

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM:
A METAMORPHOSIS

IN 1952 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was played in Athens at the Greek National Theatre.¹ Had any of us been there, with our minds fresh from the sights of the Acropolis and the Agora, I suspect we might have been tempted to ask the rather perverse question of what Shakespeare's Duke Theseus was doing among the ruins of classical Athens? Yet where should Theseus tread the boards if not in the city of his founding? The question of anachronism in the play does not normally occur to us, and should not. Unless our historical sense is aroused for some reason we are aware of nothing especially anomalous in the play, although in it the Fairy King Oberon is suspected of a flirtation with the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta, and an Anglo-Saxon hobgoblin blesses the bride-bed of the Athenian Theseus and follows the dragon-team of Hecate, Medea's goddess of dreadful spells. The reason that we are not troubled is that Shakespeare has effected a genuine metamorphosis of the most diverse materials of myth, legend, and folklore—ancient, medieval, and contemporary—into a perfect and timeless work of art. Nevertheless, the very richness of the allusive texture, with its echoes of the classics too extensive and too adroitly managed to be merely the casual recollections of schoolboy reading, strongly suggests that Shakespeare meant to give his play a classical flavor in keeping with its setting at the court of Theseus, and so to fulfil the artistic requirements of verisimilitude and decorum. But how can verisimilitude and anachronism exist side by side? The truth is that they can, and often do, in Renaissance painting and literature, and that they may be even complementary to one another. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to us, in idea, method, and

spirit, as little classical as a comedy could well be—unAristophanic, unMenandrian, even unPlautine—a most typical example of a romantic comedy and dramatic fairy-tale that could come only from the age of Lyly and Spenser. It may, therefore, teach us something about how the classics functioned in Renaissance art. Since a return to the classics was the way in which the Renaissance itself made its own claim to be a Renaissance,² we need to examine the claim in particular works of art. I do not mean the truth of the claim, which is another matter altogether, but only the way in which the claim was worked out in art. The way exemplified in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a supposed classical setting and a rich ornamentation of classical allusion) is not the only way, for there were of course strict imitations of classical models, as in some Italian and French tragedies, and in some sculpture; but *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is all the more alive for Shakespeare's free use of his materials, and in this it is typical, too, I believe, of much Renaissance, or at any rate Elizabethan, art. I shall return to the question of verisimilitude and anachronism at the end of the paper after I have described some features of Shakespeare's handling of his materials.

Let me remind you briefly of the plot of the comedy. There are four groups of characters: Theseus and his court, the young lovers, the fairies, and the Athenian craftsmen. The court of Theseus forms the enclosing frame for the love story and for the other actions, all of which transpire in a wood a mile without the town. The play opens with Theseus announcing his approaching nuptials with Hippolyta, former queen of the Amazons. He then turns to a domestic problem of the court, the refusal of Hermia to marry Demetrius, the suitor of her father's choice, because she is in love with Lysander, a young man of her own choosing. Theseus' ultima-

tum that she wed Demetrius, enter a convent, or die, precipitates an elopement with Lysander. The action then moves to the wood. Lysander and Hermia are followed by Demetrius, the rejected suitor, and Demetrius is followed close behind by Helena, the girl he has jilted. The moonlit wood proves to be the haunt of fairies, King Oberon and Queen Titania, having domestic troubles of their own; but through mainly well-intentioned interference they manage to tangle up the affairs of the young people still further before they eventually untangle them. The Athenian craftsmen, coming into the wood to rehearse a play for the Duke's wedding festivities, fall foul of the fairies, too. And Bottom, "translated" by Puck, becomes, with his fair large ears, the gentle joy of the dainty Titania. But the fairies, following darkness like a dream, disappear with the dawn, and the lovers are awakened by the hunting horns of Theseus, riding into the woods with his cry of hounds on May Day morning. Demetrius has recovered from his defection to Helena, he knows not how; therefore, since there are clearly two pairs of woodbirds to couple, Theseus orders Father Egeus to relent, and all go back to Athens to celebrate a triple wedding. At the evening solemnity, "the tedious brief scene of young Pyramis and his love Thisby," an interlude of "very tragical mirth," is performed with more good will than art. Then the fairies appear to sing their epithalamium, take brands from the hearth, and go through the house blessing the bride-beds.

