
UNIT 4 *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM: II*

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES AND INTRODUCTION

The chief difficulty in reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or even watching it performed is that it seems in the end to be not one play but several separate strands very tentatively looped together. So in this unit we will take up and study three chief areas of interest:

- The Fairies who live in the forest and interact with the mortals
- The Dreams or visions which take up so much of the enactment time of the play
- The Female Characters, both human and non-human, who give the play much of its ultimately serious tone

In 4.4 we will consider whether these separate strands mesh into a satisfying whole or not.

4.1 THE FAIRIES

The fairies are the unusual characters in the play, forming one of the two subplots. In this section we will look at

- their role in the play
- Puck's characterisation and function

The role of the Fairies:

You might think that a grown and serious writer like Shakespeare must have been slightly mad to write a play with fairies in it for an adult audience. But then in his time nearly everyone believed in the existence of supernatural creatures like fairies, witches, goblins. The three witches of *Macbeth* have been interpreted as symbols,

but Shakespeare's audience must have accepted them as real creatures who predict the future and intensify Macbeth's latent ambition.

Like the witches in *Macbeth*, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are linked with the world of men. For example, when Oberon accuses Titania of having an affair with the mortal Theseus, we realise that mortals and fairies do not remain strictly separate from each other.

In some respects, the fairies are very much like the Athenians. They have a similar social hierarchy. A King and Queen rule them, while some fairies simply fetch and carry for the others and could be seen as the counterparts of the Athenian Mechanicals. In general, however, the fairies fit in with the celebratory air of this play and of the midsummer festival which was supposed to bring visions to young people.

Puck:

Puck is the odd creature. He has abilities that the rest do not have. His special gifts are that he can fly around the earth at great speed and he can execute mischief. And it is for these that he is summoned by Oberon to help him steal the Indian boy from Titania and in the process make a mockery of her for withdrawing her attention and favour from him.

Puck's name is of special interest. For one thing, it sets him apart from Oberon and Titania who have classical names, as well as from the other fairies who are called by the names from nature such as Mustardseed, Peasblossom, and quite delightfully, Cobweb.

He is sometimes called by other names, particularly Robin Goodfellow. Robin Goodfellow is an English folk character who is a genuinely good fellow. He helps hard worked housewives complete their tasks, he helps butter set and so on.

But he is also, without warning and for no reason that human beings can understand, maliciously mischievous. For example, when an old woman prepares to settle down on a stool, he pushes the stool away so that she falls down and hurts her rear end. He can also make milk turn sour and prevent the butter from setting. And he does so for no very sinister reason. He is not instructed by the devil or some evil spirit but does these nasty things for his own amusement. Here is what we learn from a conversation between Puck and a Fairy:

Fairy. Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Call'd Robin Goodfellow. Are you not he
That frights the maids out of their villagery,
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
And bootless make the housewife churn,
And sometimes make the drink to bear no barm,
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they have good luck.
Are you not he?

Puck. Thou speak'st aright;
I am that merry wanderer of the night.
I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;
And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl

In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And when she drinks, against her lips I bob,
And on her wither'd dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their hips and loffe
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there. (II i 32-57).

Shakespeare used both the good and the bad aspects of the Robin Goodfellow folk tales in his dramatisation of Puck. We can see this in the havoc Puck creates among the young Athenian aristocrats with the love potion.

When Oberon tells Puck to put the love juice in the eyes of Demetrius so that he may fall in love with the unhappy Helena, Puck makes a genuine mistake and pours the juice into Lysander's eyes. Having done so and seen the resultant confusion, Puck simply laughs. The unhappiness of the two Athenian women does not move him to correct his mistake. Yet when Oberon scolds him, he does make the correction, ensuring at the same time that corrective juice is poured into Lysander's eyes but not into Demetrius' so that the right couples are married in the end. And he explains to Oberon that he did not plan the mischief but mistook Lysander for Demetrius because they were dressed alike. The entire sequence shows his malicious as well as good side.

But the important and revealing aspect of the fairies' attitude towards the Athenians is that Puck cannot distinguish one Athenian from the other. They all appear to him much alike. One of the "truths" Shakespeare seems to be hinting at is that lovers think their individuality is important while the reader / audience can see that there is in fact very little to distinguish them, to show the difference between them.

But before we look at Puck's view of the other characters, we need to understand Puck's own place in the hierarchy of the forest. Puck's relationship with Oberon provides the tension between the fun-filled, mischievous side of the fairy world and its darker, more threatening aspect.

In the lighter vein, of course, Puck is Oberon's court jester who changes shape and mimics sounds to make Oberon laugh. But Puck's ability to change shape, and to make others (notably Nick Bottom) change shape has a potential for unpleasant, darker mischief. He confesses that his purpose is to frighten people by creating illusions in the forest, and to drive Lysander and Demetrius "astray."

Oberon represents the happier side of the fairy world, and does his best to hold Puck in check. For instance, he seriously rebukes Puck when he finds that the latter has mistakenly (though we suspect it is not really a mistake) applied the love juice to the wrong persons.

4.2 THE DREAMS

There is much play on "dream" in this drama. To begin with, we have "dream" in the title. It is not just any dream that is mentioned here but a midsummer night's dream. Midsummer was a festive time with many associated pre-Christian ceremonies. One of these was a belief that if a young virgin spent the night in the forest, she would have a vision or dream of the man she would marry. Of course; it was also a time

when sexual games between young men and women occurred in the forests without any social censure being attached. The title of the play would have led the audience to anticipate some its action. Shakespeare in fact draws attention to the connection between dreams and his play:

...as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and name. (V i 14-17).

