Rebecca Stanton

A Midsummer Night's Dream, redux

Oct 4, 2013 2:25 PM

As we discussed in class on Thursday, while Shakespeare's play is both more light-hearted and just plain "lighter" -- easier to digest -- than Spenser's deliberately difficult, densely allegorical poem, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* nonetheless shares certain background assumptions and even thematic concerns with *The Faerie Queene*. Similar vocabulary is used to talk about magic, love, dreams, visions -- as in *The Faerie Queene*, the inherent unreliability (and potential demonic origin?) of dreams and visions, and even of straightforward sensory data about the material world, is at issue. To put it another way, it's not just the "mind's eye" that is easily bamboozled -- our *actual eyes* are as well. What does Shakespeare's comedy have to say about empirical knowledge and human understanding? Where does magic play into all of this?

Fairies, as we've seen in Spenser, are serious business -- not, as the historian Diane Purkiss suggests in the introduction to her superb *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, Nymphs, and Other Troublesome Things*, merely "tiresome wingy thingies who are always good." Purkiss continues: "Actually, as we shall see, fairies are an invention that almost wholly lacks moral engagement. In stories about fairies, there are exceedingly strict rules of behaviour, but these apply not to the fairies but to human beings, and they exist for reasons of self-preservation, not morality. . . . Rather than good or bad, fairies are more simply and plainly *dangerous*." To what extent does Purkiss's characterization of fairies -- which certainly held true in general belief in the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare and Spenser were writing -- accurately describe the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Are they disturbing? What is the effect of Shakespeare's grafting of an English fairyland onto Classical Athens (the play's ostensible setting)?

For a more in-depth treatment of fairies, check out this BBC podcast (MP3, 28 min), a conversation among 3 experts (including Purkiss).

Finally, let's continue considering the discussion questions from last time:

1. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe chosen by the rude mechanicals for their masque is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Where else does Ovid's text (fundamentally, a set of stories about magical transformations) resonate in the play?
2. Act I takes place in the "real" world of Athens (by day), Act II in the "dream" world of the forest (by night). How does Shakespeare deploy these two settings? Do they serve any symbolic purpose? What powers obtain within each world? What is their relationship to each other?
3. Who "dreams" in the play? What do "dreams" represent? Who presides over the dream world (the forest at night)? What is the power of dreams? Can dreams have an effect on "reality"?
4. Based on what we've seen so far, how would you characterize the fairies and their magic (perhaps comparing them to Spenser's fairies; or to the fairies in *Sir Orfeo,* or another medieval text)? How does fairy magic signify within the world of the play?

Ad here are a few more:

1. How does Shakespeare use language (prose, blank verse and rhyme) to differentiate between characters (i.e. fairies and mortals; nobility and rustics) or to create other effects (possibly even "magical" ones?!)?
2. The play begins with a forced marriage, fighting fairies, and thwarted lovers; it ends with a triple wedding and a newly reconciled pair of Fairy monarchs. "Love," in particular the erotic love that draws two people together into a

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marriage, looms large here -- but how can we make sense of the apparent contradiction between the urgent desire of all the lovers to get married, and the state of war that appears to exist between the two parties involved in the play's one already-existing marriage -- that of Titania and Oberon?

3. Spenser's epic offered us many "shews within a shew," so to speak -- that is, even in just the short excerpts we read, the poem depicted a pageant (the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins), a masque (the Masque of Cupid, watched by Britomart), and a series of ornate narrative tapestries (depicting the victories of Cupid, again viewed by Britomart). Shakespeare in *MND* offers us a play within the play. What do these "shews within the shew" add to the work ? Are Bottom & Co. there only there for comic relief, or do they convey a more serious message? If so, what?
4. Compare the values and practices of Athens to those of fairyland. For example, both have social hierarchies with ruling figures, and ensuing conflicts of will over children, contrasts between body and spirit, and strife between the sexes. What can we learn from comparing and contrasting these parallel worlds, as Shakespeare seems to invite us to do?
5. Puck and Theseus might not seem to have much in common -- but both of them do offer "meta" commentary on the play and its concerns. What do their commentaries add to the text?
6. What is the significance of Titania's "changeling boy" and why is Oberon so determined to get him? Explicate his story of Cupid's attempt to influence the vestal votress and explore the imagery of Cupid's bolt as well as the floral images (2.1.155-174).
7. Is there a gender commentary going on in this text?

