

The New Kittredge Shakespeare

William Shakespeare



A Midsummer Night's Dream

Series Editor: James H. Lake

Edited by
John R. Ford

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Editor

John R. Ford

Delta State University

Series Editor

James H. Lake

*Louisiana State University,
Shreveport*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE KITTREDGE EDITION

The Dating

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM was entered in the Register of the Stationers' Company on October 8, 1600, by Thomas Fisher, and the First Quarto appeared before the end of the year.¹ Though not very carefully printed, it furnishes an authoritative text. Probably the copy used was a manuscript prompt-book, which may have been in Shakespeare's own handwriting. The Second Quarto (1619, fraudulently dated 1600) reprints the First, with some misprints and some corrections. The text of the First Folio (1623) comes from a copy of the Second Quarto that contained numerous alterations in manuscript: some misprints had been corrected, the phraseology had been slightly modified here and there, and several new stage directions had been inserted. Apparently this copy was prepared as promptbook for a revival of the play occurring in 1619 or soon after. In the Quartos there is no division into acts and scenes. Acts, but not scenes, are marked in the Folio.

Francis Meres mentions A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM in the tribute to Shakespeare in his *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury* (1598). The date of the play cannot be exactly determined. It may have been originally composed for a wedding festivity in high life and afterwards revised for public performance. So far as style and meter testify, the play might be dated anywhere from 1594 to 1596. Of other topical allusions, the only one that has any probability is Titania's account of the horrible weather and consequent distress that Oberon's brawls have caused (2.1.81–117). This fits the actual condition of things in 1594, 1595, and 1596. Titania declares that spring, summer, autumn, and winter so "change their wonted liveries" that one cannot tell "which is which." Her words suggest that at least a year has passed since the onset of bad weather and that no relief is in sight. The best choice among the three years, then, appears to be 1595.

1 Kittredge uses the common abbreviations Q and F for quarto and folio texts. Folio refers to a large, expensive collection of Shakespeare's plays. The first Folio was published in 1623 by John Heminge and Henry Condell, in honor of their late friend and colleague William Shakespeare, seven years after his death. Quarto refers to a small, inexpensive edition of a single play. As Kittredge points out, the most authoritative text of the play is the First Quarto (Q1). [J.R.F.]

The Time-Scheme

The time-scheme of the drama has worried the critics a good deal and has helped them in spinning tenuous theories of revision. We need only observe that the four days and four nights contemplated by Hippolyta in 1.1.7–11 are not fully spanned. The action begins on the first day of the four, accounts for the second and the third, and ends shortly after midnight on the third day or, in other words, very early on the fourth. No audience would note the discrepancy, for the night in the enchanted forest is long enough to bewilder the imagination. What, indeed, is time in our dreams, especially on a magic midsummer eve? Yet, after all, the error may be due to hasty revision for the public stage. If so, Puck's epilogue was doubtless added for the first performance in public. Nothing indicates, however, that the revision was extensive.

The title of the play has no reference to the time of the action, which all takes place about May Day; but it indicates (or strongly suggests) that the nocturnal adventures of the lovers, the transformation of Bottom, and the whole fairy machinery may be regarded as a phantasmagoria.² And with this suggestion accords the famous speech in which Theseus refuses to believe such "antique [i.e., fantastic] fables" and such "fairy toys" (5.2.2 ff.). Midsummer Eve, June 23 (the Vigil of St. John the Baptist), was traditionally a magic time, when spirits might well appear and mislead. On that night bonfires and other rustic celebrations (some of which go back to the immemorial antiquity of paganism) were customary, and divination was practiced in matters of love and marriage. The skepticism of Theseus is whimsically confirmed by Puck in the Epilogue:

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

Sources

The plot seems to be of Shakespeare's own design. Some of the materials he drew from his general reading. He knew Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, of course, which summarizes the main facts about Theseus and Hippolyta and mentions "the feast" at their wedding. Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* was accessible to him in Sir Thomas North's translation (1579, 1595), a work which he afterwards used extensively and minutely for his Roman plays. For Pyramus and Thisbe he had only to recall the Ovid that he had read at school. The "love-juice" (3.2.89) with which, "on sleeping eyelids laid" (2.1.170), Oberon and Puck play such confusing tricks upon Titania and Lysander, and the equally efficacious "Dian's bud" (4.1.76; cf. 3.2.366–71), may or may not have been suggested by the magic potions administered to lovers by the Lady Felicia in an episode in the *Diana*, a Spanish pastoral romance by Jorge de Montemayor.

