

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Early Modern Contexts
Seminar Leader: Peter Holland

ABSTRACTS

Laura Aydelotte

“Finding the Faerie King”

While it is often noted in passing that Shakespeare’s Oberon derives his name from the eponymous faerie king in the French Romance, *Huon de Bordeaux*, there is a dearth of substantial inquiry into these origins in relation to Shakespeare’s character. My paper will examine some probable sources for the character of Oberon, particularly the 1534 English translation of *Huon de Bordeaux* by Lord Berners, and two subsequent dramatic works it inspired: the now lost play *Hewen of Burdocize*, noted by Henslowe as having been performed in 1593—the existence of which suggests a continued popularity for the romance around the time Shakespeare was writing *Midsummer*—and Robert Greene’s *The Scottish Historie of James IV* (1594), which contains a prominent framing story featuring a fairy king named Oberon. This close look at Oberon’s origins will serve as the foundation for a reading of the character of Oberon in *MND* which will hopefully suggest some new insights into the character and open a few new facets in the larger discussion of the copious and various threads with which Shakespeare wove *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Louise Geddes

“Playing No Part But Pyramus: Bottom and the Early Modern Clown”

This paper intends to consider the restraints that Shakespeare attempts to place on the figure of the clown in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the early modern theatre, clowns were celebrities in their own right, and performers such as Richard Tarlton were often given free rein to improvise, becoming famous for blurring the line between stage performance and revel. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom's repeated attempts to hijack the play of Pyramus and Thisbe, are contained, not only by Peter Quince, but by the aristocratic characters - both natural and supernatural - who impose an authority on this potential Lord of Misrule. From Titania's first instruction to "sing again" (3.1.121) to the Athenians' performance directions, the play is structured to impose in such a way as to impose authorial restraint on the clown's typical chaos. By looking at the history of the clown on the early modern stage, this paper hopes to examine how Shakespeare attempts to privilege structured narrative over improvisation and anarchy.

John Tobin

“Do These Bones Live?”

I am for the tongs and the bones, that is, at least the bones in the elephant graveyard of scholarly activity (or allegedly so): source study. I want to reconsider several alleged sources of MSND in

the light of their significances. Some of these are ones I came across and want now to see whether I hold to my original "discoveries." More importantly, for all of the sources, I want to ask, what does the knowledge of these materials as operative in the play do for our understanding of the text? I am particularly drawn to the roles of Apuleius and Nashe, and possibly Erasmus.

Lynne Bruckner

The Gendering of Nature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

How, given the sort of intimate mastery over nature that gets detailed in early modern agrarian and husbandry manuals, might we read the images of nature, the feminine, and harvest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? The play presents precise images of nature in poetic detail, indicating how the playwright values the specifics of the more-than-human world. Not only does it signal knowledge of multiple herbs and flowers, as well as their healing qualities, but *Dream* also includes a variety of landscapes—woods, fens, bowers, thickets, and green patches. While the poetics of the play emphasize the beauty of nature, the bower Titania occupies is clearly associated with female sexuality, and at times both the woods and fens become places hostile to man. Do these wildernesses, like the feminine, need to be brought under control by the ordering hand of patriarchy? Titania's sexuality is not necessarily seen as a threat in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; after all, it is through manipulating her desires that Oberon humiliates her and gains control over the Indian boy. Moreover, the characters that are caught in brakes and thickets are in an unruly state of passionate disorder, and none of the damage suffered in the brake is lasting. Nature's wildness, in this sense, becomes a vehicle through which patriarchy can discipline those who offend it. This paper does not fully resolve how to read the interrelatedness of gender, nature, and wildness—in large part because I find that the play itself is ambivalent about the status of the untamed wild. Yet, even as such ambivalence is registered, there is a clear drive toward producing a natural world that is wedded to the desires of man—one that fulfills his needs. The world of productive harvests is restored at the end, and so, too, is that of fortunate issue. It can hardly be by chance that both women and nature are set to yield at the end of play.

