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 978-0-521-82540-5 - A Midsummer Night's Dream: Updated
 Edition Edited by R. A. Foakes
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INTRODUCTION

Date and occasion

The dating of Shakespeare's earlier plays remains largely speculative, and in the absence of hard information, it is tempting to look for topical allusions or particular events – in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a wedding – which might provide a point of reference for the play. The best evidence for dating this play remains, in fact, its nature and style, for it shares with a group of plays written about 1594–7 the mastery of lyrical drama achieved by Shakespeare in the mid 1590s; there is good reason, therefore, to accept the usual dating of the play within a chronology that probably goes as follows:

1594–5	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>
1595	<i>Richard II</i>
1595–6	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
1595–6	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
1596–7	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>

In all of these plays there is a conscious display of poetic and rhetorical skills and devices. In *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare took delight in shaping for his characters 'a set of wit well played', as they engage in virtuoso games of repartee, exchanging balanced speeches, and capping one another's riddles or rhymes. Even in this intellectual play Shakespeare's deeper concerns emerge in his dramatisation of the limitations of wit, and the contrast between words and deeds, as, for instance, between the impressively latinate word 'remuneration' and the three farthings it represents. The primary emphasis nevertheless is on words, as it is in *Richard II*, in which the great set speeches of Gaunt and Richard himself carry the emotional weight of the play, and make Bullingbrook's deeds appear, by contrast, of less concern. Here again is a good deal of rhyme, formal antithesis, and stichomythia. *Romeo and Juliet* too contains rhyming passages, stichomythia, and great verse cadenzas, such as Mercutio's Queen Mab speech in 1.4; it makes memorable the passion of the lovers in speeches that have caused this to become perhaps the best-known of all love stories, yet the dialogue of the lovers is highly artificial, and its lyrical power is generated as much by its relation to the conceits and rhetoric of love poetry (exemplified, for instance, in the great vogue for sonnets at this time) as by its reference to character: so the thirteen-year-old Juliet summons night with a witty image of Phaëton whipping the horses of the sun:

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
 Towards Phoebus' lodging; such a waggoner
 As Phaëton would whip you to the west,
 And bring in cloudy night immediately.

(Rom. 3.2.1–4)

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In *Richard II* even the gardeners speak in verse, but in the other plays Shakespeare was developing his skills in creating prose characters, such as Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. These skills come to fruition in the speeches of Shakespeare's first great clown figure, bully Bottom; through him romantic ardour is genially mocked in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even as the dramatist's poetic skills are ravishingly displayed. There is no need to suppose that Shakespeare was deliberately repudiating *Romeo and Juliet* in using a similar story, that of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', for the 'tragical mirth' (5.1.57) of Peter Quince's play in Act 5, but it seems that he had the earlier play in mind.¹ The common ground between the stories, 'lovers disregarding parental opposition, meeting in secret and, through mistiming at a rendezvous, coming to a tragic end, the heroine killing herself over the hero's dead body',² suggests an element of conscious burlesque. Although the parents are not present in 'Pyramus and Thisbe', Shakespeare began by thinking of them, for Quince includes them in his casting for the play (1.2.49–52), and at the end Bottom leaps up to cry 'the wall is down that parted their fathers'. The natural assumption is that Shakespeare first treated the story seriously in his tragedy, and afterwards exploited its possibilities for burlesque and farce in a comedy.

The Merchant of Venice, which is generally thought to follow *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the sequence of Shakespeare's plays, brings harsher and more discordant notes to clash against the poetic charm of Belmont, notably in Shylock and the lonely figure of Antonio, and in enmeshing the music and amorous fancy of the lovers within a dramatic world dominated by the cash-nexus. This takes comedy, rather uncomfortably, and at the cost of an anticlimactic fifth act, into new territory for Shakespeare, and to this extent may be seen as an advance on his previous plays. All these plays are often grouped among his early works, and it is as well to notice, therefore, that, on the usual chronological reckoning, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the twelfth play Shakespeare provided for his company to act.³ The apprentice years were well past, and this is a harmonious, finely structured play of great stylistic variety, and complexity of meaning. It stands to his later comedies as *Hamlet* does to the later tragedies. Other plays may, through their range, intensity or complexity, establish new boundaries for these genres, and the general vote is more likely to be awarded to, say, *Twelfth Night* as the 'greatest' of the comedies, and *King Lear* as the highest achievement among the tragedies. None, however, has the archetypal quality and general appeal of the two earlier works, which are known to all who know anything of Shakespeare as a dramatist.

