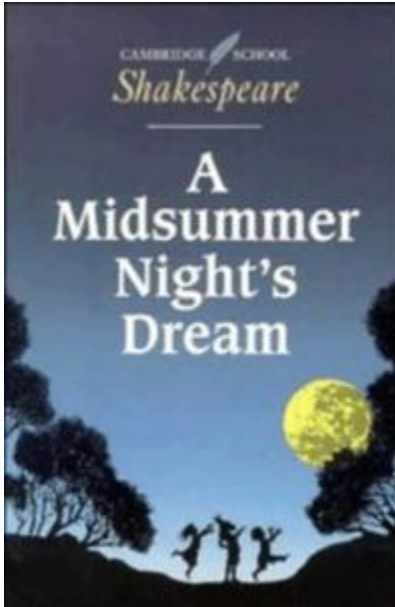


A Midsummer Night's Dream: Fiction or Truth?

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Abstract

Most probably written in 1595-96, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an enticing and enchanting play written by a master playwright William Shakespeare that still offers so much to intrigue, bewilder, and allure the readers and audience simultaneously. Even after the four hundred years of its publication and production, critical interpretations seem to strive to interpret this play from every possible angle. The play presents three freakish worlds in front of the people where characters of this play are acting and reacting absurdly and grotesquely. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* records the events and incidents of three different worlds dexterously: the world of duke of Athens; the world of fairies; and the world of six amateur artists, how these three different worlds are entwined with each other is the hallmark of this play. This *Dream* is an amalgamation of the world of deception and the world of reality and Shakespeare has interweaved fiction with truth in such a way that on the surface level, this play is a comedy but on a deeper level, the play depicts tragic insights into the characters and situations.

Key words: Dream, Night, Athens, Fairies, Love

Three Worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The play is opened with the world of Athens, where we see authoritative Theseus, the duke of Athens in his court who is proud of his recent conquest of Amazon and is all set to marry occupied Hippolyta, the Queen of Amazons. His utterance “I wooed thee with my sword/and won thy love doing thee injuries” (Act1, Sc1) confirms his authority as a ruler. Egeus brings his daughter Hermia in the court of Theseus and complains about his daughter’s behavior who is in love with Lysander and both want to marry, but Egeus likes Demetrius for Hermia to marry. Helena, a friend of Hermia is in love with Demetrius, but Demetrius starts doting on Hermia after he sees her. Egeus’ complain and Theseus’s order to Hermia that “Either to die the death or to abjure forever the society of men” (Act1, Sc1) give a clear description of patriarchal society of an Elizabethan age. Both lovers Hermia and Lysander find refuge in the woods, where Helena and Demetrius also join them. In the same woods, they are entangled with the world of fairies where the fairy King Oberon is in clash with his fairy Queen Titania over the custody of an Indian boy whom Titania has adopted, but Oberon wants to make him his henchman. Oberon is another authoritative figure of this play who affirms the existence of male dominance over females. The play portrays six amateur artists also who are preparing a play to perform at the wedding ceremony of their duke, Theseus.

In this perspective, Garber in *Shakespeare After All* (2004) asserts that “This play presents the audience with three parallel worlds, and three rulers or stage managers who try to dictate action and choice: Theseus, who rules the court world of Athens; Oberon, who rules the fairy world of the wood; and Peter Quince, who rules, or rather tries and fails to rule, the equally disordered world of the ‘rude mechanicals’ or artisans – a world of fiction and of art. Each of these “worlds” is a reflection and a refraction of the others. If Theseus’ world is based on reason and law and rank and hierarchy and a father’s authority and – on slow moving time (how slow/ this old moon wanes, Act1, Sc1) – Oberon’s world, the fairy world, is in many ways its opposite. The fairy world is a world of instantaneous time, in which Puck can circumnavigate the globe in less than an hour (I’ll put a girdle round about the earth/in forty minutes, Act2, Sc1) in pursuit of love-in-idleness. “Shakespeare is not far wrong. The first Russian Sputnik encircled the earth in

forty-seven minutes” (Kott, 216). It is a world of enchantment, magic, music, mischief, in which Puck is the principal actor and agent, for Puck is to Oberon what Bottom is to Peter Quince” (221). Shakespeare’s genius has the ability to recognize both tragedy and comedy; borrowing from classic tragedies while adding new complexity to characters and to make them his own creation.