Says Katherine [redacted] at Oct 4, 2013 5:33 PM Remove this comment

In Spenser's Faerie Queene, these "shews within a shew" seem to serve the role of dramatizing a central problem. In Busirane's castle, Britomart sees the tapestries of Cupid's battles fought against both mortals and immortals "to make his Empire great" (pg. 215). Just like the altar to and statue of Cupid (in other words the "non-narrative" elements) that Britomart also encounters in the castle, these tapestries serve to accentuate Busirane's dedication to promoting Cupid's eventual dominance. Cupid is shown as successfully building a great empire over both gods and humans, rendering him a sort of omnipotent god, capable of triumphing over Jove himself, forcing him to turn into a series of animals. It is then, the harmony of the altar to Cupid, the statue of Cupid, and the tapestries devoted to Cupid's triumphs that together serve as an accentuation of the agenda of Busirane, but also as a warning to Britomart. If she does not use her powers of reason, "her fraile sences" (pg. 222), already dazed, will overtake her soul and make her a devotee to Cupid just as Busirane desires. Therefore, the tapestries glorifying Cupid also serve to warn Britomart of her fate if she does not apply her ability to reason and doubt; she will become yet another one of Cupid's victims.

Similarly, the Pyramus and Thisbe play within a play serves as a sort of retrospective warning of what could have happened to these overly-eager lovers had not a fairy presence intervened (it is interesting to consider that the demonic presence in Busirane's palace, Cupid, is predominantly a representation of evil while the demonic or fairy presence in A Midsummer Night's Dream orchestrates the night presumably serves as the lover's saving grace, even if they have a little fun at the four lovers' expense). Although Lysander's charmed love to Helena is described by Oberon as "Some true love turned, and not a false turned true" (3.2.91), there seems to be a sort of "rite of passage" (similar to the Platonic passage from love of the flesh to a purer form of love obtained through desire allegorized by Lucius in The Golden Ass) the four Athenian lovers must undergo before they can be considered mature or true lovers (that presumably, working off of Spenser's model in the Faerie Queene, can utilize both the faculties of desire and reason). This necessity is highlighted by the Players' play of Pyramus and Thisbe in which Pyramus and Thisbe cannot even have a successful first meeting because of the impetuousness of their desire. Due to Thisbe's encounter with a lion (and the dropping of her veil as she escapes from it), Pyramus automatically assumes that the "lion vile hath here deflowered my dear" (5.1.287) and proceeds to kill himself. Pyramus' almost immediate jump to a conclusion about the "deflowered" state of Thisbe with only the slightest bit of evidence is indicative of

how he is ruled by desire and cannot maintain a balance between reason and desire that comes, Shakespeare argues, with time.

Says Serenity [redacted] at Oct 4, 2013 6:49 PM
Remove this comment

Despite having read this play more than once, I don't recall ever noticing or focusing on gender commentary until this time when I was specifically looking for it. As to be expected given the time period, women are not necessarily represented as powerful figures. We have in the very first scene the threat to Hermia "Either to die or the death, or to abjure / for ever the society of men" (1.1.65-66) if she does not follow her father's wishes by marrying Demetrius. While this is a father/daughter power issue which is decided by a king, that wielding of power over a woman is still present, when there is no equal example of such power being used on a man. In the very next scene, there is the lengthy and comedic discussion of whether the lion in the play's roar will scare the women: "An you should do it too terribly, you would fright the duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek; and that were enough to hang us all" (1.2.68-70). While this a comedic moment, and is additionally funny given the terrible acting during the play-within-the-play, there is something at least somewhat insulting that the women should think that this man is a real lion, and that he could actually roar so convincingly as to make them faint. While this may be an over-reading, it still stands that in this second scene of the play, this is already the second time that women have been made to seem helpless, or left to the mercy of men.

Most notably in this gender commentary is act 3, scene 2 when Helena is confronting Lysander, Demetrius and even Hermia. Helena speaks more than once on expected behavior of the sexes: "If you were men, as men you are in show, / You would not use a gentle lady so" (3.2.151-152). While this seems to be quite an insult to the men, as readers, we know that they are not mocking Helena as she believes they are, and that they are fully sincere (although due to the fairy magic). Therefore, this statement may insult the men, but it is not an actual commentary on the male sex. However, in some sense Helena is being mocked by Shakespeare since the men do only love her (initially) because of the magic. In the magical spells, Helena is the equivalent of the man with an ass's head. Later in the same scene, Helena says to Hermia: "Have you no modesty, no maiden shame, / no touch of bashfulness?" (3.2.285-286). Helena's expectation of Hermia and the female sex is modesty and bashfulness. This is an insult given that Helena feels that Hermia is not acting appropriately for her gender, and certainly an expectation of bashfulness does not equate a strong persona.

