

## Adaptations of Mythical Elements of Love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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*A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place in the city of Athens and the woods nearby. As in the case of other Shakespearean comedies, the location of the play seems arbitrary. In other words, the audience will not be thinking all the time, while watching the production, that it is happening in Greece, for the spectators do not have to as the drama is to provide them with some special sense of time and space away from their everyday lives. Moreover, the young Athenian lovers and the mechanics look just like English people, and the audience is only reminded of their nationality from time to time, for instance, when Bottom says, "Masters, I am to discourse wonders: but ask me not what; for if I tell you, I am not true Athenian" (IV. ii. 28-29).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the audience is forgetful of the sense of time and place and will not be disturbed by the lines spoken by Theseus, himself an antique figure: "I never may believe / These antique fables, nor these fairy toys" (V. i. 2-3). Yet the place Athens offers a great variety of myths. Athens has always been associated with mythical characters and incidents, and for this reason it is appropriate as a setting for the fantastic happenings of the play. Therefore, the elements that help compose the topic of the play have a strong connection to the location it takes place in. It is important to be reminded that the word topic derives from the Greek *topos* meaning "place." In fact, Shakespeare's unrestrained use of classical mythology is the dynamics of the play.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* consists of a mixture of classical and English elements. Names and episodes from Greek and Roman mythology not only enrich the play and give an exotic and mythical touch to the play, but are indispensable for

the development of the plot and the structure of the play, which is unlike the use of classical myth in other Shakespearean comedies. This point, however, has not received enough attention the play deserves. This paper examines Greek and Roman mythical elements of love in particular, which are always distorted and paradoxical in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I propose to show how Shakespeare exploits the classical tradition and distills mirth, or affirmation of life, from tragedy.

## 1

With Bates's *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Shakespeare's familiarity with classical works has been made clearer than ever. According to Bates,

...the classical accomplishments of the average Elizabethan grammar-school boy were considerable indeed by the standard of most of us today. And if 'lesse Greeke' really means 'less' rather than 'no', Shakespeare would have been above average, for Greek was only studied in the upper forms of the better schools, and it was not begun until Latin had been thoroughly mastered.<sup>2</sup>

As for members of the audience, who were varied, "the most able... would have been intimately versed in both classical texts and the art of allegorical interpretation, while even those who had read but little would have had a rudimentary working knowledge of ancient mythology."<sup>3</sup> Not only did Shakespeare learn rhetoric from classical authors, but was aware of the sense of instability and change prevalent in classical works. Ovid was one to show him this kind of outlook on life,<sup>4</sup> but before Ovid there were numerous Greeks concerned with the instability and change. Homer, to begin with, recounts that there stand two urns on the door-sill of Zeus, an urn of evils and an urn of blessings, and that the god bestows on mortals

sometimes sorrows and at other times happiness (The *Iliad*, Book XXIV).<sup>5</sup> Herodotus, in the conversation between Croesus and Solon (The *Histories*, Book I), also says that one can never be said to be happy until he dies an honorable death.<sup>6</sup> The Greek tragedians were no exception. *Oedipus the King* of Sophocles ends with the following song of the Chorus.

Look ye, countrymen and Thebans, this is Oedipus the  
 great,  
 He who knew the Sphinx's riddle and was mightiest in  
 our state.  
 Who of all our townsmen gazed not on his fame with  
 envious eyes?  
 Now, in what a sea of troubles sunk and overwhelmed he  
 lies!  
 Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one  
 mortal blest:  
 Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his  
 final rest.

(1524–1530)<sup>7</sup>

Although some critics attribute this particular song to later interpolation, the same kind of view appears in other works of Sophocles. In *Ajax*, Odysseus, in pity of Ajax who sees visions imposed on him by Athena and kills bullocks thinking they are the men in the Greek army, says, "Alas! We living mortals, what are we / But phantoms all or unsubstantial shades?" (*Ajax*, 125–126).<sup>8</sup> After all, *peripeteia* which Aristotle thought indispensable to the good development of the plot of a tragedy figuratively means precipitation from happiness to destruction. Thus an awareness of instability and change is a main concern of Greek tragedy. It is natural that Ovid should take over such philosophy and apply it to his works.<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, in turn, regenerates this ancient concept of instability and change in his drama of love.