Dreams occur at significant moments of the play. We will consider two of its dreams.

First, there is Hermia's dream that a serpent is eating her heart, and she calls to Lysander for help. When she wakes up, Lysander is not there at all, and she convinces herself that she was dreaming that she dreamt any such dream. None of this multiple illusion hides the fact that Lysander has abandoned her for Helena. The dream is like the forest which intensifies horrid things that otherwise hover in the air.

For instance, Helena and Hermia have been friends since they were children and there is no hint of a rupture in their friendship. Of course, Hermia's father wants Demetrius to marry Hermia whereas Helena is in love with Demetrius, but even this does not strain their friendship. It is only in the forest that they quarrel and come close to blows, the only time in any Shakespeare play that women come so close to physical violence against each other. In something similar, Hermia's dream presages the separation between her and Lysander. She is as frightened by the serpent as she is by Lysander's betrayal.

The other dream is Bottom's dream, one he claims to have had when Puck's spell is lifted from him. In fact, of course, he remembers actual events as a dream, and it in this supposed dream that he sees the possibility of cutting across social barriers and having a relationship with a queen, but he decides not to tell it to anyone. After all, Romantic Comedy never rocks the social boat but maintains social hierarchies.

Both dreams have been much commented on by critics, as you will see when you read the New Casebook essays on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These dreams have been especially tempting for psychoanalytical critics. For example, some of them claim that the serpent in Hermia's dream represents the male genital organ and Hermia expresses fear of sexuality when she is frightened by it. (See Holland *New Casebooks* 61-83).

Psychoanalysis is a form of mental therapy that investigates the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Psychoanalytical criticism uses the methods of psychoanalysis and applies them to literature. Its aim is to uncover the unconscious motivations of the author as well as of the characters. Its assumption is that the covert meaning is what the work is really "about" and should be distinguished from the overt content. Lastly, psychoanalytical critics believe that the area of drama or interplay or action is at the individual psychological level, and that the social aspects such as class conflicts are of comparatively less importance. They "privilege" or highlight individual subjectivity.

We will now consider a small part of a Freudian interpretation. Freud is considered to be the man who began psychoanalysis. He argued that sometimes a wish that is frustrated in real life can be satisfied by an imaginary wish-fulfilment. According to him, all dreams, even frightening nightmares are the fulfilment of such wishes, but in disguise. The reason for the need for disguise is that desires sometimes come face to

face with social prohibitions, with things that society does not permit, and in dreams there is a veil over their real meaning. They defy logic.

The dreams we witness in the play operate cathartically upon the characters, providing a form of therapy whereby each one can discard his or her obsession. If this interpretation seems to follow the work of the psychoanalyst Freud it is because the moonlit forest seems an obvious and fitting symbol for the creative unconscious. And keeping with the Freudian view of dreams, once the dream vision is over, it leaves each character with a greater perception of others and a greater insight into themselves.

For the Athenian lovers, the journey into the forest takes them into a world that is part dream and part reality. Reality itself is continually questioned in that a character such as Oberon can be seen by the audience but not by the Athenian lovers, whereas Bottom as an ass appears very clearly to the audience as something quite different to Titania's vision of him.

4.3 THE WOMEN

A Midsummer Night's Dream is full of confusion as it hovers between sleep and dreaming, and characters change their minds for no known reason. The women in the play are the still centre of the storm; they provide stability. This is evident in all the sets of lovers: the young Athenians, Titania and Oberon, and Theseus and Hippolyta.

Hermia and Helena never waver in their commitments to the men they love even as they try and cope with the devastating changes of heart in these men. In contrast, Lysander and Demetrius respond to Puck's mistaken application of the love juice by switching from rivalry over one girl to rivalry over the other girl. Nothing essential changes in their attitude of confrontation towards each other, making the objects of their love almost irrelevant. Meanwhile, Oberon and Titania too are locked in rivalry over yet another love-object, in this case, the young Indian changeling child in Titania's charge. Finally, we have Hippolyta and Theseus, once rivals and warrior enemies but who have now put their quarrel behind them. This gives Hippolyta, the more introspective and far-sighted partner, the ability to find "music" even in "discord" (IV i 114-18):

The relationship between Helena and Hermia is characterised by sisterhood, to the extent that they see themselves as a "double-cherry." A similar relationship existed between Titania and the mother of the Indian boy, vividly described in II i 123-37:

His mother was a votress of my order;
And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side;
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th'embarked traders on the flood:
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifle, and return again
As from a voyage rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;
And for her sake I will no part with him. (II i 123-137).

This is the reason she has taken him over as her own child, and is emphatic that "the fairy land buys not the child of me." Oberon, however, feeling that in this new-found love she has deserted him, decides he too will now desert her.

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4.4 LET US SUM UP

We see that wisdom emerges out of the folly and mockery that prevails at every level of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lysander and Demetrius learn to distinguish between infatuation and true love, and Titania learns to relinquish what she loves (the Indian boy) to elicit once again tenderness and love from her husband. This wisdom expresses itself as the rejoicing at the end of the play. The "rules" of Romantic comedy demand such ideals be celebrated at the end of the play.

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of "dream" in the title of the play?
2. What is the common factor between Hermia's dream and the forest?
3. In what ways can the women in the play be seen as a group with common qualities? Why do you think did Shakespeare make them like this?
4. What do dreams and the play have in common?
5. What lesson, if any, is communicated in Titania's giving up the Indian boy to her husband?