

A Midsummer Night's Dream

By [Paul Williams](#)

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A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy about love, love that is bound up in magic and ritual, a highly erotic fertility rite that is full of mishap and danger but still has a happy ending. Described as a celebration about what constitutes a couple, it explores fear and the relationship between love and imagination. The characters we meet in the play are derived from ancient literary sources and courtly romance. Shakespeare has used an eclectic mixture of half-classical-half-medieval myth, folklore, tradition, blended regality, festival, magic and popular tradition, to express the metamorphosis in the human condition, that of love to marriage. Although portrayed as a dream, there is a dark undercurrent to the play that suggests this is possibly a nightmare. There are implications of rape, hints of violence and death threats. Indeed, it has been described as "a most truthful and brutally violent play." The emphasis is on the liberation of the human condition and how it is potentially destructive. Paradoxically, the darker side of human nature is portrayed through sex, love and comedy. The play shows what can happen when the perceived structure of the outer world breaks down and how separateness and stability of identity are lost. The link between love, imagination, and reason, are key to the main theme of transformation and change.

In the 'dream', opposition provides the means by which metamorphosis takes place, a powerful complementary effect that emphasises movement and highlights the play's few moments of stillness. The transformations are all diverse in effect, sometimes beautiful and sometimes grotesque. The most significant example of metamorphosis in human life is marriage, the transformation from men and women in love to the affirmation of love through commitment and responsibility. Three couples are married at the end of the play and we are presented with an alternative version of the married state in Oberon and Titania. Shakespeare fixes the ideal form of marriage, in the expression of Theseus' forthcoming marriage to Hippolyta. Theseus is the king of Athens, Hippolyta an Amazon Queen whom Theseus has defeated in battle. They represent the ordered and structured world and its accompanying laws. These two characters play a seemingly minor role, which is wholly representational, but it must be remembered that their wedding is the reason for the presence of both the fairies and the mechanicals in the wood near Athens, and it is Theseus's command that drives the lovers there. Theseus's threat to Hermia, the prospect of death or a life in a convent if she does not marry Demetrius (1:1) is the catalyst that puts in motion the process of metamorphosis both in the real world and in the fairy world. It highlights an opposition between the natural process of evolution, which is only achieved through metamorphosis, and the nun's vocation, which is a self-imposed denial of the natural rhythms of human life (such as living within broader society). It is because of this threat that Hermia flees with Lysander to the wood outside of Athens, unaware that they are entering into a realm of unlimited possibility. The wood to where Hermia, Lysander and the other lovers flee is the domain of fairyland, a metaphor for the sub-conscious human mind, which is a dark, dangerous and potentially threatening place. The cold, structured world of Athens is mirrored in fairyland by misrule and chaos; it is a land of opposition, the conscious and unconscious, the light and the dark, a region of passionate excitement, a realm where metamorphoses take place, images merging and melting into one another.

Part II

Shakespeare has used a variety of literary and stage devices to enrich the imagery of the play, and a distinctive language that expresses metamorphosis; 'translate', 'transpose', and 'transfigure' are contextual forms of metamorphosis but the expression differs. The first two suggest that they are removed from value; for example, Hippolyta, in her aria (5.1.), uses 'transfigured' in an almost Jungian way, to suggest an event devoid of knowable value, but not value itself.

'all their minds transfigured so together' (5:1.24)

Hippolyta is the only character in the play that has a free range of speech. The lovers are confined to rhyming couplets, the mechanicals express themselves in prose, and the fairies in lyrical short lined poetry. These speech devices are linked to the four main elements of the play that emphasise the expression of metamorphosis between characters and the audience. With Shakespeare nothing is ever straightforward and he not only has Oberon speak in elegant blank verse to Titania, but also in rhyming couplets similar to those of the lovers.