This needs to be kept in mind in considering speculations about an occasion for which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may have been written. Because the play is designed to culminate in the wedding celebration of Theseus and Hippolyta, many

¹ See Glynn Wickham, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: the setting and the text', in *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage*, 1969, pp. 184–6, and C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 1959, p. 152 and n.

² Brooks, p. xlv.

³ A terminal date is provided by the listing by Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia Wits Treasury* (1598), p. 282, of the plays by Shakespeare he was aware of, among them *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

have conjectured that it must have been written to grace a specific event, a wedding in a noble household. Two possible occasions would have been the marriage between Elizabeth Vere and the Earl of Derby on 26 January 1595, and that between Elizabeth Carey and Thomas Berkeley on 19 February 1596. There is no evidence to connect the play with either ceremony, and, as Wells points out, while aristocratic weddings were sometimes enhanced by formal entertainments, these usually took the form of a masque, and the first play known to have been provided specifically for such an occasion was Samuel Daniel's pastoral *Hymen's Triumph* (1614), written about twenty years later, when courtly entertainments had become much more elaborate.¹ If an occasion must be sought, then the second is more plausible in terms of date, and both the bride's grandfather, Lord Hunsdon, and her father, Sir George Carey, were successively patrons of Shakespeare's company, which might suggest another kind of link. The play contains what is probably a graceful compliment to Queen Elizabeth as a virgin queen, throned 'by the west' (2.1.158 ff.), and while it is not necessary to link this with a specific occasion, she was involved in celebrations relating to the wedding of Elizabeth Vere, and, although there is no evidence to connect her with the nuptials of Elizabeth Carey, she may have had something to do with them, as the bride was her god-daughter.

The best reasons for seeking an occasion for the play do not concern its nature as a wedding play, for in this respect it is simply a variant of Shakespeare's characteristic mode of romantic comedy; *As You Like It*, for example, ends with the god of marriage, Hymen, celebrating the coupling of four pairs of lovers. Two other aspects of the play provide better grounds, though in my view still not very convincing ones, for linking it with a specific event or date. One is the influence of Lyly on this play,² which led G. K. Hunter to link it with *Love's Labour's Lost* as marked off from Shakespeare's other comedies 'because the occasion of these plays is aristocratic rather than popular'.³ Those, indeed, who take it for granted that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written for a courtly wedding tend to see it as a play for intellectuals, imbued with a 'sophisticated Renaissance philosophy of the nature of love in both its rational and irrational forms'.⁴ As against this, it has to be acknowledged, as Hunter shows, that Shakespeare 'remains true to himself' in a play which is in the line of most of his other work in appealing just as readily to unsophisticated audiences. A second feature of the play which has prompted scholars to look for topical explanations is the demand it makes on casting, and in terms of music. The play has four named fairies, and several other parts that boys would have played (Hermia, Helena, Titania, Hippolyta). It is possible that for a production in a private household, extra resources would have been available, perhaps, as Paul Siegel prettily speculates, more boys to play fairies and to dance with lighted tapers at the end in benediction of an actual wedding pair. The fairies carrying tapers in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 5.5 are often adduced as analogous; there Evans says 'twenty glow-worms shall our lanthorns be',

¹ A point made by Wells, p. 14.

² See p. 5 below.

³ G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier*, 1962, p. 318.

⁴ Paul H. Olson, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream and the meaning of court marriage', *ELH* 24 (1957), 95–6; see also Paul N. Siegel, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream and the wedding guests', *SQ* 4 (1953), 139–44.