Laura, Levine

"Visible Histories in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Shakespeare and Balanchine"

At the heart of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the Indian child Oberon wants Titania to surrender to adorn his train and "trace the forests wild." Until Titania surrenders the child, she'll remain in love with Bottom; Bottom will remain an ass; Lysander will love Helena and no "Jack shall have his Jill." To get the child, Oberon must penetrate Titania's bower and afflict her eye with the love-in-idleness. In Shakespeare's work, the Indian child, described, but never seen, is the invisible pin that holds the play together. And Titania's bower is that world which will need to be penetrated in order for her to give him up. The Indian child's history, like his existence, is narrated and imagined rather than witnessed as a physical set of facts upon a stage. We know him not through his physical presence—he is conspicuous, in fact, for his

absence—but through the narrated histories he comes to stand for.”..she, being mortal, of that boy did die...”Titania says of the votress who was the boy’s mother, “...And for her sake I will not part with him.”

In Balanchine’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, both the Indian child and the bower have a physical presence. Literalized and seen rather than described, they are givens, presented to us as realities on a stage. The histories behind both the child, and the bower, however, as well as the history of the love-in-idleness used to penetrate that bower are elided. What are the interpretive consequences of such trade offs in Balanchine’s production?

Peter C. Herman

“The Ancient Constitution in Ancient Athens: Law and Comic Form in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

Discussions of the politics of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have tended, as one legitimately expect, to concentrate on the “rude mechanicals or on the play’s gender issues. In this paper, I want to examine how Shakespeare uses the Ancient Constitution to shade the character of Theseus, and so continue D’Orsay Pearson’s 1974 skeptical treatment of this character. The problem begins with Egeus’ insistence that as a matter of law, not custom, not tradition, but *law*, he has the right to destroy his daughter should she disobey him, and he continuously insists that Theseus follow the law. This demand would have had particular force for those familiar with Plutarch’s life of Theseus (translated by Thomas North in 1579), as adherence to the rule of law lies at the root of the argument Theseus used to convince the inhabitants to band together into a city. According to Plutarch, The establishment of Athens thus parallels the establishment myth of the English polity, according to the Ancient Constitution. As Sir John Fortescue puts it, “a king who is head of the body politics is unable to change the laws of that body, or to deprive that same people of their own substance uninvited or against their wills.” Athens, like England, is ruled by law, not by men, which gives Egeus’ appeals to law much more authority than his comic demeanor might suggest. Now, as everyone knows, Theseus ignores Egeus’ demand, sanctioned thought it might be by law, albeit a “sharp” law, that the lovers die when they are discovered: “Egeus, I will overbear your will.” Clearly this act could be construed as Theseus appropriately using equity (or common sense) to ameliorate the rigors of the law. Yet at the same time, this act, while necessary for the comic resolution of the play, nonetheless has disturbing undertones. Theseus, it needs to be remembered, gets things exactly wrong in this famous statement: it is not Egeus’ “will” he is overbearing, but Athenian law. This act is exactly what Plutarch’s Theseus promised *not* to do when he organized Athens into a commonwealth. The comic ending of this supposedly light comedy depends upon the arbitrary suspension of law, exactly the sort of thing the Ancient Constitution forbids, and even though one must applaud the particular application, Theseus’ act contradicts the fundamental organizing principle of both Athens and early modern England, the subjection of the monarch to law.

Rebecca Dark

“Hermia and the Fall of Man: The Specter of Eve in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

Many scholars have noted a connection between the wood in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Garden of Eden, and Hermia’s sexually charged dream of being attacked by snakes is no small part of that association. This dream situates Hermia in the position of Eve in the Garden, but I argue that parallels between Hermia and Eve begin long before the lovers enter the wood and, in fact, permeate the characterization of Hermia. Viewing the text through this contextual narrative of the Fall of Man, we detect the specter of Eve amidst its feminine challenges to male authority and control. Because it begins with a celebration of successful masculine suppression of transgressive femininity in the form of Theseus’s martial victory over and imminent marital possession of the Amazon queen Hippolyta, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* establishes the triumph of patriarchy over transgressive femininity as its foundation, and in this context Hermia can be understood to be a playful, but perhaps ominous, calque of the paradigmatic female transgressor, Eve.