2 Cf. *Twelfth Night* 3.4.61: "Why, this is very midsummer madness."

Bottom with the ass's head need not derive from either Lukios of Patræ or Apuleius; but, anyhow, Apuleius was accessible in William Adlington's translation (1566). His romance, in which the hero is changed into an ass, was familiar to every reader, and got into popular circulation, in outline, as historical fact. Such a metamorphosis accorded with old ideas about witchcraft. Men of learning were inclined to regard these transformations as in appearance only—the eyes of lookers-on being deluded by art magic—but people in general had little doubt of their possibility. Francis Douce quotes from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) a method (which Scot doubts) of making men "seeme to haue horsse or asses heads"; but Shakespeare was not obliged to consult Scot for information about English superstitions, though he doubtless read the book with interest if it fell into his hands.

Shakespeare's fairy lore goes back to stories that he had heard in childhood—"Old Wives Fables" (1656), Thomas Ady calls them, writing forty years after Shakespeare's death, told as they sit "chatting of many false old Stories of Witches, and Fairies, and *Robin Good-fellow*, and walking Spirits, and the Dead walking again; all of which lying fancies people are more naturally inclined to listen after than to the Scriptures." Bishop Corbet, not yet a bishop, was lost in a forest in the North about 1620. In his *Iter Boreale* he gives a humorous account of the adventure. His man William was sure that Puck was "busy in these oakes" and, when they met a forester, thought it was "Robin, or some sprite that walkes about." John Gadbury, in 1660, found it necessary to maintain that the *ignis fatuus* is a natural phenomenon and not an imp that leads one astray.

Puck (*pūca*), as a generic term for a devil or mischievous imp, goes back to Anglo-Saxon times. This generic sense comes out in the Epilogue: "As I am an honest Puck" and "Else the Puck a liar call."

Oberon and Titania, however, were names unknown to English folklore. *Titania* (as well as *Titanis*) occurs in Ovid as a name for Circe the enchantress. This is enough to account for Shakespeare's name for his Fairy Queen. Ovid also uses *Titania* (once) as a synonym for *Diana*, but Diana is obviously no prototype for Shakespeare's Titania. The "vo'tress of my order" (2.1.123) is enough to settle that question, even if King James did identify the fairies of Scottish tradition with Diana and her train. Oberon had already been brought upon the stage as the Fairy King in Robert Greene's play of *James IV*. His name occurs for the first time, so far as we know, in the Old French *chanson de geste* of *Huon de Bordeaux*, in which he is a woodland dwarf with magic powers who first embarrasses the hero but afterwards befriends him. The fifteenth-century version (in prose) was well known in Shakespeare's time in Lord Berners's translation. In 1593 and 1594 Philip Henslowe records in his *Diary* performances of an old play on the subject: he calls it *Hewen of Burdoche* (*Burdockes*). Fairy plays and pageants had long been favorite entertainments with all ranks of society, and A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM did nothing to lessen their popularity. In Ben Jonson's masque of *Oberon*, performed at court on New Year's Day, 1611, the fairy prince enters in a chariot drawn by two white bears.

The most famous of all tributes to Queen Elizabeth is that of Oberon (in 2.1.155–64) to the "fair Vestal throned by the West."

Editor's Note

Kittredge needs very little editing. His clarity and scholarship are as self-sufficient now as they were more than seventy years ago. Except for some modest cuts in the text, the insertion of a few first names, and the elimination of footnotes, I have left Kittredge's writing intact. The explanatory note is mine. [J.R.F.]

INTRODUCTION TO THE FOCUS EDITION: PERFORMANCE CONSIDERATIONS AND HISTORY

What happens to us when we fall into a dream? Or when we fall into imagination, especially the imaginative experience of a play? And what happens to us when we fall into love? What kind of transformative experience is it? And how are these three mysterious states of consciousness related to one another? How are they simultaneously at the heart of human experience and at the edge of human understanding, “my own, and not my own,” as Helena guesses in the midst of *her* fall? Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* explores those multiple threads of inclusiveness and metamorphosis that weave together these three experiences, and in so doing, weave together one of Shakespeare’s most delightful and haunting plays. One of the best ways to explore these questions is to follow the strange transformations the play itself has experienced in the more than four hundred years since it was first performed. Every generation has tried to make sense of this play, a play that insistently resists all sense, all reason. We should remember that Bottom himself, an actor of sorts, reminds us that “reason and love keep little company together nowadays.” And yet, as this play keeps insisting, the line between reason and imagination becomes increasingly blurred the closer we get to what we think is that line—a kind of Shakespearean twist to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. Indeed, this play, more than four hundred years after its inception, remains our own, and not our own.