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and if the number need not be taken literally, it suggests that more than a few fairies were present. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has been associated with a possible private performance, specifically for a feast on 23 April 1597 when Sir George Carey was among those newly admitted to the Order of the Garter. The connection looks neat, but the arguments about this play are again speculative; it is difficult to see how Shakespeare could have fitted it in during a busy writing period in 1597, it is not mentioned by Francis Meres, and it could belong to a date nearer 1602, when it was published.¹

The title page of the first quarto of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents it as it has been 'sundry times publickely acted' by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and Shakespeare, who acted with the company, must have known that they had the resources to stage it. In his ingenious study of the number of actors required to perform the early plays, William A. Ringler, Jr, has claimed that Shakespeare 'to the very end of his writing career adhered to his original basic pattern of a cast of 16 actors';² he shows how the twenty-two speaking parts in the quarto could have been played by eleven or twelve adults and four boys, on the assumption that there were four fairies only in the 'train' of Titania and Oberon, and that these were played by the same adult actors who took the parts of Flute, Starveling, Snout and Snug. This might seem to be flying in the face of the late-nineteenth-century stage-tradition in doubling adults as fairies, but it is more plausible than to suppose that Shakespeare wrote for a special occasion on the assumption that a private patron would provide several boys to swell the company. At any rate, it is pointless to speculate further about a possible occasion for the play, and it does not affect the dating of its composition in 1595–6.

Sources

The word 'source' is clumsy in relation to a play like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare used or adapted names, ideas, images or hints for incidents from various works he certainly knew, and echoed a number more, so that a long list of works can be compiled that probably contributed in some way to the play. The detection of these has its own fascination and is useful in so far as they illustrate the workings of Shakespeare's imagination, but the most notable feature of the play is the dramatist's inventiveness, brilliantly fusing scattered elements from legend, folklore and earlier books and plays into a whole that remains as fresh and original now as when it was composed. The range of reference underlying it deserves attention also, however, because it helps to explain something of the archetypal force of the comedy, showing the dramatist's instinct for seizing on whatever might articulate and enrich the web of meanings and relationships developed in it.

¹ For Meres, see above, p. 2 and n. The case for a 1597 date is presented in full by William Green in *Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1962.

² 'The number of actors in Shakespeare's early plays', in G. E. Bentley (ed.), *The Seventeenth-Century Stage*, 1968, pp. 110–34; the quotation is from p. 126. See also Stephen Booth, 'Speculations on doubling', in *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*, 1983, pp. 131–4.

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A play so much concerned with transformation transforms its sources, none more so than the work which has recently been proposed as 'the primary influence' on it, and indeed a major source for it, namely John Lyly's *Gallathea* (?1585; printed 1592).¹ Shakespeare certainly knew the plays of Lyly, and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he built up the action 'in the manner of Lyly, by balancing a number of self-contained groups, one against the other',² and presenting each group in turn. In drawing attention to Lyly's influence in this general way, G. K. Hunter pointed especially to *Sapho and Phao* (not published until 1632) and *Midas* (1589; printed 1592), in which Midas's head is 'metamorphosed' (4.1.168) into an ass's head, anticipating Bottom's transformation. In her more recent essay, Leah Scragg claims that *Gallathea* was much more directly influential on Shakespeare's play in its concern with love in relation to 'a pervasive process of metamorphosis'.³ Lyly's plot begins from the disguise of two girls, Gallathea and Phyleida, as boys, so that neither will be made the victim in the sacrifice of a virgin. Lyly plays variations on the effect of this change as they fall in love, until at the end one or other of the girls is to be transformed into a boy so that they can marry. However, *Gallathea* is not much more than an elegant debate on love and chastity, passion and virtue, and the action has to be resolved in the end by a compromise arranged between Venus and Diana. The subplot, involving the three sons of a miller and their dealings with a mariner, an alchemist and an astronomer, has no connection with Shakespeare's play, apart from the dance of fairies Lyly inserted in 2.3, and Lyly's balanced prose, written for his schoolboy actors, appears stylised, monotonous and thin when set against the variety of textures in Shakespeare's language, and the rich play of metaphor and image in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Whatever hints Shakespeare picked up from Lyly he developed beyond recognition, so that the differences are far more remarkable than the similarities, and G. K. Hunter's account of Lyly's impact on Shakespeare remains persuasive; he assessed Lyly's dramatic achievement sympathetically, and showed too how Shakespeare went beyond him in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to create 'a whole realm of action whose poetic atmosphere is alone sufficient to characterize the ideas it contains'.⁴

