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Shakespeare

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### **Characterisation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*<sup>1</sup>**

Any witness to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* must notice almost at once the particular vagueness in which character is drawn. But any tendency to judge this as being ineffectual stems from what must be a misunderstanding of the effect itself. Just as it would seem foolhardy to berate a black and white film for lack of colour, neither should we see the general lack of realistic distinguishing details in the personalities as a shortfall of the play as a whole. What we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not so much the presentation of personalities, but the representation of certain types who occupy a fantastical world. These several character types are an expression of the several

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<sup>1</sup>I am sure you are unsure which of these papers is worth 30%. Obviously it is the one that has the highest mark--if such a distinction exists--since that would naturally be the one I worked hardest upon--if such a distinction exists. Please note that, as always, I allow myself certain footnote liberties which academic conventions would probably deem footloose and they are not, therefore, to be considered part of the paper itself.

themes contained in the play; therefore, to understand their<sup>2</sup> symbolic nature means, basically, to understand the play.

### ***Theseus and Hippolyta***

It is certainly a testament to the genius of Shakespeare that the most insignificant principal characters--in terms of their participation in the largest part of the play--are actually indispensable in terms of structure. Theseus and Hippolyta provide the entire framework for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But we have here an early indication of the relative unimportance of character *per se*, for it is not so much Theseus and Hippolyta who provide that framework, as their marriage. It is discussion of the marriage which opens and its actuality that closes the play. And it is their marriage plot--if we might call it such--that provides the main stem from which the other three distinct plots develop.

But this is not to say that their value rests entirely upon the framework their marriage provides. When Hermia rejects her father's choice of husband, Theseus states: "Rather your eyes must with his judgement look." (I.i.57) Here we see, in essence, the representative shape of Theseus, and that shape is the sober judgement of Reason. Amongst all the infectious love madness, Theseus represents the majestic faculty of Reason. Egeus,

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<sup>2</sup>In reference to you detailed explanation of "there," "their," "they're" on my last paper: surprising as it might seem, I do know the difference. Look therefore upon such mistake as something done by the keyboard, rather than by me.

although important for the lovers plot line, also serves as a foil to Theseus. His abuse of paternal authority is supported by Theseus upon the reasonable grounds of law, demonstrating that Reason alone seems somehow *lacking*. The representational identity of Theseus is made still clearer: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,/Are of imagination all compact." (V.i.7-8) The key speech, from which this is taken, occurring in the final act, is in effect Theseus' assessment of all that we have witnessed in the strange dreamy realm outside Athens. That place is notably a wood rather than a forest, since it is, like the characters, itself a representation, in this case of the word's secondary sense: mad. It is this sense which is most appropriate to Theseus' reasoning.

Hippolyta shares a similar quality of majesty with Theseus, but her reasonableness is qualified by her sex.

But all the story of the night told over  
 And all their minds transfigur'd so together,  
 More witness than fancy's images,  
 And grows to something of great constancy.

Here we see Hippolyta not entirely in accord with her fiancé. In a play which is remarkable in structure, we find, besides the unification of four plots, a consistent use of antithesis reminiscent of several of Shakespeare's plays, and of *King Lear* in particular. It is the happy unification of opposites, symbolised by marriage--an activity in which every group is some way involved--which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* attempts to highlight. Theseus, masculine reason personified, cannot see the

wood for the trees--so to speak. He is unable to see the intangible things that cast moonlight shadows, the stuff of which love and poetry are made. Hippolyta, on the other hand, is more willing to place faith in matters which defy rationalism. She takes the fantastical seriously, particularly where it forms the substance of art, recognising its potential to transform. It is in this respect that she has difficulty accepting the foolish artistic offerings of Bottom and Co. "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard." (V.i.210) Theseus' compassionate reply shows both his civilised tact and politeness that is lacking in his Amazonian Queen, and also that he is not entirely destitute of the imaginative faculty, but only where it lies within the realm of the fantastic and poetic. In a play which, as we have said, is built upon antithesis, it is notable that Egeus stands, like Puck, as a singular figure. It is this singularity in both Egeus and Puck that explains, in part, the unbalanced reckless nature of their actions. Theseus and Hippolyta, matched, serve to complement each other, providing what the other lacks, forming together a perfect royal couple perfectly able to rule.

### ***The Lovers***

The four lovers take the concept of equality by virtue of "indistinguishability" to its penultimate degree. Students of Shakespeare have been known to make cardboard cut-outs of Lysandra, Hermia, Demetrius, Hermia, to move them about the kitchen table top in a pantomime of their changing affiliations; or to draw charts with zooming arrows zooming from one name to

the other.<sup>3</sup> All this to keep track of who is who and who did what to who.<sup>4</sup> Even then, at the play's conclusion, confusion must certainly remain.