And yet despite, or perhaps because of, that equivocating volatility at its center, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is one of the most popular plays in the Shakespearean canon. In the U.S., as well as in the U.K., the play has been a staple of Shakespeare summer festivals, community theaters, and, of course, school performances. That enthusiasm for the play is becoming increasingly global. Joseph Summers speaks for many when he notes that “[m]ost of the critics and scholars who have written about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have united to praise it: a great many of them love it.”¹ Producers and directors now refer to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, somewhat indecorously, as a “bums in the seats” play, a play guaranteed to succeed at the box office. The play is justly celebrated for its astonishing synthesis of multiple plots that seem to have nothing to do with one another; or of four groups of characters that seem to exist on contradictory planes of imaginative “reality”; or of wildly disparate kinds of language—prose, blank verse, rhyme, pentameter, tetrameter, trimeter—

1 Joseph H. Summers, *Dreams of Love and Power: On Shakespeare’s Plays* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), 1.

all of which somehow achieve not only coexistence but a surprising richness and unity composed out of apparent dissonance. The play itself is a living oxymoron, like the musical discord or “sweet thunder” Hippolyta remembers hearing in the strange harmonies of her yelping hounds. For most contemporary theatergoers and critics, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of those rare works of art that discovers its own integrity, “something of great constancy,” as Hippolyta puts it, by violating every known “rule” of dramatic and poetic excellence.

The play, however, did not always enjoy such high regard. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to have been well-received in its early history, its later popularity has been limited to the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The praise of Shakespeare's contemporaries attests to the play's strong popular reception during Shakespeare's life. Francis Meres, for one, in 1598 includes a reference to *Dream* in his list of Shakespeare's great achievements. Judith M. Kennedy and Richard F. Kennedy point to a number of plays performed by Shakespeare's contemporaries that allude appreciatively to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1600), *The Malcontent* (1604), and *The Insatiate Countess* (1610); Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemakers' Holiday* (1599); Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels* (1600); and a number of other plays.² Each of these plays echoes one or another of the features of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—perhaps one of the play's four subplots, or its lyrical prosody and memorable images. These allusions attest to a wide awareness of Shakespeare's play and often a celebration of it.

But there's also evidence of a *lack* of enthusiasm: for example, the censorious distaste exhibited in a 1662 diary entry by Samuel Pepys. “Then to the King's Theatre,” he writes, “where we saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which I had never seen before nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that I ever saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure.” It is, of course, possible that Pepys's mind was distracted from the play by the “pleasure” of all those “handsome women.” In fact, however, Pepys was very much in agreement with his times, and even far beyond his times. Trevor R. Griffiths reminds us that the play “languish[ed] in almost total eclipse in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”³

What accounts for such theatrical volatility? These diverse opinions measure not so much the absolute value of Shakespeare's play as the changing cultural values and definitions that *shape* critical judgment. By following the often tumultuous and vacillating fortunes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then, we can chart a history of popular theatrical taste.

Scholars tend to agree that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first written and perhaps also first performed in the mid 1590s. The play bears a number of resemblances to other Shakespeare plays written and performed in what has become

2 Judith M. Kennedy and Richard F. Kennedy, eds., *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition* (London: Athlone, 1999), 1-13.

3 Trevor R. Griffiths, ed., *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare in Production* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 1.

known as Shakespeare's lyric period, an extraordinary time when Shakespeare was blending the characteristics of poetry and prose, romance and irony, an odd mixture of apparently hostile energies that, incidentally, lie at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Those plays include *Romeo and Juliet*, a play which Shakespeare's *Dream* playfully parodies, *Love's Labors' Lost*, *Richard II*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. What is especially interesting about all these plays is that they encourage, sometimes require, readers and audiences to experience such rich poetry with a "parted eye" that both celebrates and gently mocks what it sees and hears.

