
UNIT 1 BACKGROUND : PERFORMANCE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

We have called Unit 2 “Background” because it is the word used for information that does not seem to have direct relevance to the text being studied. From the Block Introduction, you will know that such information helps us to appreciate the text better, so it is less background than the stuff of the play.

We have concentrated on three points:

- The time when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written because a writer knowingly or unknowingly includes contemporary ideas and events in his writing.
- The constraints under which the plays were written and performed, or “conditions of performance.”
- The difference between performance and reading texts. Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be acted but for a long time they have been treated as plays to be read. This has affected the interpretation of the plays.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare lived 400 years ago in England. Elizabeth I was then the queen of England. The conditions he lived in, what interested him and his audience, and even the language were different to what they are now. So different, in fact, that even the ordinary English man or woman finds him “strange.” Shakespeare’s audience, however, would not have found him strange. It shared his interest in current affairs such as the food riots of 1595-96, the power of Queen Elizabeth I over the kinds of plays that were to be performed, and that boys took women’s roles (see 1.4). The difference between reading and performance texts will be discussed in 1.5.

After reading this unit, you will know

- The bases of the arguments among Shakespeare scholars about when the play was written and performed
- The difference in meaning when a play is performed and when it is read
- The playhouse culture of Shakespeare's time

1.2 DATING THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

Why should the date of the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concern us? Largely because the time and occasion tell us what Shakespeare's audience would have found interesting in the play. We will discover the real emphases or important ideas in it rather than inventing our own.

Most Shakespeare scholars agree that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed in the second half of the 1590s, but the exact year is debated. The four questions we will try and answer about the first performance are:

- What time of year was it performed?
- What was the occasion for which it was performed?
- Was Elizabeth I present at this performance?
- Which year was it first performed?

What time of year was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed?

The only certainty about the date of this play is that it was entered in the Stationer's Register in September 1598 as having been performed, but it may have been performed earlier than 1598. Scholars have used different data to determine the date of its first performance. For example, because of "midsummer" in its title, it is possible that the play was performed in summer, perhaps on a special occasion such as the eve of Mayday (Walpurgisnacht) or Midsummer Eve when young men and women would find their life partners and which is therefore associated with eroticism.

What was the occasion for the performance?

For a long time it was accepted that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was an "occasional" play, that is, it was written for a special occasion. Harold Brooks is among those who are convinced that it was performed for an important aristocratic wedding. This explains why the play begins and ends with the wedding of Duke Theseus and Queen Hippolyta while the main action is about the rest of the characters. It would seem, then, that Theseus and Hippolyta are not really important to the action of play.

The importance of a character, however, does not depend on the length of the role. Sometimes a writer emphasises characters' importance by placing them in significant scenes, such as the first and last scenes. Theseus and Hippolyta appear in the first and last scenes, both of which focus on their wedding. Shakespeare shows us other similarities between these two and the audience that was supposedly gathered for the aristocratic wedding. Like the audience at the first performance, Theseus and Hippolyta are powerful aristocrats. Theseus is Duke of Athens and Hippolyta has been queen of the Amazons. In a further parallel with whatever wedding *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream is supposed to have been performed for, a play is to be performed to celebrate Theseus' and Hippolyta's wedding.

Many modern critics do not agree that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed for an aristocratic wedding because there is no record of such a wedding in the second half of the 1590s.

Was Queen Elizabeth I present at the first performance?

If *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was indeed performed for an aristocratic wedding, it is likely that Elizabeth I was present. This is generally the explanation for the compliments to Titania, queen of the fairies, and Diana, the virgin goddess of the moon. Elizabeth I was called the Virgin Queen and compared with Diana and Titania.

The argument against this view is that these compliments are not proof that Elizabeth I was present at the first performance. They are routine compliments to the very powerful queen who liked to be admired in this way.

In 1.4 you will see why Shakespeare would compliment Elizabeth I in a play that had nothing to do with her and who was probably not even present at its first performance.

When was the play first performed?