Normally speaking, such a condition would be seen as wanting; but *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will hear none of it. Indeed, there are certain distinguishing qualities. Lysander is perhaps a more sympathetic character than Demetrius, for his ill treatment of Hermia was caused by a spell--though this is about as far as their differences go. Helena and Hermia are contrasted by their different temperaments--though which is fiery and which is cool escapes the memory. Indeed, this is most telling, for they are contrasted though not fully drawn. The symbolic meaning of the lovers is made entirely evident by Helena's explanation of her confederate's motivation.

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,  
And therefore is winged cupid painted blind.  
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;  
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:  
And therefore is Love said to be a child,  
Because in choice he is so oft beguil'd. (I.i. 234-  
239)

The characterisation of the lovers takes the form of a description not of themselves, but of Cupid's nature, for they

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<sup>3</sup>This seems the most sensible system!

<sup>4</sup>"Whom" has been dropped for two reasons: it would spoil the repetition; it goes against my working class principles.

are entirely defined not by who they are but by what they represent. The name Cupid then tells us, essentially, everything there is to know about the lovers. We might notice also the inappropriate speaker, for Helena is in effect commenting upon herself by virtue of her association. And why, if she demonstrates such abilities of insight, does she continue, like cupid, to act without sight? Of course, this is not important, for it is what they symbolise that interests us.

### ***The Fairies***

It is quite clear that the fairies do not provide us with a fourth social group, but rather a supernatural equivalent of the three human groups. The fairies then form a delightful symmetry with their analogous people counterparts: Oberon and Titania as the Royal contingent; Pease-Blossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustard-Seed as the airy and courteous courtly entourage--matched with the lovers by their relationship with royalty and also their delicate ways; and lastly Puck, the raucous replacement for Bottom and company.<sup>5</sup>

The fairies are the most complicated element in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though it is not their individual characters in which the complexity lies, but in nature of what they represent. Since they are divided into three separate groups, certain differences must exist between each, and any exploration of

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<sup>5</sup>This is not to suggest that the three groups of fairies are entirely comparable to the three groups of humans, but certainly in respect of tone the comparison is valid.

their representative meaning must necessarily take this into account.

Oberon and Titania, at first glance, seem entirely defined in aesthetical references to nature. Certainly they are concerned with the beauty of nature, flowers and fruit and birds, as well as landscapes:

Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,  
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,  
Or in the beached margent of the sea, (II.i.83-85)

and are themselves bathed in the gentle moonlight. But there is a subtle ambivalence in their characters. Although only Oberon is accused of jealousy: "What! jealous Oberon," (II.i.61) it is clear by the ensuing squabble that both are guilty of this less than delightful sentiment. Oberon's threat to Titania, after she refuses to give up custody of the boy, also shows an opprobrious element: "Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove/Till I *torment* thee for this injury." (my italics) (II.i.146) And later, he utters, "Wake when some *vile thing* is near!" (my italics) (II.ii.34) And Titania herself is equally guilty of such malevolent tendencies: ordering the fairy band to treat her true love--Bottom--with consideration, she says:

The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,  
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,  
And light them at the fiery glow-worms eyes,  
To have my love to bed, and to arise;  
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies . . .  
(III.i.159-163)

In this one speech we have the duality of the royal fairies clearly expressed: Titania means well, yet in the expression of her well-meaning demonstrates certain brutality.

If we have gone to great lengths to delineate the "twofoldness" of Oberon and Titania, here benevolent, there malignant, it is because therein lies the first key to what they represent. Their close association with the natural world, their ambivalence to human welfare, their gentleness and cruelty all seem to point to their being representative of natural forces. But it would certainly be a mistake to read the fairies as being symbolic of nature, for this would overlook entirely the fact that they are first and foremost fairies and so not expressions of nature but, at the very least, supernature. They affect nature. They control nature. When the royal couple squabbles, nature reacts. Their duality then is an expression of the mysterious forces at work in the universe, forces which might manifest themselves in nature.

They are connected to humans by suggestion of the affair between Oberon and Hippolyta: "But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,/Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love"; (II.i.70) and a similar intrigue between Titania and Theseus:

How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,  
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,  
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus? (II.i.74-76)

But this connection is unknown by the humans involved. It is doubtless their supernatural quality which first causes the Duke's rejection of the fairy's existence at the opening of act

V. But the Duke is certainly wrong. The fairies *do* exist. The Queen says so. The lovers say so. The play itself says so and has taught them so. Despite the testimony of four people, Theseus refuses to believe the supernatural story. His support for Egeus showed something lacking in that Reason, and here we see it manifest in a slightly different form. Just as love is shown, in many respects, to be blind, so too is this kind of Reason, for it is the reason of the sceptic. Recognising the existence of the supernatural is a problem with which humans grapple and which Reason, personified by Theseus, proves unequal. Awareness of the fairies, from the human's vantage, provides then a marriage between the natural realm and the supernatural. But how then can the supernatural be ascertained by men in general?