Unless some source of the main plot should be found, one must assume that Shakespeare put it together himself. It is made of ordinary romantic materials, similar to those in the earlier *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: a father's opposition to a daughter's choice of a husband, an elopement, love triangles, conflicts of love and friendship, a final untangling and a happy pairing of lovers. But Shakespeare has set this plot,

not in contemporary Italy, as we might expect, but in Athens, and in a framework of classical legend. The sources of Shakespeare's mythology and legend are well enough known,³ and I merely remind you of them: they are principally Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, certainly in Golding's English version and probably in the Latin as well; Plutarch's life of Theseus in Thomas North's translation of the *Lives*; and Chaucer's handling of the Theseus legend, certainly in *The Knight's Tale*, and perhaps also in *The Legend of Good Women* and the *House of Fame*. Allusions which cannot be pinned down to Ovid, Plutarch, or Chaucer, may come from any one of a number of unidentifiable common sources of Renaissance classical literary knowledge, such as Virgil, Erasmus, Renaissance mythographies, classical dictionaries, and indeed just the schoolroom. If the allusion is a commonplace, identification of it becomes irrelevant. The important thing to note here is that Chaucer as well as Ovid and Plutarch contributed a good deal to the legendary element in the play.

What Shakespeare has done with Theseus gets at the heart of our question: that is, what Shakespeare's metamorphosis is, and how he has effected it. In the play, Theseus appears as a sage Renaissance prince—authoritative, direct, the unquestioned ruler; at the same time courteous, liberal, and even magnanimous. For the most part he merely fills a rôle. He begins the play, and, except for the coda of the fairy epithalamium, ends it. His court provides a stable background of sensible custom, a place the lovers must escape from for their night of midsummer madness, but also one they must return to when they are ready to end the desperate infatuations and infidelities of their courtship in sober matrimony. This prince does not at once suggest the Theseus of classical legend; but he does recall, at least in outward flourishes, Chaucer's "Duc Theseus" of *The Knight's Tale*.

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
There was a duc that highte Theseus;
Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
And in his tyme swich a conquerour,
That gretter was there noon under the sonne.
Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
That whilom was ycleped Scithia,
And weddede the queene Ypolita,
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree
With muchel glorie and gree solempnytee,
And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.
And thus with victorie and with melodye
Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,
And all his hoost in armes hym bisyde.
(*CT*, I, 859-74)⁴

Shakespeare's Theseus echoes the tone of this passage:

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling.
(*I*, i. 16-19)⁵

Also, later in the play, Shakespeare's Theseus riding with his hounds into the wood on a May morning is reminiscent of Chaucer's Theseus:

myghty Theseus,
That for to hunten is so desirus,
And namely at the grete hert in May,
That in his bed there daweth him no day
That he nys clad and redy for to ryde
With hunte and horn and houndes hym bisyde.
For in his hunting hath he swich delit
That it is all his joye and appetit
To been hymself the grete hertes bane,
For after Mars he serveth now Dyane.
(*I*, 1673-82)

Arcite had already gone into the wood "for to doon his observaunce to May," and Shakespeare's Theseus had come for a similar purpose, as he supposed the lovers had also done.

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No doubt they rose up early to observe
The rite of May; and, hearing our intent,
Came here in grace of our solemnity.
(IV. i. 135-38)

One begins to suspect, indeed, that Shakespeare took from Chaucer in the first place the idea of making the court of Theseus the frame for his love-plot. One wonders why otherwise such a setting would have occurred to him. The suspicion is borne out by the rôle the Duke plays in both tale and comedy. Chaucer's Theseus is like a ruler in a fairy-tale. He is absolute, and lays down hard conditions on Palamon and Arcite, not because he is meant to be unduly harsh or in any way unjust, but because he must fulfil the conditions of the story. This rôle carries over into Shakespeare in the severe choice Theseus presents to Hermia, when she asks to know the worst that may befall her if she refuses to wed Demetrius. He tells her it is

Either to die the death, or to abjure
Forever the society of men.
(I. i. 65-66)

She must either prepare to die,

Or on Diana's altar to protest
For aye austerity and single life.
(I. i. 89-90)

Theseus settles matters at the end with an equally firm command:

Egeus, I will overbear your will;
For in the temple, by and by, with us,
These couples shall eternally be knit.
(IV. i. 182-84)

But Chaucer's duke has a subtler function than merely to rule a court of chivalry. He helps define the attitude towards the lovers in the story, and it may well be that Shakespeare

found here an important hint for the comic mood of the play.⁶ In *The Knight's Tale*, when "Duc Theseus" finds Palamon and Arcite fighting in the woods, he gives a little sermon on love:

"The god of love, a, *benedicite!*
How myghty and how greet a lord is he!
Ayeyns his myght there gayneth none obstacles....
And yet hath love, maugree hir eyen two,
Brought hem hyder bothe for to dye.
Now looketh, is nat that an heigh folye?
Who may been a fool, but if he love?"

