bad. Anyway, Obe.'s & Puck's magic is powerful, and if the whole night in the woods was only a dream, it still effected changes (if only on Dem.) and helped re-establish order.

Another form of illusion in the play: the theatre. What makes the amateur actors so bad is that they both have too little and too much faith in dramatic illusion: they fear the ladies will be scared by the lion, and they need someone to represent moonshine; with Wall, they do both at once: they need someone actually to play the wall, and they imagine that it will be satisfactory for the audience. The theatre is proverbially compared to magic; when Puck delivers the epilogue, he speaks as an actor (a "shadow") as well as a character (compare Prospero's epilogue in *Temp.* and the Clown's in *TN*: "But that's all one, our play is done"). Coleridge famous "willing suspension of disbelief", accepting what is not reality, as condition of drama.

☛ Two opposed worlds: reality & reason v. imagination, illusion. A general movement from rational Athens to the topsy-turvy, preposterous woods and back. Two (different, but both valid) ways of knowing things?

EPISTEMOLOGICAL & SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS: THE MAZE

Herbert, *Obe.'s Mazéd World* (1977): the characters' interrogations when waking up can be read as the reflection of scientific / philosophical controversies in the context of the birth of modern, scientific England in the Elizabethan age. Opposition between a rational view of the world, with an emphasis on scientific knowledge as way to understand and make sense of the world, and a spiritual, traditional, religious view with beliefs in superior (supernatural) powers that

elude us: Thes. / Athens embody the former, the fairies / the forest embody the latter. The image of the maze or labyrinth, suggested by the very presence of Thes. (but see also Bott. “translated”) and manifest especially in Puck’s leading Lys. & Dem. astray in 3.2 would be a symbol of it: quest for knowledge. One of the things that make the “rude mechanicals” ridiculous: their frequent confusion of the senses (“to see about a noise” etc.; not in a Rimbaldian way, although that would be another form of disorder).

This also works, in many ways, with a (20th-c.) Freudian / anthropological approach: the maze = the characters’ / our psyche(s): quest for self-knowledge, confronting our inner fears and desires. See Dem.’s threats on Hel. in 2.1.214ff, 237 (rape) or the way she wants to be his dog (S&M fantasy); Bott. as expressing his animal side (sleeping and eating more than sex, in his case); Puck’s giving free rein to his amoral caprices (beyond good & evil = civilisation, the superego); Obe.’s playing a sadistic trick on Tit., Tit.’s stealing a little boy + cf. supra: maternal instincts, to be compared with 1.1.46ff: Athens has lost touch with nature and role of women in procreation (Cantor). Generally speaking, the fairies are natural spirits, i.e. free from the constraints of culture, but also from its protection: the forest is a dangerous place, with a myriad of wild, threatening animals (2.1.174, 180–181, 228, 2.2.3, 9–30, 36–37, etc.); the Minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth again. Note: compare “what fools these mortals be” with Romeo’s “I am fortune’s fool”.

☛ The forest as a symbolic maze of the mind, whether knowledge or self-knowledge. Going there (the green world) and back = a quest, an initiation, “losing oneself in order to find oneself”, leading to rebirth / purification (catharsis) / enlightenment / etc. The general movement of the play (palace – city – woods – city – palace) could itself be seen as a form of involution that could recall a labyrinth. Cf. maze in Amiens cathedral

AN APOTROPAIC OR PROPITIATORY FUNCTION?

On a cosmic level: Obe. & Tit. as embodiment of the elemental forces: see especially Tit.’s speech in 2.1.88–117: the weather is out of joint, disorder / chaos in the world at large. An animist, pagan vision, but also a possible theological reflection: the fairies are not necessarily benevolent; unlike the Christian God, they are not inherently good: one way of answering the theological crux of existence of evil / chaos (Paul Cantor: “not malicious but capricious”). See also the way Pyr. & This. address things a lot: animism again.