It is easy to see that Shakespeare, to some extent, referred to Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" for his characters, the occasion, and the plot. Shakespeare takes Theseus and Hippolyta from Chaucer, not Antiopa as Theseus' Amazon wife as cited in Plutarch. Philostrate is also a name from Chaucer. Theseus and Hippolyta are expecting their wedding at hand, and the characters "do observance to May" at some point in the story. Two men in love with one woman in the respective stories see the resolution of their love either by death or magic. The direct source may well be Chaucerian, but the play abounds in elements and echoes of classical mythology, and the technique of adaptation of these elements and echoes is very Shakespearean.

## 2

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is supposed to have been written in celebration of an aristocratic marriage,<sup>10</sup> and in the play characters celebrate the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, but every single love image chosen from the classical myth is antithetical to a happy marriage. First of all, why choose Theseus, who did not lead a happy marital life? Romulus, for example, a counterpart of Theseus in Plutarch, would have been more complimentary if this play was first produced in celebration of a marriage. According to the legend, Theseus was an excellent ruler who organized the *polis* of Athens, and he brought aristocrats, farmers, and artisans into the *demos*. Therefore, Shakespeare might have thought it fitting for Theseus to bring in handicraftsmen into court to celebrate his marriage. Although he himself is a mythical figure, he represents reason and does not believe in the lovers' experience in the woods, thus he plays foil to the dream and illusion which the play is all about.

For Theseus' wife, Shakespeare took Hippolyta from Chaucer, while Plutarch lists Antiopa and mentions the name Hippolyta as that of minor tradition. In Euripides, the name of

this Amazon wife is not mentioned,<sup>11</sup> while Seneca refers to Antiope as Theseus' wife and Hippolytus' mother.<sup>12</sup> There might have been a reason why Shakespeare preferred Hippolyta over Antiopa, whose name follows the same metrical pattern as Hippolyta. The name Hippolyta is easily associated with Hippolytus, Theseus' son by his Amazon wife. The name Hippolytus, a compound of *hippo* (horse) and *lytus* (bound), anticipates the manner of his death: he was killed tangled in the reins of his horses that were panic-stricken by a sea monster. His only son thus killed, Theseus did not lead a prosperous marriage with his Amazon wife. At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, Oberon and Titania, accompanied by fairies, come to bless the house of Theseus. Such a paradoxical or discordant adaptation of the mythical fact established earlier is a key to appreciating *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I will discuss this point later after further examining other echoes from the classical myth of love.

Let us consider other characters next. Theseus' marriage is but to provide a framework for love among young lovers. Hermia, whose love for Lysander meets parental opposition, promises Lysander to meet him at the appointed place and swears

by Cupid's strongest bow,  
By his best arrow with the golden head,  
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,  
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,  
And by that fire which burn'd the Carthage queen  
When the false Trojan under sail was seen;

...

(I. i. 169-174)

As refuted by Helena some sixty lines later, it would not be wise to swear by Cupid since "Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste." (236) and "is Love said to be a child, /

Because in choice he is so oft beguil' d" (238-239). The effect of Cupid's arrow with the golden head together with that of lead introduces the story of Apollo and Daphne. Helena, metaphorically speaking, shot by an arrow with the golden head, proposes the classical story to be changed so that women who "were not made to woo" (II. i. 242) can pursue as "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase" (231). We will certainly see the ancient stories of love rewritten in this play. Then Hermia refers to Venus, the goddess of love. Love inspired by Venus, Cupid's mother in tradition, is erotic and sometimes infatuous as opposed to the chaste love of Diana. Venus as such a victim of Cupid's arrow and her tragic love for Adonis might have been in Shakespeare's mind. After all, it was the love Venus kindled in Phaedra that brought destruction upon the house of Theseus.

