

# Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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but also a more physical and sexual meaning: a “spirit” could be a nonhuman being with sexual powers, and “spirit” could also denote sexual energy and seminal fluid (as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129). E. A. M. Colman quotes Reginald Scot’s *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) appositely:

The power of generation consisteth not onlie in members, but  
chieflye of vitall spirits, and of the hart: which spirits are never  
in such a bodie as *Incubus* hath, being but a bodie assumed . . . .<sup>4</sup>

At this point it might be useful to insist that Mary is hardly likely to have been intending bawdy puns—but the language of her time certainly had such connotations, presumably present in her mind at some level and wholly relevant to the fundamental conceit that she employs.

The spirit-human union produces an incarnated offspring. In the Christian story, God reproduces himself in his Son in human form. Here, in the brain-child of the Psalms,

. . . heaven’s King may deign his own transformed  
In substance, no, but superficial tire  
By thee put on . . . . (8–10)

Philip’s words provide the “superficial tire” (or “bodie assumed”) for heaven’s king’s “own” spirit—and for Philip’s. Later in the poem, Philip is addressed in terms conventionally associated with Christ:

. . . exceeding Nature’s store,  
Wonder of men, sole-born Perfection’s kind,  
Phoenix . . . . (36–39)

. . . such loss hath this world aught  
can equal it? (75–76)

Nevertheless, he remains “an angel’s soul with highest angels placed” (59).

The psalms are “offerings of [Mary’s] heart” (78), to Philip, rather than to God, as one might have expected. They constitute their joint offspring, yet only if they bear Philip’s “mark” (the coin metaphor again, for identifying features) will they be “will born”; otherwise they will be illegitimate.<sup>5</sup>

The authentication is remarkable. In the third verse, Mary claims that, had Philip not died too soon,

. . . and reft the world of all  
What man could show (which we Perfection call),  
This half-maimed piece had sorted with the best. (16–18)

Immediately thereafter, she laments how

Deep wounds enlarged, long festered in their gall,  
Fresh-bleeding smart: not eye but heart tears fall. (19–20)

Clearly, Mary refers to her own emotional wounds, which are evoked with some force; however, one remembers that Philip died of thigh wounds that

Turns them into shapes and gives airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy. . . . (5.1.1–20)

Act 5 provides an intricate, stately denouement to the four plots of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; it fittingly opens with a speech by Theseus, the character who most brings logic and order to all that is illogical and disorderly in the preceding action. Beyond commenting on present plot, Theseus offers a compact, eloquent model of literary criticism in blank verse. He codifies an idea that provides much of the play's structure and imagery: "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact." On the surface, this thesis provides easy rationalization of the magic that has occurred in the forest world. The lover, like the bewitched Titania, "sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt." So the night's strangeness can be shrugged off as natural hallucination. But Theseus's speech is more complex than its surface. Each layer of depth offers a new level of discourse, which colors and may even erase prior statements.

The imaginative triad of lover, lunatic, and poet are said to "apprehend / More than cool reason comprehends." Thus are strong metafictional elements in a play about *love* justified. If love or moonlight can make characters in a forest doubt their sanity, the efforts of Peter Quince's men to learn their parts can cause an astute audience to comprehend not only problems of identity, but problems of fictionality. What contemporary critics celebrate as the "post-modern" combination of textual and sexual is thus seen to arise from a logical observation available to any careful student of life.

As Theseus is a demonstrably astute observer, his stated philosophy—or reading strategy, for that is what it evolves into 70 lines later, when he elects to hear Bottom's play—becomes problematic: as readily and as logically as it disproves fairies in the wood, it points to his own fictionality. By so aptly describing the poet whose pen "gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name," Theseus foregrounds the elusive boundary between art and author. "Such tricks have strong imagination, / That if it but apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy." Such a trick is Theseus himself, and such a bringer of joy is William Shakespeare. The mention of a bear in the couplet that follows this marvelous statement brings the audience back to the business at hand—the next tying of loose ends—but the message has been conveyed, all the same. Theseus flickers and for at least a moment Slothrops into nothingness, three and a half centuries before Thomas Pynchon was born.

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