

*A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM***COMMENT**

Shakespeare wrote many more thoughtful plays, deeper and broader works of greater wisdom, but he never wrote a more perfect gem than the fairy tale he called *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Written around 1595, perhaps for a lord's wedding, *Dream* is the closest thing to a foolproof piece of theatre that I know. Two things make it invulnerable to bad productions: the dream process buried deep in its structure and the inspired idiocy of "Pyramus and Thisbe."

Shakespeare has built his play like a dream. To understand how *Dream* imitates dreaming, conceive of sleeping as a sphere of multiple layers like an onion, beginning with the surface level of consciousness and moving to the core of deep, unconscious dreaming. The play begins with the theatrical equivalent of the totally conscious state, heroic drama set in Athens and featuring mythical heroes: Theseus, "Duke" of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. The occasion is high (the marriage of two legends) and the language is formal. But no sooner does an audience settle down to the job of accepting the story before it, when newer, barely related matters interrupt the heroic drama with the romantic comedy of Hermia, and her two suitors. Like a waking person who relaxes his conscious thought from business to think about pleasure, we hardly notice that our minds are now on newer, more cheerful, more energetic material.

We expect to follow these young lovers into the woods, when Shakespeare accelerates our journey away from the rational by introducing the "rude mechanicals," tradesmen who have met to produce a play for Theseus on his wedding day. Say what? This slightly plausible but highly unlikely new business might seem a challenge to our skills as an audience, but we manage without effort the sudden climb—or descent—from one level (young people in love) to another (working blokes putting on a play for a royal wedding). Unconsciously enlarging our capacity for belief to include Bottom and Company and this third plot, we might expect to have Shakespeare take us to the woods and resume the Hermia-Lysander plot.. Instead, he sends on stage, new matter, a hobgoblin named Robin Goodfellow and a Fairy. The play has now left the realm of the real as easily as we slip into dream, and Shakespeare pushes us even deeper into a dream state when Puck and the Fairy direct our attention to something yet more fantastic than themselves: Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the Fairies, squabbling over a half-human boy. At this point, Oberon becomes the ringmaster of sleep, and with "a little western flower" and Puck's connivance sets up the play's most anarchic and irrational moment, a sexual encounter between the world of man (Bottom), of beast (Bottom as ass), and of the supernatural (Titania).

Thus Shakespeare spins his audience ever further from the play's first moment of formal theatricality and ever deeper into the realms of irrational dream. To retrieve us from this state without breaking the spell, he takes us to Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding feast and merges us with the lovers as an audience for "Pyramus and Thisbe." Every play is a kind of collective dream, but most end abruptly when the story—the fictive world on

stage—goes its way, and we as audience go our way. But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare keeps the first dream intact by having the characters in it go to a play *with us*. When the mechanicals put on “Pyramus and Thisbe,” our fellow playgoers are Hippolyta, Theseus, and the four lovers. They are in the audience and we are equally in their world. When Bottom and his friends finish the show, our new, royal friends leave for bed under the watchful eye of Oberon, who gives his assistant Puck the chore of waking the audience:

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... (5.1.417-422)

When we see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we enter a multi-layered bauble that Shakespeare has constructed to play tricks with our conscious minds no matter how bad the acting or production choices. And since “Pyramus and Thisbe,” which actually thrives on amateurishness, essentially ends the play, and audiences always go away from the play in some state of enchanted wakening

Beyond Shakespeare's brilliant manipulation of audience, the play boasts one of his most unforgettable characters and my own favorite. Bottom, the weaver, has an appetite for life that makes Zorba the Greek look like a picky eater. Bottom wants to get on with things, he wants to play all the parts. And Bottom copes. When his friends run away from him in the forest, he decides, “I will walk up and down here and I will sing” (3.1.116-117). A moment later, confronted in the woods at night by the Queen of the Fairies, who tells him that she loves him at first sight, he replies modestly: “Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that” (3.1.136-137). Always his instinct is to put others at ease: when he meets Titania's attendant fairies, he makes a little pleasantry with each of their names; when he gets back to Athens, he has no reproaches for the friends who abandoned him in the woods but greets them with, “Where are these lads? Where are these hearts?” (4.2.25); and when he thinks that Theseus is confused about a point in the play, he steps out of character to reassure the legendary ruler of Athens.

Shakespeare makes Bottom, whose name indicates his station in the society of the play (as well as reinforces the ass joke), the main repository of the play's wisdom, both in what he says and in what he is. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is about the irrationality of love, and it is Bottom, trying to understand how Titania might be in love with him, who voices the closest thing to the play's message: “to say the truth, Reason and Love keep little company together nowadays” (3.1.137-138).

Bottom also understands the nature of experience and the limits of language. When he wakes from his “dream,” Bottom says he will have Quince “write a ballad of this dream” (4.1.211-212), but when he gets back to Athens, named for the goddess of wisdom, he changes his mind, because, “If I tell you, I am not true Athenian” (4.2.29).

In a play about the magic of theatre and dream in our lives, Bottom is the character who lives most fully in both those realms and whose life is, accordingly, most full.

PLOYS

A. Hold a “Pyramus and Thisbe” Competition

Scripts: *MND* 5.1.108-350
Prep: prior intro, rehearsal periods, scripts
In class: full class
Players: groups of 3-6

I would guess that being involved in a production of this play-within-the-play has helped more students “see the fun in Shakespeare” than any other theatrical experience. (You Tube a pretty good version starring the Beatles.)