The fire that burned Dido is also ominous. Dido chooses death over life: "moriemur inultae, sed moriamur" (I shall die unavenged, but let me die!) (The *Aeneid*, Book IV, 659-660). Death was one of the alternatives open to Hermia in case of her disobedience to her father. Another choice open to Hermia was the single life of a nun, which Hermia would prefer to being married to Demetrius.

The. But earthlier happy is the rose distill' d  
 Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,  
*Grows, lives, and dies*, in single blessedness.  
 Her. *So will I grow, so live, so die*, my lord,  
 Ere I will yield my virgin patent up  
 Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke  
 My soul consents not to give sovereignty.  
 (the italics mine)

(I. i. 76-82)

The above quotation echoes Dido's resolution in the repetition of the same word in a different tense, though the difference is

in the mood in the case of Dido (*moriemur* and *moriatur*). In this respect, too, Hermia's future is not a bright one. The life of a nun can be compared to that of "Helen and Limander" as Bottom and Flute put for Hero and Leander. Hero was a priestess of the temple of Aphrodite: "So lovely fair was Hero, Venus' nun" (*Hero and Leander*, I. 45).<sup>13</sup> Hero, a priestess in love, can be a future Hermia, and the name Lysander is strangely similar to Limander and Leander. Shakespeare brings in, though in scenes after this, the image of a priestess who was believed by Theseus to lead a blessed single life but, after all, dies a tragic death for love, an anti-priesthood image. Hermia and Lysander's escape is also anticipated by the tragic death of Pyramus and Thisbe, and such an end might have been ordained to them but for the intervention of Oberon and Puck, the fairies of the woods the couple escapes to.

Although Oberon makes Puck play Cupid to the Athenian lovers, the marital life of the Fairie King and Queen is not without dissension. Oberon is French in origin and Puck is from traditional English folklore, while the name Titania is Ovidian. In Ovid, Diana is called Titania; therefore, critics, with some puzzlement, associate her with Diana, the goddess of the moon. The puzzlement is due to the character of Titania, who passionately dotes on the ass, the metamorphosis of Bottom. The character of Titania may well take on that of Diana, for she is the mistress of the woods. Diana is a complicated figure not only as she has three aspects, Diana, Luna, and Hecate, but she is a fertility goddess who helps with childbirth as well as a virgin goddess. She is a foil to Venus in the sense that she is a chaste virgin, yet her episode with Callisto and Opis suggests that "at some time she may have had fertility connections."<sup>14</sup>

Titania, in fact, embodies a very complicated personage, too. In a sense, she is like Earth Mother because she represents contradictory aspects of a daughter as well as a mother and an amorous goddess as well as a virgin goddess as we will see. Upon meeting Oberon, Titania attributes the cause of the

“distemperature” of the weather, a poor harvest, and the rheumatic diseases to their dissension. The description of the disorder in nature echoes several descriptions from classical works.<sup>15</sup> Once Ceres, a mother goddess in woe, caused a disaster, and she prefigures Titania, a parent having an influence on the natural order:

She curst all lands...

But bitterly above the rest she banned *Sicilie*...

And therefore there with cruell hand the earing ploughes  
she brake,

And man and beast that tilde the grounde to death in  
anger strake.

...the corne was killed in the blade:

Now too much drought, now too much wet did make it  
for to fade.

The starres and blasting windes did hurt...

(The *Metamorphoses*, Book V, 591, 593 ff.)<sup>16</sup>

The cause of the devastation results from a child, Proserpina in the case of Ceres, and an Indian changeling in the case of Oberon and Titania. However, Titania consents to yield her Indian boy to Oberon while she is collecting flowers. The abduction of Proserpina happens when she is preoccupied with collecting flowers. Although it is not herself that Titania was made to yield to, Oberon wins the consent to receive from Titania, now enamoured of an ass and collecting flowers for her lover, the child whom she had earlier declared, “The fairy land buys not” (II. i. 122). Here Titania resembles a girl who is lost while preoccupied with some girlish delight.