The framing device of the play – the wedding celebrations of Theseus – Shakespeare developed from the narrative in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, which refers to the conquest by Theseus of the Amazons and their queen, Hippolyta (1, 866–83), and the great 'solempnytee' and feast of the wedding (compare 'the night / Of our solemnities', 1.1.10–11).⁵ In Chaucer's poem Theseus is represented as a keen hunter, riding out 'With hunte and horn and houndes him bisyde' (1, 1678;⁶ compare 4.1.100 ff.). Chaucer stresses the wisdom, dignity and great state of Theseus, and

¹ Leah Scragg, 'Shakespeare, Lyly and Ovid: the influence of "Gallathea" on "A Midsummer Night's Dream"', *S.Sur.* 30 (1977), 125–34, p. 133. This essay has been supplemented and reworked in *The Metamorphosis of Gallathea: A Study in Creative Adaptation*, 1982, pp. 57–77.

² Hunter, *John Lyly*, p. 318; the section in this book on 'Lyly and Shakespeare', pp. 298–340, remains the best study of their relationship.

³ Scragg, 'Shakespeare, Lyly and Ovid', p. 128.

⁴ Hunter, *John Lyly*, p. 327.

⁵ See Ann Thompson's useful account of *Shakespeare and Chaucer*, 1978, esp. pp. 88–94.

⁶ Line references are to the text as arranged in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn, 1957.

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Shakespeare clouded his picture by taking from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's 'Life of Theseus' the names of various women he was there said to have loved and abandoned (2.1.77–80). Shakespeare's Theseus, if Oberon (and Plutarch) can be believed, had doted like the lovers in the play, whose story also owes something to Chaucer. In *The Knight's Tale* Theseus returns home to Athens after his wedding to be stopped by a 'compaignye of ladyes' (1, 898) kneeling in the highway and seeking his help against the 'tiraunt Creon' (1, 961) of Thebes, who has refused to allow them to bury their husbands, killed in battle. Theseus in turn slays Creon, and in the fight takes prisoner two young knights, friends and cousins, Palamon and Arcite, who both fall in love with Emily when, from their prison tower, they see her setting out to 'do May observance' (1, 1047, 1500; compare 1.1.167). Their story, involving their meeting in a wood after Arcite's release and Palamon's escape, and their quarrel arising from a clash between love and friendship, suggested the escape of the lovers to a wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as their quarrels and eventual reconciliation. Shakespeare, of course, creates two pairs of lovers and transfers the emphasis on friendship and 'sisters' vows' (3.2.199) to the girls, Hermia and Helena. In Chaucer's tale, Theseus, out hunting on a May morning, comes upon Palamon and Arcite fighting one another for the love of Emily; in the play, Theseus, again out hunting, encounters the two pairs of lovers asleep in 4.1, supposing they have risen 'early to observe / The rite of May' (4.1.129–30). Shakespeare also borrowed the names Philostrate and Egeus from Chaucer; Philostrate is the alias adopted by Arcite at 1, 1428, and Egeus is the name of the old father of Theseus (1, 2838, 2905). Shakespeare transformed the company of ladies who complain to Theseus at the beginning of *The Knight's Tale* into Egeus complaining against Hermia in 1.1.

Shakespeare probably derived the general idea for a King and Queen of Fairies who quarrel between themselves, and intervene in the affairs of human beings, from Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. Chaucer's king and queen are called Pluto and Proserpine, and the outcome of their debate about love, sex and the relations of wife and husband, in which Pluto attacks and Proserpine defends the treacheries of women, is that Pluto restores the sight of the old man January in time for him to see his wife, May, making love to the young squire Damian in a pear tree, while Proserpine ensures that May has the wit to persuade January to believe he imagined what he saw. Like Pluto and Proserpine, Oberon and Titania take sides in their support respectively for Hippolyta and Theseus, but Shakespeare richly develops the basic idea by making his fairy king a lover of Hippolyta, and Titania a lover of Theseus, by inventing their quarrel over the Indian boy, and by providing them with a train of fairies and adding Puck; although in Chaucer's tale Pluto is King of the Fairies, no fairies appear, and he is somewhat oddly accompanied by 'many a lady' (1v, 2228).