There are sparse records of performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the 1590s, when it was written, until 1642, when the Puritan regime closed down all the theaters. As Kittredge suggests, the play could have been intended to celebrate one of a number of court weddings. Jay Halio further speculates that, given the simple staging requirements of the play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could, after its private performance, easily be refashioned for the public stage.⁴ In 1600, the frontispiece of the first quarto (similar to our inexpensive paperback editions) boasted that "A Midsommer nights dreame...hath beene sundry times publickely acted." Although those "sundry times" are now impossible to document, there being no specific records of public performances of the play, many scholars tend to accept the veracity of the quarto's claim. On New Year's 1604, *A Play of Robin Goodfellow* was performed at the court of King James—a play that critics surmise might have been *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There was one other documented performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presented to a royal audience. Jay Halio, citing E. K. Chambers, notes that "on 17 October 1630 at Hampton Court Palace" the King's Men put on a performance for James I.⁵

Then, nothing—or almost nothing. Yet again there are hints of the play's perseverance. When the Puritans took power, one of their first acts was to close down the theaters, plucking them to the ground. From 1642 until 1660 all public performances were prohibited. But theatrical energy didn't entirely evaporate. There was a kind of subversive theater that slyly emerged, usually taking the form of scenes, or pastiches of scenes, accompanied by music and dance. Those resistant sketches were called "drolls." One of those drolls, *The Merry Conceited Humors of Bottom the Weaver*, is clearly a version of Shakespeare's play. Further, as many scholars note, the simple fact that one of the few drolls performed during the interregnum would be an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Dream* provides some evidence of the play's popularity. Indeed, the printed text of that droll, revived in 1661, boasted on its title page of the same widespread popularity as did that early quarto of 1600, claiming that "[i]t hath been often publickely Acted by some of his Majesties Comedians, and lately,

4 Jay L. Halio, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare in Performance, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 9.

5 Halio, 14.

privately, presented, by several Apprentices for their harmless recreation, with Great Applause.”⁶

Improving Shakespeare: The Restoration

While the return of royal power in 1660 brought back theater to an enthusiastic public, the Restoration was not kind to Shakespeare's comedies in general or to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in particular. The taste of the new era was more for the heroic and the sentimental. There was also a rejection of Shakespeare's bare stage and aural richness and an embrace of their opposites: a crowded, even operatic, stage that spangled with visual splendor combined with a severe erasure of Shakespeare's words. If the play in performance was found wanting, so was the very notion of magic and fairies in the age of enlightenment, where reason, not imagination, prevailed. Trevor R. Griffiths points out that “[e]nlightenment’ ideas and practices did not constitute a fertile intellectual matrix for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its emphasis on the supernatural made physically present” as well as its indecorous mixtures of upper- and lower-class characters and city and country setting.⁷

This pattern of “dandifying” the play with music and pieces from other plays continued through the seventeenth century. These adaptations often presented themselves as being based on Shakespeare's play, but you needed a keen and forgiving eye to note the resemblance. One such Restoration adaptation, produced by Thomas Betterton in 1692, was Henry Purcell's opera *The Fairy Queen*. This musical version kept only a third of Shakespeare's lines. Not only was Shakespeare's language severely cut, but Shakespeare's characters and scenes were similarly transformed into operatic opulence. The lavish set featured “Juno, a chorus of Chinese men and women, a dance of six monkeys, and ‘a Grand Dance consisting of 24 *Chineses*.”⁸

Eighteenth-Century Shakespeare

The eighteenth century continued the practice of adapting Shakespeare's *Dream*, as well as the substantial cutting required by the many musical numbers added to the play. Despite the emphasis on visual spectacle, the play was beginning to be performed more frequently, and Shakespeare's words were, to some extent, restored. The key phrase here is “to some extent.” The relationship between visual set pieces and substantial cutting of the play's text is an interesting one. Because such elaborate scenery took so long to set up and then to strike, it was necessary for whole scenes either to be cut completely or rearranged so that two or three scenes could share the same set. That dependence on elaborate scenery and the need to change sets created two additional problems for Shakespeare's play. First, it slowed the pace of the play to a crawl, an odd impairment for a play whose imagery and action repeatedly emphasize speed. Consider Hermia's “My legs can keep no pace with my

6 Halio, 14.

7 Griffiths, 20.

8 Halio, 15.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Theseus, Duke of Athens.

Egeus, father to *Hermia*.