(I, 1785-99)

These lines remind us of what, if we were tempted to give *Midsummer Night's Dream* a text, we should probably choose: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" The difference from Chaucer is that it is Puck's text rather than the Duke's. Shakespeare makes his Theseus contented with a minor humorous note:

Good morrow, friends. Saint Valentine is past.
Begin these woodbirds but to couple now?

(IV. i. 142-43)

Instead of moralizing on the night's adventures, he is incredulous of them.

I never may believe
These antic fables nor these fairy toys.

(V. i. 2 ff.)

The gist of his famous speech on madmen, lovers, and poets, is that all three are governed solely by the imagination, and display, indeed, merely different forms of frenzy. In Shakespeare the speech is less important as a facet of Theseus' character than it is a necessary aspect of his rôle as the spokesman for the world of commonsense; and perhaps that is the function of Chaucer's Theseus here, too. But in Shakespeare the Duke's reflection is a way to ease us out of the

night's phantasmagoria, without at the same time letting us dismiss it as only a dream, for Hippolyta replies:

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

(V. i. 23-27)

Moreover, Shakespeare makes Theseus' speech bear one of his most delightful ironies. The logic of the speech would demand that Theseus take a rather poor view of the dramatist who has tucked him into such a play of airy nothings.

In sum, with allowance made for differences of emphasis, Shakespeare seems to have owed a good deal in the handling of his Theseus to the Theseus of *The Knight's Tale*: his keeping "state" in the wedding of Hippolyta, the conquered bride; his riding to hounds and his change of service from Mars to Diana; his rôle as an arbiter in a romantic love story; perhaps something of his amused and tolerant attitude towards the lovers.

All the same, Shakespeare's Theseus is not just an imitation of Chaucer's "Duc Theseus," a knight of brave exploits, a winner of a fair lady, a jolly hunter, and a ruler of a court of chivalry. Many names and details show that Shakespeare has looked at Plutarch as well as Chaucer, and the Plutarchan Theseus has greatly qualified the Chaucerian one. The life of Theseus is one of the least interesting of the lives, since Plutarch threads his way through a tangle of conflicting legends, and emerges with no portrait, as indeed he hardly could unless he invented one. But the emphasis, by the very inclusion of Theseus in the collection, is on Theseus as a historical and political figure—the unifier of the Attic communities into one state. His strengths and weaknesses, in comparison with those of Romulus, the "noble Roman" Plu-

tarch pairs him with, are analyzed after the fashion of the later, fuller portraits. Thus there is throughout, explicit or implicit, a moral and political point of view. The phrasing in North's translation gives a Renaissance coloring to the virtues for which Theseus is praised: In his youth, he accomplished many brave deeds, "his heart secretly set on fire by the fame and glory of Hercules; pricked forward with emulation and envy of Hercules' glory."⁷ Of the "venturing himself with the boys and wenches of Athens to the Minotaur," North says, "This was such an act of magnanimity, justice, and glory, and briefly of so great virtue, that it is impossible truly to be set out."⁸ By way of Plutarch and North, Shakespeare has converted Theseus into a Renaissance prince. Of course he has added contemporary touches of his own. The court of Theseus, with its witty courtiers, its after-suppers and interludes, its discussions of the arts, is an Elizabethan court, not a Chaucerian one. And Theseus, in so far as he has a "character" beyond his function in the plot, is preëminently a man of "magnanimity and justice." Miss Bradbrook's paper yesterday showed us still another reason why we may consider this play especially Elizabethan.⁹ It contains within it "a princely pleasure" and was, if it were written for a great wedding, such an "offering" itself.

To this conception of a prince keeping court, Shakespeare has subordinated other important aspects of the legend—Theseus as hero, a second Hercules, and Theseus as false lover, the abandoner of women. These traditional aspects of Theseus are not neglected in the play, but they are included only to enrich the background and supply verisimilitude. As is appropriate, the heroic Theseus is more prominent in the play than the philandering Theseus.