The name Oberon derives from the romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, translated by Lord Berners (first published 1533–42), and well enough known to have provided matter for a play, no longer extant, in the repertory of the Earl of Sussex's Men in 1593–4,¹ and for incidents in Robert Greene's play *The Scottish History of James IV* (?1590),

¹ It was performed three times in December 1593 and January 1594; see *Henslowe's Diary*, p. 20.

which turns history into romance, and gives Oberon a marginal role at the opening and later on when he brings on fairies dancing in rounds. In *Huon of Bordeaux* Oberon and his fairies are associated with the east; they inhabit a wood, they can create illusory storms and dangers, all 'fantasie and enchauntments', and they can make mortals think they are in paradise. When Huon encounters them he is on his way to Babylon to see a maid, 'the most fairest creature in all *Inde*',¹ and this may have suggested to Shakespeare the association of Oberon and Titania with India (2.1.69, 124). The name Titania is a patronymic used several times by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* in reference to descendants of the Titans, such as Pyrrha (I, 395), Latona (VI, 346), Diana (III, 173) and Circe (XIV, 382, 438). Shakespeare apparently borrowed the name from the Latin, since Arthur Golding never uses it in his translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567, reprinted for the fourth time in 1593), which the dramatist knew well, and which provided him with a version of the Pyramus and Thisbe story.

If Oberon comes from romance, and Titania from classical legend, Puck seems to have originated as a generic name in Old English for mischievous, or sometimes malicious, spirits, and came to be used in the sixteenth century as a specific name for a 'shrewd and knavish sprite' (2.1.33) also known as Hobgoblin and Robin Goodfellow.² Many of Puck's attributes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were traditional – his mocking laughter 'Ho, ho, ho', (3.2.421), his broom to sweep 'behind the door', so helping housemaids who left milk for him (5.1.367–8), and his ability to take on any shape (2.1.46–55). Shakespeare makes him merry and impish, a practical joker acting more in fun than malice, and so perhaps established a popular image of Puck, who is elsewhere sometimes depicted as devilish, as in *Wily Beguiled* (1602).³ Puck or Robin Goodfellow was a familiar figure in Shakespeare's day, in legend, ballad and drama, and he appears with his broom in Jonson's masque *Love Restored* (1616). Bullough and most editors take it for granted that Shakespeare picked up hints for his Puck from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584); certainly Scot summarises the traditional characteristics of Robin, though I doubt whether Shakespeare needed to consult him to learn what was common knowledge. Scot interestingly records that belief in such spirits was passing away: 'heretofore Robin Goodfellow, and Hobgoblin were as terrible, and also as credible to the people, as hags and witches be now: and in time to come, a witch will be as much derided and contemned and as plainlie perceived, as the illusion and knaverie of Robin Goodfellow'.⁴ Shakespeare gave him immortality by transforming him into his 'merry wanderer of the night' (2.1.43).

Puck was probably played by an adult actor, as in *Grim the Collier of Croydon* (1600),⁵ where he appears as the clownish servant of the devil, for he is called a 'lob' or bumpkin by a fairy at 2.1.16. The fairies in the play are, by contrast, imagined

¹ *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeaux*, ed. S. L. Lee, EETS, 2 vols., 1882–3, ch. 21, I, 64; Bullough, I, 391, reprints the 1601 edition, ch. XX.

² See M. W. Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies*, 1930, pp. 223 ff., and K. M. Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck*, 1959.

³ See Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, pp. 71 ff.

⁴ *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, p. 131.

⁵ This play, probably by William Haughton, was written for the Admiral's Men, the major rivals to Shakespeare's company.

