

CRITICAL INSIGHTS

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Editor

Nicolas Tredell

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A Midsummer Night's Dream as Fantasy Fiction_____

Catherine Belsey

Fantastic Stories

As the title promises, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is fantasy fiction, depicting improbable events in a world that is not accountable to everyday reality. And in that respect the play bears some resemblance to the *Harry Potter* series, perhaps the most popular instance of the genre in our own time. Both have secured attention from a wide age range. Like J. K. Rowling's stories, Shakespeare's play tends to captivate the young, at least in performance, if not on the page. At the same time, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeals to grown-ups—as, it turned out, the *Harry Potter* books were to do, too. In due course, Rowling's novels were reissued with special covers, more severe, broadly Gothic, to be read by adults who might have been embarrassed by jackets designed for children. This is less surprising than we might think. In Shakespeare's day—and for many years after—fairy tales were not confined to the nursery but were told by the fireside to entertain the whole family. *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* world of spells and mischief offers to charm playgoers of all ages.

What is the attraction of fantasy fiction? How does it work? How do we learn to inhabit its imagined worlds? Can it do anything that other genres cannot do? Perhaps strange adventures in unreal settings can cast new light on the reality we think we know. I do not mean to offer a point-for-point comparison between Shakespeare and J. K. Rowling. There are obvious differences between drama and prose fiction, as well as among works written four centuries apart. Rowling's stories are more interested in the contest between good and evil, as well as characters tested to destruction under stress. The play, meanwhile, centers on couples and the relationships between them—although these, too, are put severely to the test. But attention to the common ground may perhaps yield some insights.

Stories grow out of other stories. We know where we are in fiction by reference in the first instance to other fiction. Children learn to distinguish genres early. “Once upon a time” marks out a world of virtuous but oppressed young women who are rescued and married by princes. Or it raises expectations of ogres and resourceful boys called Jack, where a happy ending means marriage to the princess. Fables rely on talking plants or animals, often engaged in life-and-death struggles. Other genres gradually develop their own familiarity. Even though I miss the opening credits of a new series on TV, I can generally tell within seconds whether I am watching horror, an action thriller, or a police procedural.

Fantasy commonly creates its invented worlds by adapting and mixing existing genres in unexpected ways. In *Harry Potter* the tale of the neglected orphan joins boarding-school stories, redrawn by combining medieval legend with traditional myth and magic. The conjunction makes for a narrative that is at once brand new and delightfully comfortable. Something similar might be said of the blockbusting *Star Wars*, where fairy tale meets science fiction, with a dash of the western for good measure. Viewers or readers are invited to feel paradoxically at home in unlikely places.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Shakespeare invoked a range of materials, all of them likely to be known to at least some in his early modern audience. First among them, Chaucer was then a favorite English author, repeatedly reprinted, and regarded as evidence of what the English language could do. Ovid’s witty Latin narrative poetry was taught in the grammar schools, while Seneca’s Roman tragedy had been recently translated and was much imitated on the Elizabethan stage. Meanwhile, the new genre of romantic comedy joined forces with native folk traditions, still in circulation in the long winter evenings. These fireside yarns took for granted the existence—in stories, at least—of a parallel universe peopled by anarchic supernatural creatures. Out of these component parts, Shakespeare assembled a world where playgoers could rapidly come to feel at ease, and the improbable passed for possibility.

Muggles

A Midsummer Night's Dream begins in an Athens that allows no place for enchantment. Duke Theseus and his promised bride are Shakespeare's Muggles, not part of the magical world in the woods, and puzzled at the end of the play by the lovers' account of their shared dream. It is nonsense, Theseus declares, no more than—well—fantasy (5.1.5). But Hippolyta thinks there might be something in it, however strange and surprising. In the end, they all return to Athens, where the lovers touched by magic can go on with their everyday lives.

But even Muggles have their roots in fiction. Harry Potter's unhappy place in 4 Privet Drive, for example, is already recognizable, at least in outline, from existing stories. Ill-treated children, excluded from full participation in the life of the family, were familiar from the stories of Snow White, tormented by her stepmother, and Cinderella, humiliated by her stepsisters, long before Shakespeare retold Snow White's story in *Cymbeline* and Charlotte Brontë reimaged Cinderella's in *Jane Eyre*. The unassuming boy revealed as the true heir by his virtue or skill goes back at least to the legends of King Arthur, before it resurfaces in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and any number of Gothic romances. And while we're thinking of Arthur, long-bearded Merlin keeps an eye on the boy's education, much as Albus Dumbledore supervises Harry's.

Theseus and Hippolyta, too, were the protagonists of a sustained legendary history that eventually made its way into Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and from there to Shakespeare's play. Hippolyta is queen of the Amazons, inhabitants of an all-female realm where women tuck up their skirts and fight as fiercely as men. Amazons challenged conventional gender roles and exerted their own ambivalent fascination in the process. Since they rejected male domination they were, of course, out of order but their independence commanded admiration, even so. One of Edmund Spenser's virtuous protagonists in *The Faerie Queene* was the beautiful female knight Britomart, who inspired desire and fear in equal measure (3.1.46). Hadn't Elizabeth I herself worn armor when she spoke to rally the troops against the Armada?