We hear of "the battle with the Centaurs," in which Theseus and his "kinsman Hercules" (a touch from Plutarch)

fought with his friend Perithous and the Lapiths against the Centaurs.¹⁰ We hear of Theseus coming "from Thebes a conqueror"; this is the Seven against Thebes legend enlarged in the Middle Ages and known to Shakespeare through Chaucer.¹¹ We hear, too, of a hunt which reminds us of the famous hunt of Theseus with the heroes of Greece for the Calydonian boar.¹² And to his Theseus Shakespeare has perhaps assimilated yet another hunt, that of Actaeon; for Theseus' hounds in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though recognizably an English cry or pack, with their voices matched each under each like bells, are yet said to be "hounds of Sparta," and "bred out of Spartan kind." Actaeon's hound Melampus, or Blackfoot, was said by Ovid to be "Spartana gente"—"of Spartan kind."¹³

But the most famous of all Theseus' legendary exploits—the killing of the Minotaur and hence the freeing of Athens from the Cretan tribute—is omitted from the play. Why? I think because it is not appropriate to the Theseus who does not believe in "antic fables and in fairy toys." For his rôle in the plot, Shakespeare's Duke may be epic, but not mythical. The heroic deeds Shakespeare allows him to recall—deeds of hunting and of war—are such as would be fitting to the youth and manhood of a Renaissance prince.

So much for Theseus the hero. What about Theseus the philanderer? This aspect of the Theseus legend was as familiar and had been as much exploited as the heroic legend, but often independently of it, as in Chaucer. "Periurus et perfidus" were stock epithets for Theseus in the rhetoric books.¹⁴ Although Chaucer's Duke in *The Knight's Tale* glances humorously at his own experience in love—

For in my tyme a servant was I oon—¹⁵

he is really quite another person from the false lover of Ariadne in *The Legend of Good Women*, or the perjurer who

takes his place with all the other perjured lovers in *The House of Fame*:¹⁶ Aeneas, Demophoön, Achilles, Paris, Jason, and Hercules. Shakespeare of course knew the Theseus and Ariadne story very well, as is shown by references to it in *The Merchant of Venice*¹⁷ and in *The Two Gentlemen*. In the latter, Julia recalls having acted in a pageant:

For I did play a lamentable part:
Madam, 'twas Ariadne passioning
For Thesus' perjury and unjust flight.
(IV. iv. 171-73)

But Theseus *perfidus* has to be handled very carefully in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lest he spoil the impression of hymeneal felicity so clearly wanted in the play. Allusions to Theseus' less creditable affairs occur in the bickering between the Fairy King and Queen. Titania reproaches Oberon jealously:

Why art thou here,
Come from the farthest steep of India,
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity?
(II. i. 68-73)

And Oberon replies, tit for tat:

How canst thou thus, for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?
Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigouna, whom he ravished?
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne, and Antiopa?
(II. i. 74-80).

(The forms of these women's names, by the way, and the order in which they are given, are evidence of Shakespeare's use of Plutarch.)¹⁸ There is no risk in all this to our picture of the sober husband of Hippolyta. For one thing, the hint is given that he was not altogether responsible for his infideli-

ties, being subject to the same fairy spells as the lovers in the play. For another, Shakespeare has used this part of the legend mainly to enlarge the background, and he has directed it more to Oberon and Titania than to Theseus. It creates for them a context, an illusion of life outside the plot; at the same time it ties them to the action and characters of the play. It is an example of the most skilful control of the images to make them serve a limited purpose.

Shakespeare's Theseus, then, seemingly compounded of fragments of Ovidian legend, of Plutarchan pseudo-history, of Chaucerian courtly romance, is really no compound at all, but a new and whole character: a quite satisfactory Renaissance prince, who, with glory won in manly exploits, rules now with wisdom and magnificence.

One might make the same sort of analysis of the fairy element in the play and of the Pyramis and Thisbe interlude, and one would discover a similar blending of things classical, medieval, and contemporary. In the remaining time I shall content myself with the effect of classical allusion in the fairy parts, particularly in the part of Titania.

A brief word must be said first on the fairies generally.¹⁹ Only one of them can qualify as strictly an English folk fairy; that is Robin Goodfellow, or Hobgoblin, a "Puck" or mischievous household imp. Oberon and Titania, with their beauty, their courtly train of followers, their swift travels, their spells, are the fays of romance, "cousins" of Morgan and Merlin. Oberon's name and his kingship come ultimately, if not immediately, from the French *chanson de geste* of *Huon of Bordeaux*,²⁰ in which Oberon is the dwarf King of the Faery, imperious, capricious, but beneficent, so powerful that he even receives fealty from King Arthur, who visits him with Merlin and Morgan le Fay in Fairyland. But this Oberon was said to be the son of the Lady of the Secret Isle, or Cephalonia; he

had been begotten on her by Julius Caesar on his way to fight Pompey in Thessaly. This strange genealogy and the carrying back of Oberon into antiquity tell us something important. Particular fays were readily assimilated by romancers to the sorcerers and even gods of classical mythology,²¹ and fairies and elves generally to the mythological beings of similar habitat, to the dryads, hamadryads, nymphs, and naiades of ancient woods and waters.²² "The Diana," referring to the nymphs of Diana, was indeed a collective name for "the Faery," as King James tells us in his *Daemonologie*, published in 1597.²³ This assimilation had gone on for so long a time that there was nothing remarkable about it in Shakespeare's day. And when Shakespeare chose "Titania" from Ovid as a name to bestow on his Fairy Queen, he was using it most appropriately.