We should note that the fairies bring with them not just a supernatural quality but an aspect of story telling, and this provides the second and final key to their symbolic meaning. Oberon and Titania come from the classical tradition, the band of fairies and particularly Puck a product of folklore. Puck, more hobgoblin than fairy, his practical jokes, his trickery, serves to mock the human race. He is scornful, ridiculing, and so reveals the truism that only limited dignity is possible in creatures of the flesh:

The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,  
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;  
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she. (II.i.51-

53)

Where the fairy band provides a link between the supernatural and the natural--and in particular the flowery region--Puck provides a connection between the supernatural world and the world of people. This connection we saw also with the amorous intrigues of Oberon and Titania, but Puck makes it a more commonplace thing, something not restricted to royalty but touched by everyone, strongly felt by the wisest of aunts and her wisest of relatives.

It is in folklore that Puck's character is defined and limited, and this point is thematically important for it defines also the supernatural/human link in terms of story. It is through story, and so, more broadly speaking, through art and imagination, through poetry, that the mortal can conceive of the immortal.

Speaking of the three fairy groups together, it must now seem clear that they combine then the supernatural with the fancy, only now this is not the "fancy" of the lovers, but the fancy of story, of poetry. This is made clear not simply by the fairies' connection with folklore and classical myth, but in their close association with another aspect of fancy: dream. Accordingly they are active mostly at night. They are concerned principally with things pleasant, though, as with a nightmare, show darker possibilities. The lovely boy, stolen from the Indian king, might easily be held captive by fancy. Further more, it is a dream that allows Titania to love the man/mule beast.

The fairies then represent the transcendental, that which cannot be grasped by Reason alone, but Reason married to the

imagination. It is for this reason that Theseus includes poet in the same catalogue as lunatic and lover: his scepticism regarding the supernatural is matched by scepticism regarding the poet.

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to  
heaven;  
And, as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name. (V.i.12-17)

This, in the Duke's own words, is tied to the imagination. It is then only through the imagination that certain qualities of the universe might be glimpsed, and through Reason understood. This marriage of Reason and fancy allows for the expression of that understanding in what we call Art. The fairies then form part of Shakespeare's affirmation of the value of the poet and the value of poetry.

### ***The Workers***

Although it could be said that the workers have no imagination, the truth is that they have too much. This is made patently obvious when we meet them properly, after their initial introduction, in the wood:

Pat, pat; and here's a marvellous convenient  
place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our  
stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring house; and we  
will do it in action as we will do it before the duke.

(III.i.2-5)

Every phrase here speaks of pretending, and it is this that most defines them: in their childlike simplicity, they explore the imaginative realm through pretend. Play acting, for the workers, makes remarkably real the things pretend, which is why they must explain that the lion is no lion, that Pyramus' suicide by his own sword will not do, that a person can play a wall. Their abilities to pretend are outrageous, and lead to the belief that so it must be for everyone. The Duke's relegation of poesy to shadowy insignificance, is balanced here by the other extreme, where the workers comically represent the dangers of being unable to distinguish what is real and what is pretend. The whole theme of poetry and imagination's ability to transform is a perfect complement to the theme of love which show a similar ability: "Things base and vile, holding no quantity,/Love can transpose to form and dignity."(I.i.233-234)

Of all the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is Bottom who is most completely drawn. Accordingly, his self proclaimed abilities will not be entirely hindered by "symbolification." Nevertheless, Bottom represents not only unbridled imagination, as do his fellow workers, but also serves as a testimony to the innate sanctity of art. Bottom stands for that common person, the critic, the editor, the director, the producer, who feels able to reinterpret original works, in this case mythological stories, and make them more appropriate, suitable, comprehensible. The disastrous consequences, despite their humour, make a serious point. But we must not forget that

Bottom belongs mostly with his fellow works. It is for this reason, because he also represents unbridled imagination, that he comes away from the fairies most affected:

I have had a most rare *vision*. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was . . . I will get Peter Quince to *write* a *ballad* of this dream: It shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom. (my italics) (IV.i.204-215)

Representing unbridled imagination, Bottom feels the fairies' influence more profoundly than the lovers and here clearly expresses the dual nature of their symbolic meaning: the connection between the supernatural/things unseen and profound, and the imagination as expressed in Art.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a body quite distinct from many of Shakespeare's plays. Here characters are representation whose quiescence renders them immune to change. Rather than character development, we find plot and theme development. It is plot which interacts with plot, which changes and finds resolution. It is the various themes that, like the plots, intertwine, one with the other. If there remains any doubt that meagre characterisation does not a beggar's banquet make, we need only remind ourselves of the popularity *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has known over the centuries.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, in the simplest of terms, an affirmation of the importance of marriage between Reason and imagination and so, necessarily, a validation of the arts in general, and the poetic arts in particular.