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CONTEXTS

The Re-Enchantment Industry: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Its Own and Our Time_____

Nicolas Tredell

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play of enchantment, disenchantment, and a kind of knowing re-enchantment, and in that respect, and without overstating or oversimplifying its historical significance, it encapsulates a broader movement in English society and culture from Catholicism through the Reformation and the Elizabethan settlement to the fragile equilibrium that would survive the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 but explode into the English Civil War in 1642, thirty-nine years after Elizabeth I's death in 1603. It would be a movement through the breaking of old idols and icons to a reconstructed faith shadowed by its older version and challenged by an increasingly rational and potentially secular worldview in a mercantile society that was expanding its proto-imperialist and proto-industrialist horizons and questioning the right of the monarch to control commerce and capital flow.

Dream plunges us into a melee of quick bright things come to confusion, of parallel worlds in which mythological figures, fairies, courtly lovers, and artisans co-exist and sometimes invade one another's spheres. The play's dialogue and action make all these figures and each of their worlds existentially vivid but also strive repeatedly to place their intermixture as a dream, as a fantasy, as a product of narcotic or, indeed, psychotic aberration. That these attempts are not wholly successful is part of the strength of *Dream*. It cannot quite control its intermingling of natural and supernatural, nature and culture, chastity and concupiscence, love and reason, desire and constraint, turbulence and calm, sleeping and waking, night and day, benignity and malignity. Here we shall aim, in a necessarily provisional, compressed, and sometimes speculative way, to relate this interfusion and confusion to its time and, finally, to our own.

First, we can point to the position of *Dream* in a long process of change and uncertainty involving both religion and politics, which were not, in the Elizabethan era, as distinct as they have since become. In terms of religious attitudes, practices and beliefs, the largest change was the English Reformation, which Elizabeth I's father, King Henry VIII, had carried through with ruthless effectiveness, aided by his Chancellor Thomas Cromwell who oversaw the dissolution of the monasteries, and which her elder half-sister and predecessor Queen Mary, reigning from 1553 until her death in 1558, had tried and failed to reverse. The first Act of Supremacy, in 1534, had made the monarch, rather than the Pope, the head of the English church and a range of propagandist and punitive measures were introduced and implemented to suppress Catholicism. It is difficult to determine how much popular support the English Reformation had. Most people, it has been proposed, were glad of the change and saw Catholicism in England as already corrupt and decaying. Recent revisionist accounts, however, most notably Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (2nd ed., 2005), have argued that Catholicism was alive and well, indeed thriving, immediately prior to the Reformation and that the break with Rome was fueled more from the top than from an upsurge of popular anti-Catholic feeling at the bottom. It is not necessary to adjudicate between these positions to recognize that the break with Catholicism, whether primarily populist or elite-driven, was a radical one in the original sense of that adjective, going to the roots of people's beliefs and practices concerning the most fundamental rites of passage from one human condition to another—birth, marriage, joy, suffering, illness, death. It was bound to create the sense of a rupture, a split within Christianity that would pose political, social, and cultural problems as well as offering possibilities for change.

Elizabeth I's religious policy was, famously, an attempt to find a *via media*, a middle way, between the demand for a return to Catholicism and the demand, particularly from a growing Puritan movement, for a more emphatic Protestantism; but there was no question of trying, as Mary Tudor had done, to reverse the

Reformation. It was, therefore, necessary to try to fill the gaps that it was feared the attempted extirpation of Catholicism might have left; to try to repopulate those “[b]are ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang,” to take an image of personal decay from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 that, as Katherine Duncan-Jones observes, “evokes visual recollections of chancels of abbeys left desolate by Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries” (2007, 73). There was a pressure to create, in a necessarily ad hoc, improvisational, and often hardly conscious way, a re-enchantment industry. In the Elizabethan era, the Queen was both chief begetter and central icon of this industry.

Fair Vestal and Fairy Queen

The figure of Elizabeth as Queen was peculiarly complex, a source of calm and disquiet, desire and aversion, fantasy and calculation. Her position, especially at first, without a standing army or police force to call on, excommunicated by the Pope and thus arguably a legitimate target for assassination or deposition, threatened with invasion by Spain, was highly vulnerable. As well as considerable political skills, she needed a kind of magic to maintain it, and as her reign went on and she grew older and stayed single and childless, this became centered in the iconography, which she and those around her built up, of “the Virgin Queen,” a partial English Protestant substitute for the Virgin Mary of Catholicism, a form of attempted re-enchantment that failed fully to convince.