Titania and *Titanis* are used indifferently in Ovid as epithets for Pyrrha, Latona, Diana, and Circe—all descendants of the Titans.²⁴ The Titan association has quite fallen out of Shakespeare, but the associations with Circe and with Diana remain. Professor Kittredge and Professor Orsini may be right in thinking the association with Circe the more important of the two, as least as the inspiration of Titania herself.²⁵ Shakespeare would have had sufficient reason to borrow the epithet of Circe the enchantress, already established as a fay in romantic fairy lore, for the name of his Fairy Queen, though he turned the enchantments into something merely playful and innocent and left the exercise of them all to Oberon and to Puck. The Circe legend may even have given him the notion for Bottom's transmutation into an ass, though the differences are greater than the similarities. Circe is clearly no exact model for Titania. Nor is Diana, for Titania's behavior is most unDiana-like. And the order of which she is a patroness does not appear to be Diana's; for its votaresses,

as we know from the story of the Indian princess, who was mother of the little changeling boy, may have children with impunity, as Diana's nymphs emphatically might not. It is in the play as a whole, rather than narrowly in Titania herself, that we must look for Diana, and there we shall find much of her.

In antiquity Diana, like most deities who had become cosmopolitan in their travels from the east, had acquired various powers and attributes not altogether consistent with each other; for instance, fierce virgin of the woods though she was in the Actaeon and Callisto myths, she was yet, as Lucina, goddess of childbearing. She came into the Renaissance highly idealized as Phoebe and Cynthia, the virgin goddess of the moon: "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair"; yet she had not wholly shed her connotations as Lucina. The *theme* of Diana, in a purely Elizabethan mood, is strong in the play. The wood is steeped in moonlight. Hermione, if she will not marry Demetrius, is given the choice of death or the cloister:

For aye to be in shady cloiser mew'd,
To live a barren sister all your life,
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
(I. i. 71-73)

She was to be a votaress of Diana, like Hero in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. Inevitably, in Elizabethan poetry, the chaste goddess must evoke the figure of the Virgin Queen, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Elizabeth is "the fair Vestal thronèd by the West," who is not hit by Cupid's arrow; that arrow is quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon while the imperial vot'ress passes on, in maiden meditation, fancy-free.²⁶ But the Diana symbol is handled with playful ambivalence, and, although as a symbol of maidenhood it is a compliment to Elizabeth, it is also as the same

symbol something rejected by the young people, who choose love:

Thrice blessed they that master so their blood
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.

(I. i. 74-78)

Hermia would obviously rather be the rose distilled than to chant hymns to the cold fruitless moon. This delicate play with the symbol is conceivable only after the Christian Middle Ages, when virginity had assumed positive value as an ideal, and when the plucking of the rose of courtly love had been idealized as well in literary tradition. In truth, Shakespeare reconciles the apparent opposition by using Diana as a symbol of chaste love as well as of virginity. The juice of the little western flower (the pansy or love-in-idleness stained with Cupid's arrow), gladly applied by Puck to the eyes of Lysander, of Demetrius, and of Titania, causes them all to dote madly on the first person they see; but the liquor of another herb restores true sight and hence true love. Oberon awakens Titania with this spell:

Be as thou wast wont to be;
See as thou wast wont to see.
Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower
Hath such force and blessed power.

(IV. i. 74-77)

Diana is doubtless a safer patron of the married state than Cupid.

We might now move on to Hecate, for she comes into the play by way of Diana and Circe. But it's time I let you off these intricacies of allusion.

It will be clear, I hope, from what has been said, that there is a special opulence of classical allusion in *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream. It is abundant and detailed, not necessarily "accurate," but more often so than not. Although Shakespeare owes as much to Chaucer as to Ovid or Plutarch for the figure of Theseus, the same generalization would not be true of the classical allusions generally; in them Ovidian myth, whether directly from Ovid or secondhand, bulks largest. It should also be apparent that the allusions are not simply an overlay that can be removed without injury to the fabric. They are ornament, indeed, but ornament that is intimately related to the structure. They define the curves, invite the eye in the direction it should take, lead it into and out of the design, make for it pleasing points of rest. The allusions have much to do, in fact, not only with enriching the play (by hinting at a world beyond its defined and limited action), but also with directing and controlling our responses to the action and the characters. Those glimpses of landscape in Umbrian or Florentine or Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century, in which, behind a scene of the Annunciation or of the Adoration, a window opens on a retreating valley, varied with rocks and trees, have such a double function; we are led out for a moment of contemplation beyond the immediate and active scene, but by repetition of lines and colors we are led back into the structural design of the painting.