Lysander, beloved of *Hermia*.

Demetrius, suitor to *Hermia*, approved by *Egeus*.

Philostrate, Master of the Revels to *Theseus*.

Peter Quince, a carpenter; *Prologue* in the interlude.

Nick Bottom, a weaver; *Pyramus* in the same.

Francis Flute, a bellows-mender; *Thisby* in the same.

Tom Snout, a tinker; *Wall* in the same.

Snug, a joiner; *Lion* in the same.

Robin Starveling, a tailor; *Moonshine* in the same.

Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to *Theseus*.

Hermia, daughter to *Egeus*, in love with *Lysander*.

Helena, in love with *Demetrius*.

Oberon, King of the Fairies.

Titania, Queen of the Fairies.

Puck, or *Robin Goodfellow*.

Peaseblossom,
Cobweb,
Moth,
Mustardseed, } fairies.

Other Fairies attending *Oberon* and *Titania*.

Attendants on *Theseus* and *Hippolyta*.

SCENE. *Athens*, and a wood near by.

ACT I

SCENE I. [*Athens. The Palace of Theseus.*][†]

Enter Theseus, Hippolyta, [Philostrate,] with others.

THESEUS Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
 Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
 Another moon; but, O, methinks, how slow
 This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
 Like to a stepdame or a dowager,
 Long withering out a young man's revenue.

5

ACT I. SCENE I.

4. **lingers my desires:** tediously postpones the fulfillment of my desires. 5. **dowager:** a widow who has rights of dower in her late husband's property. 6. **revenue:** The young heir has inherited his father's estate, but his income is diminished by the necessity of paying a part of the annual rents to the surviving widow. [In fact, Theseus's comparison of the lingering old moon to an old stepmother or widow wasting away a young man's income may suggest, perhaps unwittingly, that his idealized love has its practical side. JRF]

† One of the first decisions a director makes is to discover his own definition of Athens and how that definition helps realize the design of the play. Does he imagine Athens as a strong classical order, whose stately formal columns can oppose itself to the irrational disorder of the woods? Or as something quite different? Recent productions have suggested a wide range of definitions. Peter Brook's 1970 Athens suggested a parody of classical authority, an empty, white-box setting where anything could happen. Michael Boyd's 1999 Athens was a colorless, cold place. Its inhabitants, with their identical dark overcoats, seemed to create not so much a world of intellectual or imaginative inquiry as one of conformity. More recently, Francis O'Connor's design for Gregory Doran's 2008 *Dream*, like Brook's spare set, implied a complicity between actors and audience. A huge mirrored backdrop allowed the audience to "observe" a distorted version of itself commingling with the reflected characters on stage. O'Connor's design suggested that Athens, like the play itself, contains its own antithesis.

Film versions of *A Midsummer Night Dream* have their own ways of constructing Athens, based on cinematic tactics. Peter Hall's English-style Athens suggested the authority and order of an Elizabethan great house, standing in benign opposition to what could have been a Warwickshire countryside. But Hall also noticed the "distemperature" in the air, a disorder brought into being, as Titania admits, by the jealousies of Oberon and Titania. Hall used various film lenses and filters, as well as the film's rainy locations, to suggest that disorder, creating a muddy, messy world, where Athens and the woods around it were hard to distinguish from one another. Adrian Noble's 1994 film version of his stage production of the play imagined Athens as a formal, legally obsessive world that was in need of analysis. Accordingly, Noble focused his Athens by looking at its dreamy antithesis, a series of corridors ending in Freudian doors opening into various levels of unconsciousness. The transitions between Noble's Athens and the dream world were marked by characters and details taken from the world of fairy tales, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Peter Pan*, and *ET*. In Michael Hoffman's 1999 film of the play, the early scenes of Athens reflected a more sanguine world, a world of surprisingly exotic tastes, as cameras lingered on vast quantities of food, so rich and so bounteous that they couldn't be contained by the screen's frame. Hoffman's sensual abundance suggested that Athens, for all its resistance to love and imagination, nonetheless contained within itself the potential for a richer world of passion and sensuality awaiting the Athenians' discovery.

Enter Egeus and his Daughter Hermia, and Lysander and Demetrius.