The Fairy World of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

The world of the woods is a quagmire where there is no escape. Four lovers are wandering and roaming around the woods and their confrontation with the fairy world brings chaos in their lives. Puck’s use of love juice for the eyes of Lysander makes him fall in love with Helena suggests the transitory nature of male love. Both girls in love are reliable and don’t change their suitors, but male love has been presented with the manifestations of ups and downs. This fairy world is a free world where everyone has a liberty to do anything he or she wants to do. Oberon’s cunning attempt to make his wife Titania fall in love with Bottom is a satire on human jealousy and human lust. Though Oberon and Titania don’t represent human beings but in nature they do possess human characteristics: anger, jealousy, and lust. All these happenings together create a topsy-turvy world in the woods and this world is being ruled by Oberon and his assistance Puck. The whole play with its each and every ingredient is so impressive and persuasive that it compels us to read between the lines. Therein lie some hidden truths and unnegotiable realities about fairies and human nature and Shakespeare has negotiated all these with such subtlety that have marveled the literary critics since centuries.

Love, Eroticism, and Sex

Jan Kott mentions in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1961), “The metaphor of love, eroticism, and sex undergo some essential changes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. They are completely traditional to start with: sword and wound; rose and rain; Cupid’s bow and golden arrow” (223). Titania’s lust for Bottom is degradation and implies her desperate desire in a state where she is at clash with her king Oberon. It seems as due to conflict with her king, her sexual desires remain unfulfilled and therefore, she is inclined towards Bottom. It does not matter for her that he is half human and half animal. Bottom’s transformation into ass has been a crucial issue to interpret for critics. This transformation and Titania’s infatuation convey dark and

dismal outlook on human predicament. Kott has used the word 'translation' in his essay *The Bottom Translation* as a metaphor that is quite perfect to look at Bottom from different perspective. A person whose identity is changed from human to ass now is providing with more space to translate him as a desire. He evokes desire in Titania for lust and lascivious Titania dotes on him.

Male Dominance in *Dream*

Male dominance is one thematic element found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *Dream* Lysander and Hermia escape into the woods for a night where they are not required to obey laws of Theseus or Egeus. Upon their arrival in Athens, the couples are married. As a matter of fact, there are no two opinions that marriage is seen as the ultimate social achievement for women while men can go on with many other things outside domestic life. In his book, *The Purpose of Playing (Chapter: The Imperial Votaress)*, Louis Montrose (1996) draws attention to male and female gender roles and norms present in the comedy in connection with Elizabethan culture. In reference to the triple wedding, he says that the conclusion of this play is three marriages and none other than these marriages could be the proper end of this *Dream*. The play starts with a dispute over matrimonial matters and ends also with resolving of the very matters. This festive conclusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* depends upon the success of a process by which the feminine pride and power manifested in Amazon warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wives, and wilful daughters are brought under the control of lords and husbands. He says that "the consummation of marriage at the end of the play is the showcase of male power as husband takes physical and symbolic possession of wife. A connection between flowers and sexuality is drawn elegantly. The love juice employed by Oberon represents menstrual blood as well as the sexual blood shed by virgins. While blood as a result of menstruation is representative of a woman's power, blood as a result of a first sexual encounter represents man's power over women" (151-179).

Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy, Shakespeare has pointed out some critical and serious issues in the veneer of this comedy play. Egeus dislike of Lysander and his insistence upon her daughter Hermia to marry Demetrius is the showcase of his power in a patriarchal society. Theseus' marriage with the Queen of Amazons is another type of showcase

of the male power, nonetheless, Hippolyta is not an ordinary women, but she is compelled to obey Theseus. Oberon is stubborn and wants a child custody to make him his henchman and cast spell on Hippolyta to make her fall in love with the first thing she will see upon awakening. He is delighted on seeing her infatuation for Bottom. The male dominance is a recurring motif of the *Dream*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream with reference to The Bottom Translation

The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition is a unified analysis of the “carnival tradition” in the work of William Shakespeare as a far-ranging continuation of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964). This *Translation* is a deeply influential study and offers meditations on the art and thought of Shakespeare and several of his contemporaries.

Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* provides an example of a play inextricably rooted in carnival, which typically turns the world upside down. “The union of the bewitched Queen Titania and Bottom the Weaver, transformed into a beast, is a perfect image of the meeting of high and low, a theme that recurs throughout the play. Kott echoes this scene in the title of his book, not only to call attention to the importance of metamorphosis in Renaissance drama but also to emphasize that these plays must be read, from the bottom, from Bottom’s perspective also” (*The Bottom Translation, Literary Masterpieces*).