The complication of her character is more evident when we see her amorous aspect. The most striking characteristic of Titania concerns her love affair with Bottom, metamorphosed as ass. First, let us examine her name. The name Titania is interpreted as the feminine form of that which belongs to the





Although Titania denies Oberon's suspicion that she has led Theseus astray from Perigouna, Aegles, Ariadne, and Antiopa, the doubt remains. If we think that love for another woman—here more symbolic than anthropomorphic—led Theseus away from his mistress, then it is possible to attribute the image of the goddess of love Venus to Titania.

Her love for Theseus might be over now, or it was simply “the forgeries of jealousy” (81). This time Titania is to fall in love with Bottom, as ass, so that Oberon, who intrigued this love affair, turns out to be a cuckold. This love of Titania for Bottom reminds us of the two stories involving Venus. One concerns her love for Adonis mentioned earlier. Her love for Adonis was not without a cause: her son Cupid unwittingly scratched her bosom with the golden head of an arrow when he kissed her (The *Metamorphoses*, Book X, 525–26).<sup>19</sup> We can identify the love juice from the flower love-in-idleness with the golden head of Cupid's arrow, so that the cause of Titania's dotage on Bottom is equivalent to that of Venus on Adonis. Shakespeare mischievously substitutes Bottom, the ass, whose visage Titania loathes, for the beautiful youth.

Whenever Venus has an affair, her husband Vulcan gets cuckolded. But classical works seldom mention the betrayed husband except in Homer's story of Aphrodite and Ares (Mars in Latin). Aphrodite and Ares were caught in bed with a fine net of steel Hephaestos had set (The *Odyssey*, Book VIII, 266–366). It was a story embarrassing to both the lovers and the husband. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, differs from this story in that Oberon, the husband, was the initiator of the love affair, the difference being paradoxical. When all his company flee, Bottom, transformed into an ass, sings a song to show that he is not afraid. The last part of his song refers to a cuckoo and husbands who cannot but hear “cuckold” in the bird's song.<sup>20</sup> This, too, proves that the audience should notice the cuckold image in Oberon, though Oberon, being the initiator

of the love affair, would not be concerned about it. Perhaps we should not stress this point too much, but the image of a cuckold appears again in the play-within-the play when Starveling introduces himself as the Man in the Moon.

*Moon.* This lantern doth the horned moon present—

*Dem.* He should have worn the horns on his head.

*The.* He is no crescent, and his horns are invisible within the circumference.

(V. i. 231-234)

3

The Athenians prepare some entertainment in celebration of the noble wedding, and Philostrate presents a short list of performances at hand. The topics of the performances are all unsuitable to the occasion, though the performers, such as the company of Quince, must be trying hard to please Theseus with “their intents, / Extremely stretch’d and conn’d with cruel pain / To do you service” (V. i. 79-81). The stories of the battle with the Centaurs and the death of the Thracian singer Orpheus are taken from classical myth. The former results from the extreme misbehavior, i.e., the abduction of the bride by the drunken guests at a wedding feast. Orpheus, of the latter, is most tragic because his bride dies on the very day of the wedding following the ceremony. The time between the ceremony and the consummation is the time the newlywed Theseus and Hippolyta and the Athenian couples spend watching a performance. The “very tragical mirth” of Pyramus and Thisbe is also about unconsummated love. However tragic and unfitting to the opportunity, the Interlude played by the Athenian mechanics turns out to be so hilarious that it invites “merry tears” (V. i. 69).

The play by the mechanics sums up all the distorted images of love indicated so far. Love meeting the hindrance of

the Wall, which is always the case with "The course of true love" that "never did run smooth" (I. i. 134), reflects love between Hermia and Lysander that meets parental opposition. But the Wall is misplaced within the great chamber. The love of Helen and Limander is a possible future waiting for Hermia and Lysander. Yet their names are misquoted so that the reference to them fails to bring in the severity of their doom. The danger within the woods they escape to may cause them such an end as the unconsummated love of Pyramus and Thisbe. But Bottom is too prone to be self-conscious to be tragic, and his Pyramus endures the blows of death far too long. Their tragedy acted in the Interlude invites nothing but laughter. Cephalus and Procris are the paradigm of a faithful couple, but their names are misquoted as Shafalus and Procrus so that the faithfulness the two names imply is distorted. Rather, Starveling's Moonshine undermines their established faithfulness. As the horns of the moon are invisible within the circumference, the doubt of being cuckolded is lurking, if invisible, in any marriage. These discordant images of love fill the stage where a wall stands within a great chamber, and the man in the moon stands outside the moon. Since the classical stories inappropriate to the occasion are represented so inappropriately, they produce an appropriate result, i.e., mirth. This is "four negatives" making "two affirmatives," (*Twelfth Night*, V. i. 20)<sup>21</sup> and such is Shakespearean affirmation of life.