There had been an early expectation that, like any monarch, she would marry and produce an heir, but she never did; however, as G. R. Elton points out, “while she would not marry, she also would not say so; she had no intention of depriving herself and England of one of the best diplomatic counters available in that age of dynastic marriages” (281). Of course, by the decade in which *Dream* was first performed, the 1590s, the Queen, enjoying unusual longevity for an Elizabethan as she moved from her fifties into her sixties, had no chance of producing a biological heir, even if she had then married. But her long-preserved virginity (if it was) generated confusion and uneasiness not only about the succession but also, more broadly,

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The Shared Space of the Wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Lisa Hopkins

Many British folktales involving fairies center on where the fairies live—often a house, but sometimes a bridge or a hill. When humans enter this terrain, one or both of two things usually happens: some form of visual magic is applied, which generally causes the human either not to notice that the fairies are far smaller than they seem or to believe that the surroundings are palatial when actually they are sordid; and/or it proves impossible for the human to return to their own world until something happens to break the spell. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deviates from both these norms. No one that we encounter in the wood outside Athens is a permanent denizen, with the problematic exception of the aunt whose house Lysander cannot find, and though there is a magic applied to the eyes, it affects only how mortal creatures are perceived (either by other humans or by Titania) rather than how fairies are. Moreover, both humans and fairies seem free to enter or leave the wood at will; it is a shared space that is common and open to all rather than a place of entrapment or danger. This essay will explore the idea of the wood as a shared space in order to argue that this is a metaphor for the common ground shared by actors and audiences. In recent theater history, it was Emma Rice's failure to observe the convention of "shared light" in her inaugural production of *Dream* that ultimately cost her the job of artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe ("Emma Rice: Shakespeare's Globe Boss to leave"); in Shakespeare's day, when it would almost certainly have been obvious that the actors playing the mechanicals were the same as those playing the fairies and Puck announces that he can happily switch from the role of auditor to that of actor, the wood is a space where theatrical magic happens.

Making Fairies Different

In order to achieve this effect, Shakespeare departs entirely from received ideas of fairies and their habitations. Matthew Woodcock observes that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* “Shakespeare appears to go out of his way to bring together as many different motifs and images from fairy mythology as he possibly can within the play: changelings; fairy hunts or ‘rades’ (2.1.24–25); a sexualized fairy queen; associations with nature, fertility, and generation; fairies’ invisibility; and the mischievous and potentially malicious Puck” (2004, 14). However, he also goes out of his way to deviate from the ways in which these topics were usually represented. Dale M. Blount comments on “the essentially malevolent nature of fairies and their traditional activities from the twelfth through the sixteenth century” and argues that “Shakespeare consciously modified this occult folklore in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in order to make a comic drama possible,” even though “The folklore in all of his seven fairy plays [*Comedy of Errors*, *Dream*, *Merry Wives*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *Winter's Tale*, *Tempest*] is essentially traditional except for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*” (1, 6, 15n11). In a separate analysis, Woodcock too notes that Puck “paints a very dark picture of fairy-kind through associating them with the ghosts of those who had damned themselves by committing suicide. Puck’s infernal vision of fairies is not without foundation and draws on a wider tradition that identifies fairies with consciously evil and malicious aspects of the supernatural. Oberon, however, is quick to dispel this image.” Shakespeare’s changes are indeed so thoroughgoing that Woodcock points to “the view, developed by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fairy scholars, that the literary representation of fairies changed irreparably following *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and that Shakespeare is responsible for establishing the dominant characteristic of fairies found in subsequent literature and artwork” (2010, 14). In short, Shakespeare seems to have been aware of a well-established view that fairies were bad and to have done everything in his power to challenge and change it.

One by one, Shakespeare takes every wicked act that fairies were popularly thought to commit, and in true comic spirit turns it on

its head. In his classic book *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* Minor White Latham noted that “The fairies’ passion for stealing human children from their cradles and their known practice of disfiguring them with withered arms and elvish marks is changed into an excessive solicitude about the welfare of babies” (183). Wendy Wall similarly notes that “sixteenth-century texts routinely mention charms used to ward off fairies who might steal a mortal child, kidnap a nursing woman, or deform a baby. *Dream* hints at this concern by dramatizing the fairies’ quarrel over the mortal Indian changeling” (87), but it also transforms it because no one is proposing to harm the boy in any way.

There are other equally notable changes. In pre-Shakespearean representations of them, fairies were generally (though not always) smaller than humans, though not minuscule: an earlier version of Oberon is said to be three feet tall (see e.g., Connolly, 133, 137). Shakespeare glances at this tradition by suggesting that some of the fairies are very small indeed: Puck says “all their elves for fear / Creep into acorn-cups, and hide them there” (2.1.30–31) and Titania orders “some war with rermice for their leathern wings / To make my small elves coats” (2.2.4–5). If they can hide in acorn cups and wear clothes made from the wings of bats, the elves must be not merely small but tiny. But there is no suggestion that Titania is much smaller than Bottom, and, indeed, the fact that Titania and Oberon almost always double Hippolyta and Theseus means that we perceive them—and Puck too—as being the same size as humans. There is thus a double challenge to tradition, which authorizes neither very small fairies nor fairies who are just like humans, and indeed perhaps there is a joke about this in one of the play’s other references to size, when Hermia says of Helena,

Now I perceive that she hath made compare
Between our statures; she hath urg’d her height.

(3.2.290–91)