Fran Helphinstine

Printed Amateur and Courtier Descriptions of Comedy at Play in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?

Does the posthumous printing of Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* (composed ca. 1579) in 1595, when theatre companies were returning to London after the plague, signal renewed interest at Elizabeth’s court in that comedy in which the representation of the strange power of love delights and the scornfulness of action brings laughter? Although we have no record whether Shakespeare read the earlier *The Art of English Poesy* (printed in 1589), credited to George Puttenham, or the Sidney text, we have records from the Stationers’ Register that show the expanding print culture made both available to Londoners. The courtier Sidney writes that comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he [the comic poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one” (Sidney 152). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* does Shakespeare fashion Duke Theseus’ order for Philostrate, the Master of the Revels, to find merriment for his wedding night to reflect that courtiers no longer share Sidney’s classical view about laughter? Or does Shakespeare fashion Peter Quince’s company to dramatize that Puttenham misconstrues the courtier’s classical views of comedy with his advice “our intent is to make this art vulgar for all Englishmen’s use”(Book I Chapter 10 Whigham and Rebhorn 114)? Or does the 1595-1596 courtier audience now enjoy what Puttenham describes as another kind of poetry invented only to make *sport* of, or deride the main action, by giving a ridiculous cross construction to it with clowning between acts in order to refresh the audience (Book 1, Chapter 11 Whigham and Rebhorn 116-117) ?

Michael Saenger

“*Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a History Play”

I examine how Helena’s stated desire to be “translated” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1.1.191) resonates with other conceptions of interlinguistic, and in some senses international, contact. I wish to present Helena’s desire “to be to you translated” as emblematic of the English desire for France. It stands to reason that the genres of identity flux practiced in London (such as acting, language-learning and cony-catching) would inform Shakespeare’s vision of England’s changing national body, and it is equally reasonable to suppose that the sense of translation which Helena uses can be read as an index of Shakespeare’s perspective on the concept of translation generally. Here, Helena wishes either to assume agency over a foreign body or to learn the behaviors that empower that foreign body and nativize their potency. Helena and Gaunt in *Richard II* both address the tricky issue of whether England has an essential core, or if it is merely another fallen thing to be defended only after it has effectively been “leased out.”

Jean Merrill

“Context as a Vehicle for Containment: Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

This essay explores how Shakespeare makes use of and then departs from Boccaccio and Chaucer as sources for the story of Theseus and Hippolyta. The play’s goal for Hippolyta is to incorporate her into Athens’ patriarchal norms of female sexuality and domesticity. Female size is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s code for its anxieties about female sexuality, while the play addresses concerns about domesticity in terms of naming and silencing. Shakespeare implicates the physical but discusses the behavioral aspects of these characters to turn Hippolyta from an independent female warrior into a good wife for Theseus. To make sense of the Amazon in this play, readers must also explore how the play works to control her sexual and domestic identities. Shakespeare’s divergences from Boccaccio and Chaucer’s choices illuminate that control.

Robert N. Watson

“*Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Permeable Self”

Midsummer Night’s Dream acknowledges what Theseus proudly denies: that while we blunder along, a shadow world of unseen creatures sorts out our mating and feeding and sleeping, patches our wounds, and fights off the demon death. In the mysteries of love and the fairyland, Shakespeare codes the world we do not know, but could not live without. In biology as in so many areas of early modern science, “magic” is the place-holder for phenomena with pending explanations.

Recent scholarship attacks the illusion of autonomous human identity, using Foucault to emphasize our unconscious subservience to powers much larger than ourselves. But we are also overrun (interpenetrated, as well as interpellated) by much smaller and seemingly weaker entities. *Midsummer Night’s Dream* offers a kind of prescient allegory of this fact, with the fairies in the role of microbes and hormones.

Obviously Shakespeare did not know biology as such; but he saw the world occurring in orders of scale and fractal symmetries, and this paper explores the early modern forms of this proto-ecological recognition. When Demetrius is flower-juiced into love, Bottom translated into an ass, and the young lovers metamorphosed into the plants and predators of the wilderness as the wildness of passion overcomes them, the barriers by which humanity distinguishes itself from ambient nature collapse.