" Ill met by moonlight proud Titania" (2:1. 60)

"Now until the break of day,
Through this house each Fairy stray". (5:1. 399)

There is a very strong lunar imagery that runs throughout the play, from Theseus's opening speech "Another moon: but oh, methinks, how slow" (1:1.3) To Puck's farewell " Now the hungry lion roars, and the wolf beholds the Moon" (5:1.369). The Moon; associated with night, hunting, madness, revelry and femininity, helps to ground the fairies in our imaginations and emphasises the ritualistic nature of the play, conveying human attitudes in situ with the lunar cycle. As the moon goes through its cycle, so do the emotional states of the characters metamorphosing through love, hate, fear, joy, sympathy and forgiveness. It also acts as a stage device to promote transposition and change, by creating a dreamlike effect.

Fairies are traditionally seen as peaceful. This popular image reduces them to the diminutive creatures that are small and non-violent. However, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are far removed from this vision; they are powerful and formidable forces that represent chaos and imagination. Elementals, Earth-Fire-Water-Air-spirit; shape- shifters that merge and metamorphose with one another, maintaining stability and balance in the natural world. Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the fairies, are representations of the polemic nature of pagan Gods, the Earth Mother and the Sun God, when united, they control the weather and the seasons. When Oberon and Titania quarrel for possession of the changeling boy all nature goes awry. As husband and wife, we are presented with an alternative view of the married state. The fairy marriage though very similar to human marriage, is not the same; it has a different sexual convention, which is constant with the balance of order and disorder in the natural world. The changeling child is a mortal, born of a mortal mother, the rules prescribed by immortality for the fairy

powers, and by regular cyclic metamorphoses of the natural world do not apply to mortal children even those transposed as changelings. They are born, and change, and grow. Oberon in seeking possession of the boy is seeking to exercise his paternal authority over the maternal role in the growing living and dying of a mortal boy. Titania has disrupted this natural sequence and in doing so has caused upheaval in the natural world. This aspect of Titania's nature is analogous to the dark mother Goddess of Celtic mythology, Queen Mab (Maeve) who also appears in *Romeo and Juliet*. In the quarrel we see a malicious battle of wills that exposes the dark-side of Titania's nature, the feminine power of the moon; when she evokes a dark world of chaos:

The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,
The plowman lost his sweat, and green corn,
Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard:
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock...(2:1.94-98)

Part III

Oberon in a fit of jealousy quite cruelly reduces his wife to level of animal sexuality by using magic to cuckold with an ass. Though his motives are mixed and vindictive, it does suggest that by this act, Oberon is exercising male authority in marriage. A parallel can be drawn between the relationship of Theseus and Hippolyta, not only in the contrasts they represent, but also in the past conflict and male victory that lies behind their wedding. Oberon can be seen as restoring an equivalent male authority by forcibly bringing his own wife into subordinate conformity by an act of metamorphosis. This incident over the Changeling boy is not only a way of furthering the plot by having plans fail rather than work out, but it also represents a kind of future experience that awaits the lovers: marriage, pregnancy, parenthood and the growth of children. Reflecting the cycle of childhood friendships of the lovers that changed to sexual love, courtship and marriage.

The mechanicals in the play provide the audience with a level of reality that they can identify with. They represent a range of trades and are projected stereotypes of human understanding that would have been familiar to the Elizabethan audience. Their performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is a major metamorphosis not only for the mechanicals but also as a stage device to bring the audience back to a sense of reality from the 'dream state' of the play. The mechanicals have no understanding of the theatrical conventions of drama and their performance is indicative of what might have happened to the lovers. Although the course of true love never runs smooth, the process can lead to tragedy, it lies within the power of art to make the story a tragedy or a farce. The story of *Pyramus and Thisbe* comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is derived from an old Babylonian tragic love story that shows what people will do for love (a theme repeated in *Romeo and Juliet*). The lovers' more unsophisticated comments on the mechanicals play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* mark them as irresponsible to the imaginative world of Bottom and his fellows, who project themselves into their play's heroics almost without fear or failure. They are also distinct from the duke, Theseus, who says of the amateur performers:

"The best in this kind are but shadows:

and the worst are no worse, if imagination
amend them" (5:1.210)