We return now to the question of verisimilitude and anachronism I raised at the beginning of the paper. One thing these allusions do is to give a sense of verisimilitude to the setting chosen for the story. One sense of verisimilitude, as understood in the Renaissance, was simply "the appearance of reality,"²⁷ and things that had happened in history, or even in long-recorded legend,²⁸ clearly had such an appearance. Theseus had an ample and well known legendary history. Therefore, to be reminded about his adventures in war and love gives us a comfortable sense of being in country

we have been in before; we are invited now to attend to a new story, but we start from the credible things of familiar legend. There is no need to be thoroughgoing about this background; a few touches to establish familiarity are enough, and others are brought in from time to time to keep decorum. For of course verisimilitude is allied to decorum. To give the appearance of reality, one must supply details and make allusions appropriate to the time and the place. For example, the tragedy of Pyramis and Thisbe, set in the reign of Queen Semiramis, widow of King Ninus, the supposed founders of Babylon and Nineveh,²⁹ is most fitting for presentation at the court of Theseus of Athens.

But there is another and deeper sense of verisimilitude, and that is the sense of universal truth.³⁰ This requires that the representation transcend the accidents of time and place, and that the characters in the representation be alive in the present as in the past. And so Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania, the four lovers, and the rest, behave like Elizabethan Englishmen. Shakespeare is so sure at this kind of thing that far from giving the impression of a hodge-podge of characters, customs, and times, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to be all of a piece, richly variegated in texture, indeed, but seamless. It has depth and shading, but no jarring contrasts. The important thing, for Shakespeare and his time, was that the classical past, as a force in literature and thought, was not something remote and dead, to be pieced together and resuscitated. It had never, perhaps, been altogether dead, and if moribund in the centuries before Charlemagne, it had certainly been thoroughly alive for several centuries before the sixteenth. In those centuries, the ancient past had been thoroughly medievalized, it is true. Even so, the classical revival of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was essentially a fresh and exciting look at old

friends. In literature this made possible a profound change of perspective without a break in tradition. The ancient past was not reconstructed as a museum piece of archaeologically correct figures; having never been wholly dead, it was simply caught up again into the present with new meanings and new emphasis.

I am not forgetting the genuine antiquarianism in the sixteenth century that made itself felt in many ways in art, as in the modelling and costuming of figures in Italian paintings of the high Renaissance, in the strict imitation of Seneca in the tragedies of the Italian academies, or in the learned historical detail in English Ben Jonson's Roman tragedies. But in English literature generally, antiquarianism was not a truly regulative or strongly defining force.

One may illustrate the freedom taken with historical accuracy of detail by the outward visible signs of it in costume. It is possible that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was played on Shakespeare's stage entirely in Elizabethan costume. Judging from the *Titus Andronicus* drawing,³¹ however, and from the identification of Demetrius in the play by "the Athenian garments he had on," we may guess that Theseus and the members of his court wore ancient costume, and that Bottom and his friends wore the jerkins, breeches, and netherstocks of Elizabethan craftsmen. We have nothing in the text to help with the garb of the fairies. My own guess is that Titania and Oberon wore Elizabethan costume, ceremonial and bejewelled, and that even Moth, Cobweb, Peaseblossom and Mustardseed were splendid in paned hose, starched ruffs, tall hats, and capes of satin and sarcenet.

The outward anachronism of the costumes, however, is less our concern than the anachronism, if such there be, in the fable and the characters, in the association of Theseus and

Hippolyta with Hermia and Helena, and of Oberon with both couples. There are two essential and related points to be made about such anachronism. One is that too cultivated a historical sense—or perhaps I should say merely too great an awareness of difference in manners in other ages from our own—may actually be inimical to the effective treatment in art of historical or legendary themes. To know what I mean, one has only to think of the period films of our day, for which the best brains of English departments or theological seminaries have been employed in settling the style of snuffboxes in the reign of Charles II, or table manners at the court of Ikhnaton. Shakespeare stands at a half-way point between Chaucer and a modern historical novelist. As the Roman plays show, he is capable of considerable historical perspective without at the same time being slavishly bound by tedious correctness in the accidents of manners, dress, and speech. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he was writing a romance, of course, and not a historical play, and quite obviously allowed himself much greater freedom than in *Julius Caesar* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Even so, if he had just followed Chaucer's lead and not gone back afresh to Plutarch and Ovid, we would not be subjecting his play to this particular scrutiny or asking about it this particular kind of question. It was he who opened his window on Actaeon's hounds, on Hecate's dragon-team, on the abandoned Ariadne, on Aurora making love to Cephalus. He evidently sought some perspective depth, something that would place the action credibly in a time far away and long ago. The classical overtones seem to me to be clearly intentional.