Reflection of an Elizabethan Age

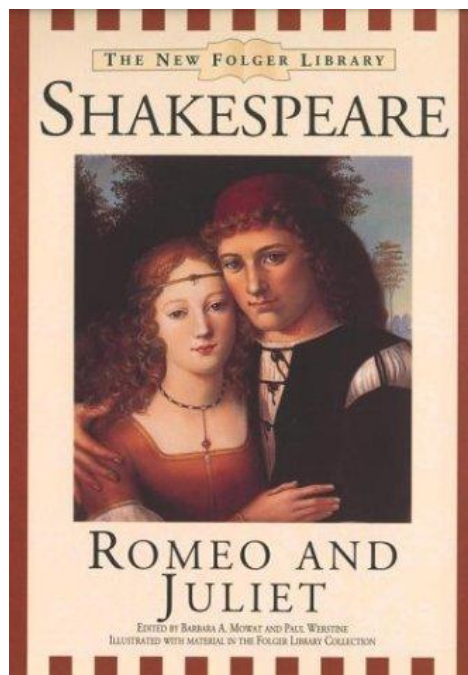
A Midsummer Night’s Dream is not a play that just offers lovers, their escape, fairies in the woods, and the union of lovers, but it figures the social relationship between sexes in courtships, marriage, and parenthood in a serious manner. Thus, *Dream* highlights not only the cultural values but also the cultural politics of England of that time. No one can completely disconnect him/herself from cultural, social, and political environment of the time. Shakespeare plays are heavily influenced by the elements of Elizabethan culture and politics. Marriages were decided by parents and marriage was the most favorable condition both for males and females to live together, therefore, family institution was strong. Though in the *Dream*, permission is granted to the four lovers to marry according to their wishes, but it happens after a long struggle

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and couples wait for this permission until the end of the play. This play emphasizes the importance of marriage and at the same time in history, the marriage of Elizabeth I was a hot topic in England. She had no exception, despite this fact that she was the daughter of the king. Hence, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* mirrors exactly what was occurring in the age of Elizabeth I. In a nutshell, it is said that this play is a social, cultural, and political document of an Elizabethan age.

A Connection between A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo and Juliet



It is conjectured that both plays have been written in the same year and it is surprising to note that both play have a great deal in common to discuss in the light of each other. In Garber's words (2004), "we could say that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is *Romeo and Juliet* turned inside out, *Romeo and Juliet* transformed into a comedy" (213). Both plays have striking similarities in the form of authoritative fathers who want their daughters to marry according to their choice. Both plays have authoritative rulers, the prince of *Romeo and Juliet* is not different from Theseus, duke of Athens. Both daughters choose their partners and are not willing to marry where their fathers want. In addition, "In both plays the disobedient and rebellious daughter is

threatened with the life of a nun and both plays strongly emphasize the difference between night, which transforms and changes, and day, which is rigid, inflexible, and associated with law” as Garber mentions in *Shakespeare After All* (2004). The only difference is the end where characters live happily ever after in a *Dream*. Despite this fact, this difference does not undermine the somber effects that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* carries from the beginning to the end. This close resemblance imparts *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a touch of tragedy.

A Play within the Play

Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* around the same time he penned *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that's heavily influenced by the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. Throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a humble group of Athenian craftsmen (the Mechanicals) practice a play-within-the-play that they hope to stage at Theseus's wedding celebration. The play is Pyramus and Thisbe and it is adopted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. By including this play-within-the-play technique, Shakespeare has given us ample time to reflect upon life as a parody of bad theatre. Indeed, life is a theatre and to face the odds of life requires crafts and a set of skills of successful actors. Though during their nocturnal adventures, there is no lion, no blood, and no death like in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the fear of death hovers over the couples all the time. In this connection, Kott in *The Bottom Translation* has given us an interesting calculation by stating that 'Death' and 'dead' are uttered twenty-eight times; 'dying' and 'die' occur fourteen times. The field of 'death' appears in nearly fifty verses of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and is distributed almost evenly among the events in the forest and the play at Theseus' wedding. The frequency of 'kill' and 'killing' is thirteen and 'sick' and 'sickness' occur six times. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which has often been called a happy comedy of love, 'kiss' and 'kissing' occur only six times, always within the context of the burlesque; 'joy' occurs eight times, 'happy' six, and 'happiness' none (55).

Dream: Fiction or Truth

People take *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a play full of slapstick humor, light hearted entertainment, fantasy fairy world in the woods where lovers are chasing each other and where moon night romance is in full blossom. It is true that fairies sing and dance, enchant and mesmerize us, and keep the lovers busy in absurd activities. The transformation of Bottom gives

this play an impression of grotesque play and while reader and audience are enjoying this grotesquery but this is not the real picture. A deep ironic contrast exists in the fabric of this *Dream* that is connected with the appearance and reality of the characters; what they say and what they do. It is ironic that they talk logically but behave irrationally and what the audience do, they do laugh. It is not surprising that a close reading reveals that most of the laughs are generated by someone's pain, humiliation, and plight. There will be always remain two interpretations of this play, the light one and the dark one. This *Dream* has a unique juxtaposition of fiction and truth and it is left to us that how do we perceive and interpret this *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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