EGEUS	Happy be Theseus, our renowned Duke!	20
THESEUS	Thanks, good Egeus. What's the news with thee?	
EGEUS	Full of vexation come I, with complaint Against my child, my daughter Hermia. Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord, This man hath my consent to marry her.	25
	Stand forth, Lysander. And, my gracious Duke, This man hath bewitch'd the bosom of my child. Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes And interchang'd love tokens with my child; Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung	30
	With feigning voice verses of feigning love, And stol'n the impression of her fantasy With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits, Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats—messengers Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth. [†]	35
	With cunning hast thou filch'd my daughter's heart; Turn'd her obedience, which is due to me, To stubborn harshness. And, my gracious Duke, Be it so she will not here before your Grace Consent to marry with Demetrius,	40
	I beg the ancient privilege of Athens— As she is mine, I may dispose of her; Which shall be either to this gentleman Or to her death, according to our law Immediately provided in that case.	45
THESEUS	What say you, Hermia? Be advis'd, fair maid. To you your father should be as a god;	

21. **Egeus:** Pronounced *Eg'ēus*. Shakespeare took the name from Plutarch, who mentions Ægeus (dissyllabic) as the father of Theseus. 28. **rhymes:** love poems—with an allusion to the use of rhyme in magic charms. 31. **feigning:** Such repetition of a word for emphasis is common in Shakespeare. 32. **stol'n...fantasy:** craftily impressed thine image upon her deluded fancy. *Fantasy* here combines the meanings of “fancy” (or “imagination”) and “love.” The idea is repeated in 1.1.36. 33. **With:** by means of. —**gauds:** gewgaws; jewels and similar ornaments. Cf. 4.1.164. —**conceits:** cleverly devised love tokens. 34. **Knacks:** Knickknacks, toys, trinkets—a contemptuous word for trifling gifts. —**messengers:** in apposition with “bracelets, rings,” etc. Such things convey love's messages to the lady. 35. **prevailment:** persuasive force; efficacy. —**unhardened:** not yet hardened by experience; impressionable. 39. **Be it so:** if it be the fact that. 44. **our law:** A similar law is ascribed to Solon. [Solon was a famous lawmaker in ancient Athens. JRF] 45. **Immediately:** expressly. 46. **Be advis'd:** consider; use proper discretion.

† Here is an opportunity for comic irony at Egeus's expense. In Michael Hoffman's 1999 film, the deeper Egeus gets in his list of poetic and imaginative offenses—bewitching rhymes, love tokens, moonlit songs, rings, gauds, conceits, knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats—the more these magical words provoke a passionate emotional charge within Egeus.



"I would my father looked but with my eyes." Hermia (Monica Dolan) pleads with Theseus (Alex Jennings) while Hippolyta (Lindsay Duncan) looks on disapprovingly. Noble, like many other directors, finds a way to give a "voice" to a Hippolyta silent for most of this scene.

One that compos'd your beauties; yea, and one
 To whom you are but as a form in wax,
 By him imprinted, and within his power 50
 To leave the figure, or disfigure it.
 Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.

HERMIA So is Lysander.

THESEUS In himself he is;
 But in this kind, wanting your father's voice,
 The other must be held the worthier. 55

HERMIA I would my father look'd but with my eyes.

THESEUS Rather your eyes must with his judgment look.

HERMIA I do entreat your Grace to pardon me.
 I know not by what power I am made bold,
 Nor how it may concern my modesty 60
 In such a presence here to plead my thoughts;
 But I beseech your Grace that I may know

51. **To leave the figure:** to allow the figure (the image that he has composed, i.e., your fair self) to remain intact. —**disfigure:** destroy, obliterate. Samuel Johnson's note is: "You owe to your father a being which he may at pleasure continue or destroy." 52. **worthy:** noble, honorable. 54. **in this kind:** in this particular respect, i.e., with respect to your taking him as your husband. —**voice:** approval. 60. **how...modesty:** how far it may involve my modesty; whether it is or is not consistent with modest behavior. 61. **to plead my thoughts:** to express my own opinions and feelings as my plea in this case.