Jesse Lander

“Thinking with Fairies: A *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Problem of Unbelief”

This paper seeks to place the fairies of MSND within debates about the supernatural and the natural in the wake of the Reformation. Instead of drawing on folklore, with its concomitant emphasis on the popular, I will examine the ways in which fairies get treated in a range of documents. As I hope to show, fairies are an especially productive category for thinking about the spirit world, and they have a significant role to play in the intellectual history of the elite and literate classes. Special emphasis will be placed on the way in which the play engages with Reginald Scot’s *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584).

Scott Hollifield

“Thopas, Meet Theseus: Shakespeare’s Chaucerian Muse”

The era of Chaucer and John Gower—a distinctively English echo of Petrarch and Boccaccio—represents a significant weigh-station en route to the playwrights of early modern London. Shakespeare, along with Marlowe and Kyd, likely recognized in the vanishing medieval stage a void that needed filling and, simultaneously, a commercial venue in which to advance the traditions of their Classical and medieval forerunners. If we follow the useful speculations of Emrys Jones and Stephen Greenblatt, the young Shakespeare may well have experienced the Coventry cycles (staged for the last time in 1579), finding in them a storehouse of medieval thought filtered through representations of the Biblical world. As Jones put it, “Shakespeare was exceptionally well-placed to catch by the tail the vanishing eel of medieval dramatic tradition” (*The Origins of Shakespeare*, 33); the poet-playwright’s lack of textual access to the cycle plays suggests a poetic and dramatic memory balanced against the open book in his approach to adaptation.

Though its key source is Chaucer’s mannered, incisive *The Legend of Good Women*, Shakespeare’s “Pyramus and Thisbe” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* echoes the near-doggerel verse forms of the mysteries, themselves often as irreverent of their subjects as those of Chaucer-the-Poet’s Sir Thopas. Shakespeare’s integrations of mystery-play commonplaces suggest that he knew the format and its evocative power well; that he developed these devices throughout his career, regardless of dramatic genre and parallel to his Ovidian and Chaucerian proclivities, indicate a sensibility borne of and honed upon dialogues with the past.

Patricia Parker

“Editorial Translations / Staged Directions: (Un)sound Government, Quarto-Folio Differences, Biblical Parody, and Other Dreamwork(s)”

This paper will explore the earliest texts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in particular the 1600 quarto and 1623 Folio texts) as a way into re-thinking, first, the multiple performance (and other) possibilities that might open up if we “take time to pause,” and query (if only with a “parted I / eye”) certain venerable editorial traditions—including the placement, personnel, order, and (performative) status of particular stage directions (concordant or discordant with “directions” of other kinds, from Theseus or what Corinthians calls “rulers of this world”); Bottom’s “raging rocks” speech turned from the early texts’ prose into (quoted?) verse, through the strategic insertion of punctuation or “points”; the giving of speeches to different speakers between quarto and folio versions, and the metamorphoses of speech prefixes before their standardization; together with other early modern strange companions (including the “sound / unsound” invoked in Hippolyta’s lines in Act 5 on Quince’s prologue as “sound,” but not “in government”). En route, the paper foregrounds this play’s early modern temporal palimpsest, with its racial, religious, and trans-geographical staging (and off-staging) of Ethiopes, tawny Tartars, and an Athens already within the East (or “Ind”) of the Ottoman Turk; and re-considers its marriage-dream plot’s serio-ludic rehearsal of (Pauline and other) “translations,” *raptus* and dream visions (with *parodia* / parody as both solemn and burlesque), including its extended biblical parody of walls that are (not yet) down, of coming again, and coming without delay (invoking, *inter alia*, the biblical text of bridegroom and “black” bride translated or Englished as “The Ballet of Ballets”); and the “stranger” (or foreign) contaminations of continental (and Babylonian) Pyramuses and Thisbes, including the crossing of Ovidian/tragic with Folly and *Narrenschiff* textual-visual sendups, as translations (and trafficking) of a different sort.