Says Rebecca [redacted] at Oct 5, 2013 10:54 PM Remove this comment

Similar to the tension between poetry and false fantasies in Spenser's The Faerie Queene, the characters in A Midsummer Night's Dream also struggle to separate the illusions of stories from magic. After the rude mechanics finish their show, Theseus says, "I never may believe / These antique fables nor these fairy toys. / Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends. / The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" (V.i.2-8) By equating the fantasies of the madman, lover, and poet, Theseus underlies the difficulty of distinguishing between the types of visions each of them sees. Further underlining his distrust, he says, "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. / Such tricks hath such strong imagination / That, if it would but apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy; / Or in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" (V.i.12-22). Coming near the end of the play, this passage, although about poets, echoes Puck's earlier trick of giving Bottom an ass's head. In this sense, the transformative magic in A Midsummer Night's Dream can be seen as an allegory for Shakespeare's writing process. Both create "shapes" from "airy nothing" and are tricks of "strong imagination."

Puck further strengthens this connection between poetry and magic. In his final

monologue, he says, “If we shadows have offended, / Think but this and all is mended— / That you have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear. / And this week and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream” (V.i.415-420). Although Puck does not specifically reference writing, by addressing the audience directly, he makes theater the subject of his conversation. Then, through his description of the audience’s experience as a dream, he likens the performance of the play to the casting of spell, both creating fantastic visions.

Says Kiera [redacted] at Oct 6, 2013 10:38 AM Remove this comment

From the reading of acts four and five, I was particularly interested in the idea that when the lovers were leaving the woods they could only recall why they had entered the woods in the first place, but could not remember the events that took place. The four lovers left the woods knowing whom they loved and wanted to marry but the time in between entering and leaving the woods was blurred like a dream. All of these young characters seem to be in wonder of their mysterious adventures in the woods.
Another thing that was brought to my attention was the symbolic representation of Athens in Theseus. Athens can seen as a logical and structured city, where reality is present and magic and mystery is not. Theseus, in the beginning of act five, is in total disbelief of what the young lovers had told him about their dream like adventure in the woods involving the magical powers of fairies. Theseus calls the lovers “madmen” having “such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends” (Act 5, lines 4-6). Theseus does not believe in the fantasy world that exists in the woods because it does not have any reason. He also believes that the adventure was all created in the imagination of the lovers. However, his wife, Hippolyta, tells Theseus that the story must be true because all of the lover’s stories are consistent. Theseus’ rational thought places him in parallel with the city he rules over while his wife and the lovers believe in the mystery and power of the woods.

Says David [redacted] at Oct 7, 2013 7:00 PM Remove this comment

I would also like to expand upon the very serious role that Bottom and Co. play in MND. In particular, I see their theatrics as mirroring and expanding upon the fairy's magic. Rebecca has already made the astute connection between the poet and the madman and lover, and pointed out the magic inherent there. She has also directed us to Puck's likening of the entire play of MND to a spell. I'd like to look more closely at the actual play that Bottom and Co. perform in Act 5.
First, I'd like to point to the similarities between the verse that the actor's speak and the verse that Puck and Oberon speak when casting their love spells. The actors say such things as: "But stay: O spite!/ But mark, poor knight,/ What dreadful dole is here?/ Eyes, do you see?/ How can it be?/" While on the other hand, Oberon speaks his spells thus: "Flower of this purple dye,/ Hit with Cupid's archery,/ Sink in the apple of his eye!/" While Bottom and Co.'s verse is significantly sillier, the meter is almost identical.
To bring this all further into the meta-level, Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the very nature of watching plays at one point. Theseus says, "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them." Hippolyta in response, "It must be your imagination then, and not theirs." They thus bring up the question of readership, incorporating us into the magic-making process, just as Puck does at the end of the play saying this has all been a dream of ours.