If the setting itself is inside out, the actors also step out of their roles by introducing themselves: Snout says, "*In this same interlude it doth befall / That I, one Snout by name, present a wall*" (V. i. 154-155). Snug goes further by being apologetic for his dramatic role: "*For if I should as lion come in strife / Into this place, 'twere pity on my life*" (220-221). Furthermore, Bottom speaks to Theseus in the middle of the play. The actors are never content to stay within the framework of the play. In such a setting as this and with such actors, there is no love image that is properly represented in the play-within-the play,

yet as the audience laughs heartily at the silly endeavors of the mechanics, a tragedy is turned into mirth. Here is Shakespeare's wit most adroitly at work.

Through the various aspects of love in motion, Shakespeare tells us of the instability and change in love, as his classical predecessors did in the various forms as I have mentioned earlier. Seeing Lysander, who could have been the counterpart of Pyramus in his elopement, poke fun at the actors, we know that however tragic love seems to be to the people involved, it can look ridiculous in other people's eyes. Thus, instead of making the instability and change the cause of tragedy, Shakespeare privileges the audience to laugh them away. While "dreaming away the time" in the theater, the audience sees all the ominous stories being turned into laughter. Finally, we should be reminded that the play was originally performed at a wedding. At such an occasion especially, the newlywed couple in the audience could have hardly resisted feeling that the fairies came to bless their house in a setting like a courtyard where the borderline between the actors and the audience is almost invisible. Thus Shakespeare has turned water into wine at a wedding, and this is the gift of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## NOTES

1. All quotations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from the Arden edition, ed. by Harold Brooks (London, 1979).
2. Jonathan Bates, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford, 1993) 7. For the grammar-school curriculum and rigorous rhetorical training, see 19ff.
3. Bates, 12.
4. See Bates, 6-7.
5. See *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951) 489.
6. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, revised by A. R. Burn (Penguin Books, 1972) 51ff.
7. *Sophocles I*, trans. by F. Storr, The Loeb Classical Library (London, 1912) 139.
8. *Sophocles II*, trans. by F. Storr, The Loeb Classical Library (London, 1913) 19.
9. See Bates, 6-7.
10. See Brooks, Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, liii-lvii.
11. Barrett says Theseus' Amazon wife was perhaps originally Antiope and "Hippolyte only after she had been made the mother of Hippolytos. Eur. himself calls her, four times, merely 'the Amazon.'" See *Euripides Hippolytos*, ed. by W. S. Barrett (Oxford, 1964) 9, f. n. 3.
12. See "Hippolytus, or Phaedra." *Seneca's Tragedies*, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. by T. E. Page (London, 1917), 1. 227, 336.
13. *Marlowe's Poems, The Works and Life of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by L. C. Martin (London, 1931) 30. For Shakespeare's familiarity with the work, see Brooks, Introduction, Ixiv.
14. See Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York, 1977) 140.
15. See Appendix I, 3-4 of the Arden edition, 137-140.
16. Arthur Golding's translation given in Appendix I, 3, 138.
17. See *Hesiod*, The Loeb Classical Library (London, 1936) 90-95.
18. According to other tradition she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione, and in this sense she is often called a daughter of Zeus.
19. See *Ovid IV, Metamorphoses II*, 2nd. ed. The Loeb Classical Library (London, 1984) 100-101.
20. See footnote on III. i. 131.
21. See *Twelfth Night*, ed. by J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London, 1975), 132.