The other point to be made is that anachronism is such art is not obtrusive, as it is, for instance, in a De Mille film, in which such extravagant pains are taken with details of local

color that the more serious violations of a historical sense become offensive. It is not obtrusive in Shakespeare because no absolute standard of historical accuracy is set up as a measure. Time is fluid. The present assumes the past. Theseus is a credible character in a play by William Shakespeare called *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; yet he would not have been the same—would not, indeed, have been at all—had not Athenians had legends about such a founder of their city, had not Plutarch cast him in the role of first statesman of Athens, had not Statius and the anonymous twelfth-century author of a French romance firmly fixed his reputation as the destroyer of Thebes, had not Boccaccio and Chaucer turned him into the ruler of a court of chivalry. In Shakespeare, he has something in him of all these things, yet he is none of them; he is a new character in his own right, by genuine artistic metamorphosis. This is true verisimilitude, and in such art, anachronism is not only obtrusive—it is, in fact, necessary.

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NOTES

1. *Shakespeare Survey*, VII (1953), 112.
2. See especially Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Boston, 1948), Chaps. I-III.
3. On sources of the play, consult especially Frank Sidgwick, *The Sources and Analogues of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"* (The Shakespeare Library, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz; London, 1908); Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1957), Vol. I; and editions of the play by H. H. Furness (*The Variorum Shakespeare*, Philadelphia, 1895), Sir Edmund Chambers (*The Warwick Shakespeare*, London, 1897), H. Cunningham (*The Arden Shakespeare*, London, 1905), G. L. Kittredge (Boston, 1939), and G. N. Giordano-Orsini (of the Italian translation by Giulia Celenza, Firenze, 1933). On the mythology, see R. K. Root, *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (Yale Studies in English,

XIX; New York, 1903); Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1932), Chaps. I-IV; T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana, 1944), Vol. II; DeWitt T. Starnes and Ernest Wm. Talbert, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries* (Chapel Hill, 1955), Chap. V; John Price, S.J., "Mythological Invention in Shakespeare," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1959.

4. Quotations are from F. N. Robinson's *The Poetical Works of Chaucer* (Boston, 1933).
5. Quotations are from Kittredge's edition, *op. cit.*
6. This most interesting suggestion was made to me by my colleague, Professor Robert K. Presson, as were other suggestions of close relationship.
7. *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*. . . . Translated . . . out of French into English, by Thomas North (London, 1579), pp. 3, 4.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.
9. See the paper by Miss Bradbrook, "Drama as Offering: The Princely Pleasures at Kenelworth," elsewhere in this volume.
10. "The battle with the Centaurs, to be sung
By an Athenian eunuch to the harp.'
We'll none of that. That have I told my love
In glory of my kinsman Hercules.

(V. i, 44-47)

Cf. Plutarch (North, pp. 16, 17) and Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xii. 210 ff. (My references to Ovid are meant only to note a readily available source of the myth in question, not to imply that Shakespeare went to him in every case.) It was evidently from Plutarch that Shakespeare got the idea of Theseus' kinship with Hercules (North, p. 4, and marginal note: "Theseus and Hercules next kynsemen"). Ovid's account of the battle contains an ambiguous hint that Hercules may have fought in it (*Met.*, xii. 536 ff.).

11. "When I from Thebes came last a conqueror" (V. i. 51). The legend appears in Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*; Euripides, *Suppliants*; Statius, *Thebais*, lib. xii; *Roman de Thèbes* (anonymous, probably 12th century; edition by Léopold Constans, Société des anciens textes français, Paris, 1890) and various redactions; Boccaccio, *Teseide*; Chaucer, *Knight's Tale*; Lydgate, *Story of Thebes* (available to Shakespeare in Thynne's Chaucer, 1561 edition; also in Speght's Chaucer, 1598).
12. It is to Hippolyta, however, rather than to Theseus that Shakespeare gives the association, if such it is (cf. *Met.*, viii. 271 ff.):

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I was with Hercules and Cadmus once
 When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
 With hounds of Sparta.