Perhaps the most profound example of metamorphosis, and what *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is often recognised for, is Bottom's transformation by Puck and subsequent seduction by Titania. A sexually powerful and grotesque metamorphosis in which, Bottom is given an ass's head, whilst Titania is reduced to the level of animal sexuality. The inspiration for the transformation of Bottom most probably came from Lucius Apuleius's work *The Transformations of Lucius*, better known as *The Golden Ass*. It deals with the transformation of Lucius from animal shape to human shape with the aid of the Goddess Isis. The tale is full of metamorphoses from the shapeshifting witches of Thessaly to Lucius' own transformation. It also refers to the festival of Isis; a Dionysiac spring festival connected to the Egyptian seasonal cycles of the river Nile (inundation, sowing, and reaping), the theme of metamorphosis and festival repeated in the 'dream'. There is also a possible early Christian link to the transformation of Bottom. In that, Roman detractors of Christianity in second century Rome, depicted Christ on a cross with an ass's head, as a metaphor for what they saw as the foolishness and stupidity of the Christian martyrs. Shakespeare presents Bottom as a kind of martyr for humankind, and uses the same literary device as the Romans, metaphor. Essentially as an ass, Bottom has become his own metaphor, representing innocence and stupidity; the action of metaphor is itself a process of transposing a kind of metamorphosis. Bottom is not phased by the metamorphosis even when his external features are changed; he acts quite normally when Titania is seducing him:

Part IV

Titania: Thou art as wise, as thou art beautiful.

Bottom: Not so neither: but if I had wit enough to get out of this wood, I have enough to serve mine own turn. (3:1.140-143)

His combination of ignorance and stupidity make him humanly credible, he serves to represent the limits of awareness, and limits as limitations as a form. The message he sends to the audience is that there is strength in ignorance, and that the world is safe as long as there are people like Bottom.

In the 'dream' metamorphosis affects everyone, but it's only the men that change. The women just get angry at one another but do not change their minds about their men. Lysander turns from Hermia to Helena, and Demetrius from Helena to Hermia and then to Helena again. What the lovers see is one of the primary concerns of the play, that is, not to believe what you see, our eyes can deceive us. The men only see superficially. Oberon's vision encompasses the stars, Cupid is blind, but his random arrow flies between the cold moon and the earth and pierces the western flower from which the juice is taken to work on the lover's eyes. Once the beloved is seen the lover is snared, so representing the wayward, unpredictable and aimless nature of sudden infatuation. Helena's conclusion about ficklety of Demetrius' affections is that true love, "Looks not with the eyes, but with the mind" (1:1.234). Young men are easily dazzled by appearances; therefore, they are easily distracted and more prone to metamorphosis. Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the truth of what the lovers experienced. Theseus dismisses it as a product of the imagination, but can it be dismissed? We are reminded in Theseus's speech that this is a play about imagination.

“And as imagination bodies forth” (5:1.14)

Shakespeare's message is clear, without imagination metamorphosis cannot take place, even at the end of the play when all the actors save Puck have left the stage, he reminds us of the power of our imagination and of metamorphosis in Puck's epilogue:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended
That you have but slumb'ed here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream, (5:1.422-427)

Who are the shadows? The actors? The fairies? The audience? Perhaps, Shakespeare warns us to be wary of shadows because they are a metaphor for our sub-conscious wherein lie the secrets of the psyche. *A Midsummers Nights Dream* tells us that the process of mutation, transformation and metamorphosis is natural and regular. In the external world its counterpart is the regularity of the lunar cycle, of day and night, and of the seasons. Life is made up of mutation but metamorphosis as a condition of existence, is itself, unstable and irregular, vulnerable to sudden transformations. The lovers once released from the constraints of society are more liberated, and revert to more natural state, where baser instincts dominate, this presents the potential for tragedy. *A Midsummers Night Dream* shows what can happen when people expound their freedom without the constraints of the rule and order of society. Shakespeare's morphic message is a simple one, a compromise between reason, imagination and love has to be reached to create balance and order.