Announce this event well beforehand, choose three companies of six players; you and selected students will read the lines the of the royals. You may not want to require them to be “off book” (ingenious “cheat sheets” hidden in sleeves, hats, shoes, and so on, can add an appropriate homemade hilarity to a production), but you should urge them to make their productions “big” with costume and props. Give your three “P&T” companies a definite rehearsal schedule. Make the day of the productions a big occasion, inviting other teachers and students, even arranging an award ceremony afterwards in which you present “Willies” for such things as “Best Roar,” “Most Convincing Wall,” “Most Embarrassing Overacting,” and so on.

Make sure you schedule time, in the next class meeting if necessary, for a discussion of the things your students liked best about each of the productions. Press them to be specific about *why* they liked what they liked. In that way, you will soon be talking about principles of comedy, of parody, and of character.

B. Do a Parody in the Style of Pyramus

Scripts: *MND* 5.1.168-179
Prep: intro, tragedy suggestions
In class: full class
Groups: 3
Props: found in class

Shakespeare makes fun of romantic tragedy throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but never more than in the language of Pyramus and Thisbe, which captures and exaggerates the purple speech of lovers. Have your students—once they’ve studied *Dream*—compose a three-minute parody of

one of Shakespeare’s other tragedies (*Hamlet* or *Macbeth* would be the most likely).

- 1) Divide your class into three groups.
- 2) Clear three small areas for them to work in a circle.
- 3) Hand each group two small editions of the tragedy you’ve decided on and tell each group to put together a three-minute version of the play.
- 4) Their show must
 - include two speeches in comic style—for example, using the rhyme style of Pyramus or of rap or of a nursery rhyme—that is

- recognizably a version of a famous speech in the real play (e.g. “To be or not to be” or “Tomorrow and Tomorrow”)
- have everyone in the group speak (even if it’s in unison)
 - use two props they find in the classroom
 - include a death scene at the end
- 5) After ten minutes check in separately with each group to see if they have questions and to encourage them. Remind them that you are not looking for a “good” work, you are looking for a “ridiculous” play.
 - 6) After 15 more minutes give them a 3-minute warning to showtime.
 - 7) Put on their shows.
 - 8) Stupidest tragedy wins.

C. Write to "Dear Abby" as One of the Lovers

<p>Prep: character assignments In class: full class</p>
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Hand out at random to your students the names of the eight lovers in the play (Oberon, Titania, Theseus, Hippolyta, Hermia, Lysander, Helena, Demetrius), and instruct them to write to a lonely hearts column in the person of the character they received. Making certain that no one gets his or her own letter, shuffle the letters that come in, hand them back to your students, and instruct them to answer the letter as though they were the columnist. Read some of the best to the class or collect them (the best or all of them) into a book. You may want to discuss the results with your students, but the point of this assignment is really just to get them involved in the issues of the characters.

SCENES FOR ALTERNATIVE READINGS

A. The Initial Confrontation of Oberon and Titania. Act Two, Scene one, 60 (“Ill met”) to 145 (“longer stay”). Two speaking parts, possible addition of fairy attendants as listeners.

Have your actors playful and loving in *the first version*, angry and dangerous in *the second version*. Discuss which works best for your students. You may wish to condense Titania's speech about the weather (81–117). In a *third version*, you might try doing the same scene with the couples' fairy attendants. If you do, then have the attendants vocalize (but not verbalize) responses cheering on either Titania or Oberon and jeering at their opposite.

B. Lysander and Hermia on Lying Down. Act Two, scene two, 34 (“Fair Love”) to 64 (“be pressed”). Two speaking parts.

Many of your students will recognize this conversation in which Lysander tries to sleep next to Hermia and she says “no.” Do *the first version* with a totally sincere and innocent Lysander and a somewhat overly tart and suspicious Hermia; do *the second version* with a slick Lysander “on the make,” and an innocent and nervous Hermia; do *the third version* with a horny Hermia saying the opposite of what she means, and a shy Lysander.

Discuss how each of the three different versions would influence the overall play. Invite a *fourth version*.

C. Titania's First Meeting with Bottom. Act Three, scene one, 114 (“I see”) to 153 (“spirit go”). Two speaking parts.

The Victorians made this scene all about getting married; I think it is much more about getting laid. Do both versions: *the first version* in which Titania is a lovesick, but virginal, goddess, and Bottom is a bluff, assured man about the woods; and *the second version* in which Titania is a horny earth mother, and Bottom feels almost sexually assaulted. Note the parallels of this scene with B above.

ON SCREEN

-  ★★★ Max Reinhardt's **1935** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with wooden classical scenes in Athens, but once this film moves to the woods it becomes irresistible. To the strains of Mendelssohn's music, the film marshals all the special effects available then to MGM and creates a dark fairy world that is one of the great spectacles in film history. James Cagney is Bottom, oddly frenetic but plausible; Mickey Rooney is really quite good as Puck; and Joe E. Brown is an hilarious Thisbe. Good as the film is, some students might feel superior to its special effects and its sentimentality on the one. A sad loss for them.
-  ★★ Peter Hall's **1968** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows that the risk of using contemporary styles for a film production of Shakespeare is that no matter how ageless the story may be, the costume will date the movie. Students who can look past the mini-skirts, Nehru jackets, and bell bottom [come to think of it, most of that is back] will enjoy good performances by Diana Rigg (Helena), David Warner (Demetrius), and Judi Dench (Titania). The film offers a *natural* reading of the play with the emphasis on mud and flesh, and, aside from some clichéd film tricks, is full of solid directorial choices.
-  ★★ Michael Hoffman's **1999** version with Kevin Kline as Bottom is an odd disappointment. Mr. Hoffman felt it necessary to give Bottom a sad little side story (including a shrewish wife), and in so doing he robbed Kevin Kline of a comic role he might have soared in. Unaccountably, the city scenes are filmed on location, while the scenes in the woods are staged on an obvious set. And then there are the bicycles. I'm not sure why, but there are lots of bicycles.