Critics have suggested two seasons: 1594-95 and 1595-96. A current view is that it was most definitely performed in 1596 (see Patterson, *New Casebooks* p.176).

Before going on to the topicality of the play, a brief mention about who comprised the audience for Shakespeare's plays.

It used to be believed that the largest group in the audience was made up of aristocrats and courtiers. Recent research suggests that although special performances were held for the Court, the biggest audiences were of people like the Mechanicals from the poorer strata of society. Shakespeare tried to please both kinds of audience. [See 2.5 for further reading on play going in Shakespeare's time.]

Why should the year of its first performance concern us in the late twentieth century? The information influences our understanding of the play and helps us to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Shakespeare's audience might have seen it.

In Act II of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon and Titania have had a serious quarrel, which, Titania says, has upset the normal workings of nature. There has been unusually heavy rain and the crops have been ruined:

...with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made proud
That they have overborne their continents.
The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud,

And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable,
The human mortals want their winter cheer;
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.
Therefore the moon, the governess of the floods,
Pale in her anger, washes the air
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The season alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are the parents and original. (II i 87-117).

Titania's speech is derived from Seneca, Ovid, and Spenser, but it also had topical interest. England had bad weather from March 1594, which was followed by wet summers in 1595 and 1596 (see Brooks xxxvii, and Patterson *New Casebooks* 176). Grain was scarce, prices rose sharply, and there were food riots. Titania's mention of wet weather and rotting grain would have interested the poorer majority of the audience which was directly affected by rising prices and hunger.

Shakespeare achieved two contradictory goals through the dialogue about bad harvests. First, Titania says that Oberon's rage is responsible for the bad weather, an accusation that seems ridiculous until we realise that Oberon is a fairy king with supernatural powers. Shakespeare's audience would have seen a parallel with their own situation. Unlike Oberon, the mortal Elizabeth I could not be responsible for the bad weather, but she was partially responsible for good government. An uprising in 1596 against bad governance showed that there was indeed dissatisfaction against those in power. The topicality in Titania's speech probably enhanced the play's popularity.

Elizabeth I, however, did not like criticism and had her critics imprisoned or killed. Could Shakespeare, a mere playwright, have dared to criticise her? If he did dare, he was careful to make a fairy king rather than a mortal queen responsible for the bad harvests. There was thus only a hint that he might have had Elizabeth in mind when he wrote this passage. He did not take any chances, however, and had Puck apologise profusely in the Epilogue for any offence the play may have given.

Keeping the majority of the audience and the queen happy may not seem important to us, but in 1.4 you will see how important it was for Shakespeare.

1.3 CONDITIONS OF PERFORMANCE

Historical critics' discoveries about the theatre culture in Shakespeare's time have enriched the plays for us. Here is some information relevant to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

- Plays were written and performed by groups of actors known by the names of their patrons, e.g., the Chamberlain's Men (Shakespeare's company) and

the Admiral's Men (Christopher Marlowe's company). The names usually changed when the patron changed. Patrons did not fund the companies nor protect them in any way. Players and owners were therefore careful not to upset powerful officials and courtiers.

- The government strictly controlled theatres (playhouses) because they were said to cause riots, traffic jams, and plague. Municipal authorities licensed playhouses within the city limits, while the scripts of all plays had to be passed by the Master of Revels, an officer of the royal Court. (Philostrate is Master of Revels in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) Strict censorship is partly why a number of Shakespeare's plays are set in Athens, Venice, Rome, or other places far from England in place and time.
- If a company displeased the authorities, its licence could be revoked and the actors would be without a livelihood. Players therefore tried to keep the authorities happy. We notice this in the Mechanicals' conversation about their play which they are to perform for powerful Athenian aristocrats who are very like Elizabethan courtiers. The Mechanicals are at pains to explain to this audience that their play should not be mistaken for reality:

Bottom: There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?

Snout: Byrlakin, a parlous fear.

Starveling: I believe we must leave the killing out, when all is done.

Bot: Not a whit; I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear.

Quince: Well, we will have such a prologue; and it shall be written in eight and six. [*i.e., as a Petrarchan sonnet.*]

Bot: No, make it two more; let it be written in eight and eight.