Says Frances [redacted] at Oct 8, 2013 12:18 AM Remove this comment

Initially, in a Midsummer Night’s Dream a human perceiving an event as a dream seems to be an illusion created by fairies to use as a scapegoat for meddling gone wrong. For example, Oberon states that when Hermia, Lysander, Demetrious and Helena wake up after their mixed-up night in the forest “all this derision/Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision”(3.2.370-1.) However, the only character who is actually subjected to any kind of magical herb is Lysander, which rises the question of whether or not the characters’ perceiving of the night as a dream is in fact due to the higher force of magic, or if they perceive it this way because of its ridiculousness. This same idea can be applied to Titania and Bottom, both of whom

also reject their night together and believe it to have been a dream. Therefore, in the play, the “dreams” may merely be the characters’ logic overpowering their memory of actual events, causing them to forget them entirely or perceive them as dreams.

Says Angelica [redacted]r at Oct 8, 2013 10:00 AM Remove this comment

Shakespeare steeps the fairy’s language in wrought descriptive imagery, so that their dialogue becomes atmospheric and representative of mysticism. Oberon says, “I know a bank where the wild thyme blows/Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,/…With sweet musk roses and with eglantine…/lulled in these flowers with dances and delight/And there the snake throws her enameled skin…” The personification of inanimate plants and objects further peaks the reader’s suspicion that anything can happen; the violets “nod,” the snake “throws” her skin, and by imbibing these inhuman objects with human qualities Shakespeare emphasizes the possibility of impossibility. Perhaps there really is a snake who tosses her skin about; perhaps violets really do shake their heads. The fairy language is further cloaked with a musicality that the Athenian and Rude Mechanicals’ speech lacks. This is particularly evident in the assonance of certain stanzas, most explicitly in that of the fairy chant: “Philomel with melody/Sing in our sweet lullaby,/Lulla, lulla, lullaby.” Oberon also used the word “lull,” earlier, playing upon a theme of the reoccurrence of dreams the professor pointed out in the previous post; magic is particularly tied to realms of sleep and reams, and thrives in lulled, languishing states.

Says Lacey [redacted] at Oct 8, 2013 9:00 PM Remove this comment

From the title itself of the play, an emphasis has been placed on the contrast between night and day, dream and reality. The pattern that we first observed in *The Fairy Queen* continues as deception and switch-ery take place after hours. Puck and Oberon exploit the fact that we (both humans and apparently fairies) are at our most vulnerable when we sleep. This is physically exemplified by Puck's squeezing the juice on Titania and the Athenians' eyelids--only visible when our eyes are closed. "And as heaven bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen / turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name. / Such tricks hath strong imagination" Theseus notes.
I also find it interesting that the characters are so completely overcome by the need to sleep, suddenly announcing it and lying down.

Says Elizabeth [redacted] at Oct 13, 2013 9:48 PM Remove this comment

To answer the discussion questions, I first of all see the transformation of Bottom into an ass resonating clearly with Apuleius's The Golden Ass. What’s interesting about this comparison, at least in my reading, are the completely polar opposite experiences and reactions of Lucius and Bottom. The one, turned into an ass by mistake, is furious, vengeful, and suicidal at various intervals. The other, turned into an ass by mischievous fairy intervention, is pretty happy to just go along with whatever. In part, perhaps, this can be attributed to the dreamlike nature of the forest world and the arguably positive events which transpire there. But Lucius’s rage, it should be remembered, begins long before anything terrible even happens to him. He’s merely angry that things have gone wrong. Bottom is a very daydreamy character, taken into the fairy world while rehearsing for a play, and thus already a creature with one foot in an imaginary world. This is in contrast to Lucius, who desires magic for himself, as a means to increase his control of events.
For Puck and Oberon, who preside over the forest, after Titania gets taken in by the love spell and generally removed from any operative role, there is some (albeit a playful) concern for the consequences of their magic. They want the lovers to fit into neat pairs and cease quarreling. Beyond that, however, they’re fine with a few mishaps, certain they can sort things out with more magic down the line. It’s interesting to contrast this with, say, Medea, for whom magic, by its very use, pushes her to insanity (i.e. has a price). I think these differences boil down to a cordoning off of the world of fairies, giving magic a place that is, as they described it in the BBC podcast, “between Gods and men”. The participants in the discussion noted that fairies look like humans and can only be recognized as different by their

behavior, and that they're used as convenient excuses for many things, including extended disappearances. I've been thinking that the fairies in the play work as a means for excusing the sexual depravity extant in the events of the play – the characters go into the woods, spend the night alone and under questionable circumstances, and their misdeeds and new-found romances are blamed entirely on the fairies. Even the planned elopement is forgiven. Magic from fairies is clearly treated very differently than magic from witches. It seems to me like an alternate placeholder between gods and man, which escapes the negative, intrinsic conclusions heaped on the witches.