(IV. i. 115-17)

On the strength of the suggestion some editors have accepted Theobald's proposed reading of *boar* for *bear*. The episode looks like sheer invention, to ring in another legendary hero and another city-founder. Shakespeare may have remembered that Cadmus had an errand in Crete (in his search for Europa; *Met.*, iii. 1 ff.).

13. *MND*, IV. i. 115-29; *Met.*, iii, esp. 206 ff. Shakespeare's phrase "of Spartan kind" rests directly on the Latin, not on Golding, who translates "of Spart."
14. As in J. Ravisius Textor, *Epithetorum Opus Absolutissimum*, Venice ed., 1588. (Quotes Ovid, *Fasti*, lib. 3, 'periure et perfide Theseu.')
15. *Knight's Tale*, I, 1814.
16. *Legend of Good Women*, VI; *House of Fame*, lines 387-426.
17. *MV*, V. i. 9-12. Though the reference is to Dido, the situation is Ariadne's.
18. North spells "Perigouna" and "Aegles" (rather than "Aegle"); Shakespeare, First Quarto, "Perigenia" and "Eagles" (probably a misprint for "Aegles"). Plutarch gives first the affair of Theseus with Perigouna (North, p. 5), then with Ariadne, together with a report that he may have abandoned her for Aegles (pp. 10-12); further on (p. 15), he speculates whether Antiopa, Queen of the Amazons, conquered by Theseus, was another name for Hippolyta, or a different woman; finally (p. 15) he lists several more of Theseus' rapes and infidelities, and repeats the Ariadne-Aegles episode.
19. On the fairy lore of the play, see especially Sidgwick, *op. cit.*; Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York, 1930); and, for useful references, Kittredge's appendix on "The Fairies" to his one-volume edition of *MND*.
20. *Huon of Bordeaux*, as translated by Lord Berners, was published about 1534; I used the Purfoot edition of 1601. King Oberon appears in Spenser's genealogy of the Elfin race (*FQ*, II. i. 6; II. x. 75, 76) as the father of Tanaquil or Gloriana; and he is King of the Fairies in Greene's *James IV* (of uncertain date), but without resemblance to Shakespeare's Oberon.
21. In the *Merchant's Tale* (*CT*, IV, 2225 ff.) Pluto and Proserpina are Fairy King and Queen.
22. See Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (1565, 1584) under *dryades*, etc.; Nashe, *Terrors of the Night* (1594), McKerrow's edition, I, 347.

23. *Daemonologie* (1597), iii. 5.
24. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*: Pyrrha—*Titania* (i. 395); Latona—*Titanis* (vi. 185), *Titania* (vi. 346); Diana (iii. 173); Circe—*Titanis*, (xii. 968; xiv. 14, 376), *Titania* (xiv. 382, 438).
25. Kittredge (Introduction to *MND*, p. xiii) rules out Diana as the prototype because of Titania's "order"; Orsini (*op. cit.*, "Commento," pp. 205-7) rules out Diana partly because the Titania-Bottom scene could hardly be taken as complimentary to Elizabeth (always "Diana") and partly because the associations with Circe and her metamorphoses of men into beasts seem stronger.
26. II, i. 155-64.
27. Fracastoro, *Naugerius* (trans. Ruth Kelso, *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. IX, No. 3, 1924), pp. 69-70.
28. Castelvetro, *Poetica* (2d ed. revised, Basel, 1576), IV. iv (pp. 559-78).
29. The time and place are given in Ovid and in Chaucer (*Legend of Good Women*, II). or *LGW*.
30. Fracastoro, pp. 69-70.
31. Reproduced in *Shakespeare Survey*, I (1948), Pl. I; and examined by J. Dover Wilson ("Titus Andronicus' on the Stage in 1595"), pp. 17-22. This drawing (*Harley Papers*, Vol. I, f. 159^v) stands above a transcript of forty lines of text; the passages transcribed come from two different parts of the play and therefore reproduce no actual scene (I. i. 105-20 and V. i. 125-44, with a patched bridge between). The date on the MS., though usually read 1595, is uncertain. Dover Wilson points out that the drawing may be by a different person from the transcriber; the drawing does illustrate the situation in the play immediately following I. i. 129, after Titus' sons have led Alarbus off to execution, and Tamora and her two remaining sons stay to expostulate with Titus. At any event, the costuming would seem to have been recalled from the theatre. The principal figures wear what are evidently meant to be antique costumes: Titus wears armor, something like a Greek himation, and a garland of oak (?); Aaron and the two sons of Tamora appear to be in the tunic of Roman soldiers; Tamora wears a loose flowing gown and a crown. But the two attendant soldiers are dressed as contemporary Elizabethan soldiers; one looks like a Switzer.