Puck’s epilogue insists on “mending” / making “amends”; it has also been noted that the artisans’ professions are all about mending / fixing / joining things. What needs to be restored / mended so much? Whether Tit.’s speech is topical or not, it almost feels as if the play had such a purpose. C. L. Barber’s *Shak.’s Festive Comedy* (1959): the “saturnalian” function of comedy in Shak.’s times, comparable to Roman Saturnalia, to the carnivalesque (Bakhtin): lord of Misrule as social mechanism; but also Bacchanals / Dionysia, linked with the origins of Greek theatre: πομπή, κῶμος, φαλλοφόροι culminating in the performance of a play: see Thes. insisting on *pomp* and solemnity. A number of other details of the play could be linked with the myth of Dionysus as told in Ovid especially: he is linked with woods and the wilderness; the donkey was one of his animals, and he is linked, through Pan, to the story of Midas; he was attacked by a snake in his sleep; he conquered India; he married Ariadne after she was abandoned by Thes. A conflation of fauns & satyrs with elves, pucks & pixies was not uncommon in the Renaissance. See image of Puck in *Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Prances and Merry Jest* (1639): obviously reminiscent of a satyr, and a clear figure of fertility.

English folk festivities, including the May-game and Midsummer, also have their roots in pagan fertility rites, originally to ensure plentiful harvest; the bedding traditions or the classical epithalamium were to ensure fertility of a couple: see Obe.’s blessing at the end of the play. See the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*, with morris dancing etc. As for folk customs as a way to ward off the evil spirits, see Pratchett’s rewriting of *MND* in *Lords and Ladies*. Shak. would later (c. 1610) include echoes of folk harvest festivals in *WT*, including a dance of twelve satyrs.

☛ This is not to say that Shak. was a crypto- or neo-pagan, of course (even though Obe. & Tit. as Wicca’s Horned God & Moon Goddess works rather well...), but see Paul Cantor: “a comic effort to revive pagan mythology”, playing with classical mythology and folk traditions? Or an echo of beliefs and customs that were far from dead, at least in his native Warwickshire? Possibly revived in time of trouble, whether national or personal (see Gaiman’s *Sandman*: Hamnet died in 1596).

“THE CONCORD OF THIS DISCORD”

The general movement from disorder to a restoration of order inherent in a comedy can probably be said to be in *MND* a movement toward balance, equilibrium: between reason & fancy, unconscious drives & conscious control of one’s feelings, civilised restraint & natural instincts, embracing illusion & trying to understand reality, sexual passion & reasonable chastity, the tyrant & the lover, hierarchical society & united community, Christian theology & folk customs inherited from paganism, joyful chaos & refined cosmos — the Dionysian & the Apollonian.

Such a view would be consistent with the Renaissance vision of “the great chain of beings”, the idea of the microcosm being a reflection of the macrocosm, and the medical theories of the time (the four humours). It would also be highly plausible from the Elizabethan age, a time of radical change in the worldview and deep questions about the world.

COMPLEMENTS AND PARALLELS

Plutarch’s *Life of These.*; Ulysses’s speech in *Troi. & Cres.*; Prologue in *Henry V*; Hamlet’s advice to the Players.

Other works that are partially or indirectly related to *MND* and may shed some light on it while being highly enjoyable: Purcell’s opera *The Fairie Queen*, adapted from Edmund Spenser (1590–96); the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*; Arthur Machen’s fantasy / decadent novel *The Great God Pan* (1894); Terry Pratchett’s *Lord and Ladies* and to a lesser extent *Hogfather*; Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* comics; illustrations by Arthur Rackham or William Blake, and Richard Dadd’s works. See <http://khagneanglaisedaily.tumblr.com> for additional resources, images and video clips.

Note on pronunciation: Lysander /laɪ-/; Demetrius /dɪˈmiː-/; Titania /-ˈtɑː-/. Genitive of Greek names: Theseus’s, Demetrius’s etc. /əs/ or /əsɪz/, but one must be consistent.