HOW TO READ *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* AS PERFORMANCE

How indeed? Many of us first encounter Shakespeare in a classroom and Shakespeare's plays within the pages of a text—like this one. We *talk of reading* plays, when instead it might be more profitable to turn that sentence inside out: to *read of talking* plays. We need to read, not just the details and patterns of Shakespeare's words but the details and patterns of an actor's and a director's *performance* of those words. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare requires us to take on the same multiplicity of perspectives that his most admirable characters discover. When Hermia awakens from her half-grasped dream, she admits to a strange and synthetic consciousness: "Methinks I see these things with parted eye / When everything seems double" (4.1.186-87). But such "double reading" is easier said than done and, in fact, has troubled Shakespeare's plays since their earliest performances.

Just what constitutes a Shakespeare text? That question has always been at the heart of a play's ambiguous identity, as Shakespeare's many censorious critics could well attest. The title page of the first quarto edition, the first affordable reading edition, underscores this ambiguity. On the one hand, it is a book of words "Written by William Shakespeare" and "Imprinted at London, for Thomas Fisher, . . . to be soulede at his shoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart, in Fleetestreete." On the other hand, this same quarto edition announces its credentials in terms of its fidelity to a number of *performances* by a company of actors: "As it hath beene sundry times publickely acted by the Right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his servants."

As we've seen in the introduction to *this* edition, widely different understandings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were inevitable given the very different understandings of what was meant by "reading" a play. Shakespeare's plays, as stage actors and directors keep telling us, are but re-creations of a performed imaginative experience. The "meaning" of that theatrical moment is shaped as much by bodies in motion as it is by poetry. And yet language—poetic language—lies at the heart of all of Shakespeare's plays. How could it not, given Shakespeare's unmatched word hoard—more words than Milton, more than the Old and New Testaments combined?

For Shakespeare, poetry and action were inseparable, like the intertwined lyrics and melodies of a song. Or, as Hamlet advised the players just before staging his

performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature.” Anne Bogart, co-founder of SITI Company and director of a brilliant 2006 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, has defined the relationship between words and action somewhat differently, as a fusion of Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century language and our own twenty-first-century emotional and bodily movement.

How do we find that modesty of nature, where the words and the action are in balance? In Shakespeare’s plays, the poetry serves the needs of the dramatic action, “scoring” and shaping that action by giving it a rhythm and a kind of melody. Conversely, the sheer energy of action, of actors moving around a stage or entering into the audience’s space, creates a power that drives the language. Any play by Shakespeare oscillates within the intersections of text and performance.

Consider the opening lines of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The words themselves, first Theseus’s and then Hippolyta’s, establish not only the play’s themes of transformation and balance but also a mood of disagreement, even challenge. Theseus opens with the traditional complaint of an impatient lover:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
Another moon; but, O, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
Like to a stepdame or a dowager,
Long withering out a young man’s revenue. (1.1.1-6)

Theseus’s words articulate the central images of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, especially its play of metamorphosis, lingering on the central symbol of the moon. Yet, for all their charm, there’s something rehearsed about Theseus’s words, as if he speaks by the book.

Then Hippolyta replies. Using some of the same words as Theseus, Hippolyta reinvents them, her repetition and near repetition giving the words a new and playful metaphoric energy. She gives new life to these conventional phrases, fusing romantic and naturalistic diction into hot ice:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities. (1.1.7-11)

Those first eleven lines establish the tone of the play: its multiple contradictions and conflicts; the strange metamorphoses of dream, desire, and play; the relationship, at once erotic and contentious, between Theseus and Hippolyta and their moonlit doubles, Oberon and Titania.

But the poetry is more than merely poetic. It prompts the actors into action. One way to measure how the words of the play authenticate the physical on-stage movements is to look at how different versions of *Dream* give voice to different kinds

The New Kittredge Shakespeare

This edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is wonderfully lucid and thoughtful, offering supporting material that will appeal to readers from high school students to scholars. The introduction is especially thoughtful, offering, in addition to expected discussions of love, magic and imagination, an exploration of the theatrical history. The bibliography and filmography are both detailed and helpful, and the questions guide students to consider the play from many viewpoints without ever forcing an interpretation onto them.

~ Annalisa Castaldo,
Widener University

John R. Ford has taught courses in Shakespeare, Milton, and other Renaissance topics at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi since 1983. He has published a book and many articles on Shakespeare for scholarly journals. He has also contributed chapters for several critical anthologies. In 2007 Ford was awarded the Excellence in Research Award from Delta State University.

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