Snout: Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?

Bot: Masters, you ought to consider with yourself; to bring in (God shield us!) a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wild-fowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to't.

Snout: *Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion.*

Bot: Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck; and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or to the same defect: 'Ladies,' or 'Fair Ladies, I would wish you,' or 'I would request you,' or 'I would entreat you, not to fear, nor to tremble: my life for yours! If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am no such thing; I am a man, as other men are': and there, indeed, let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner. (III i 8-44).

There is a strong parallel with Elizabethan players' worry that the least offence would mean a cancelled licence.

- The Chamberlain's Men were well off and owned an octagonal, wooden playhouse called the Globe. Its central portion was without a roof so that natural light could be used for daytime and summer performances. Artificial lighting was used for winter evening performances. The detailed description of moonlight in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were meant to help the audience imagine moonlight while sitting in the bright light of long English summer evenings that last beyond nine o'clock.

[The Globe burnt down early in the early 1600s when its thatched roof caught fire during a performance of *Henry VIII*. A reconstructed Globe with a fireproof thatched roof has been built recently at almost the same place and on the same design.]

- Acting companies had male actors only. Boys acted women's roles. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Francis Flute is an amateur actor and therefore upset that he is to act as a woman:

Quince: Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.

Flute: What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?

Quince: It is a lady that Pyramus must love.

Flute: Nay, faith, let me not play a woman: I have a beard coming.

(I ii 40-46).

- Wealthier members of the audience paid extra to sit on the stage and converse with the actors. The script would be ignored as actors ad libbed in response to the audience, as happens during the Mechanicals' play.

1.4 READING AND PERFORMANCE TEXTS

A major change in interpreting Shakespeare's plays has been from treating them as meant for the stage to seeing them as solely to be read to treating both performance and reading as significant.

Shakespeare was an actor as well as part owner of a drama company. Play writing and acting was how he earned his living. The plays had to be good enough to attract large audiences otherwise Shakespeare and his fellow actors would have starved. From extant (surviving) texts of his plays, we learn that an actor or prompter or manager, to suit a change in actor or audience often changed the plays. In other words, there was no "fixed" or absolutely authentic text.

About 200 years ago, Coleridge suggested that Shakespeare was a poet rather than a dramatist. This was an influential idea. Shakespeare's plays continued to be acted, but a huge number of people simply read them. The plays were taught in schools and universities as poetry and details of the language were analysed. Discussions about how appropriate a word was for a character or situation did not take into consideration that Shakespeare may have changed that word if, for example, the actor could not pronounce it.

In the middle of the twentieth century, departments of Theatre Studies were established in western universities. Here Shakespeare's drama was taught as plays to be performed. Students learned how a director could change the meaning by simply making two actors frown at each other across the stage during a dialogue instead of standing next to each other and smiling while saying exactly the same thing. Philip

C. McGuire has demonstrated this effectively in his essay, "Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen." You will find it in the New Casebooks on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. [See 2.5 for details].

**Background:
Performance**

1.5 LET US SUM UP

From relevant "background" information in this unit, you have learned

- Why it is useful to know when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed
- Whether Elizabeth I was present at the first performance, and
- How uncertain the relationships between characters and the emphases of the play can be when it is performed on the stage, and therefore how different performance and reading texts are.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. What four questions should we try and answer about the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
2. What was Shakespeare's playhouse called?
3. What are the three significant points about Theseus and Hippolyta in the opening scene of the play?
4. What does Titania's speech in Act II, scene i, 87-117 have to do with England in the 1590s?
5. Which two non-human characters mentioned in the play was Elizabeth I compared to?
6. What part of the play tells you about the censorship of drama in Shakespeare's time?
7. Why are the descriptions of moonlight so detailed in this play?
8. What are the occasions that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might have been performed at?
9. What is are performance and reading texts?
10. Who said that Shakespeare was a poet rather than a dramatist?
11. What was the function of a Master of the Revels in the time of Elizabeth I?
12. Which two authorities controlled plays and theatres in Elizabethan England?