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as tiny, and Shakespeare teases the imagination of his audience by requiring them to accept that his actors were as diminutive as their names Cobweb and Mustardseed suggest. In her study of *The Elizabethan Fairies*, M. W. Latham found no early references to fairies as diminutive, and supposed Shakespeare to have originated a literary fashion for presenting fairies as tiny, innocuous and associated with flowers (as at 2.1.10–15). The influence of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may well have been potent in the presentation of fairies as tiny and charming in drama (as in *The Maid's Metamorphosis* (1600)) and poetry (as in Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia* (1627)), but K. M. Briggs and others have shown that fairies much smaller than the three-foot-high dwarf Oberon in *Huon of Bordeaux* were common enough in lore and legend; references abound to fairies ranging from the really minute, the size of bees or wasps, to the very small at twelve or eighteen inches tall.¹

Fairies might be malevolent, as is made clear in *Cymbeline*, where Imogen prays for protection from 'fairies and the tempters of the night' (2.2.9), and in *Hamlet*, where Marcellus says that at Christmas 'No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to harm' (1.1.163). Oberon explicitly distinguishes the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from witches and tempters of the night: 'we are spirits of another sort' (3.2.388). Shakespeare's fairies belong, like those in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 5.5, to an equally strong tradition of more kindly fairies,² who may pinch sluttish housemaids, but reward those who do well and say their prayers, and bring them good fortune, as in Greene's *James IV*, where Oberon's interventions are all benevolent, or in Lyly's *Endymion*, in which fairies, as the servants of Cynthia (or Diana, the moon), pinch Corsitas for his 'trespass' against her and afflict him with spots, but kiss the hero Endymion. In *Huon of Bordeaux*, Oberon says he 'was never devyll nor yll creature',³ and the image of fairies as well-disposed to the good was encouraged by Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, in which Oberon becomes a quasi-sacred figure as father of Gloriana, who allegorically represented Queen Elizabeth.⁴ The traditional sense of fairies as 'friendly' to human beings, or at least as rewarding the good and punishing the idle or bad, is, however, modified by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which he transforms his fairies on the one hand into Oberon and Titania, who have human passions and jealousies, and on the other hand into their train of delightfully innocuous figures, whose main office is tending their queen, protecting her from beetles, spiders and other night-creatures (2.2.9–23), and serving Bottom on her behalf as airy spirits (3.1.142 ff.). In envisaging them so, Shakespeare perhaps took a hint from the fairies with 'fair faces' who dance and sing in Lyly's *Endymion* 4.3 and dance and play in *Gallathea* 2.3, for in his company of boy-actors, it seems probable that the smallest and most nimble performed these parts. All the fairies join at the end in song and dance

¹ See Latham, *Elizabethan Fairies*, pp. 66–79, Briggs, *Anatomy of Puck*, pp. 56–70, and the extensive list of early references to diminutive fairies in Brooks, p. lxxii and n. In *Rom.* 1.4.55–6, Mercutio speaks of Queen Mab, the 'fairies' midwife', as no bigger than 'an agate-stone / On the forefinger of an alderman'.

² Falstaff in this play is especially put out by Hugh Evans masquerading as a 'Welsh fairy' (5.5.81), and Brooks, pp. lxxiii–lxxvi, thinks Shakespeare may have been influenced by an acquaintance with Welsh folklore. ³ *Huon of Burdeaux*, ch. 24; 1, 69 in Lee's edn.

⁴ *Faerie Queene*, II, x, 75 ff.; see also Brooks, p. lxxvi.



1 Titania's awakening (Act 4, Scene 1); an engraving of 1803, after the painting of 1785–90 by Henry Fuseli. Bottom is shown surrounded by evil spirits, with a group of good fairies behind Oberon to the left

to bless the house of Theseus, so that the final image is of creatures who have power to ward off evil.

Shakespeare needed no other source than imagination working on life to create Bottom, Quince and the mechanicals – together with the presence in his company of the well-known clown Will Kemp and the slighter comedian Richard Cowley, a nicely matched pair who later created the parts of Dogberry and Verges.¹ Bottom's transformation is a brilliant invention, linking him and his crew to the fairies and the lovers, and also to a range of well-known tales and legends of men changed into monsters. These go back to Circe in the *Odyssey*, and her power 'most monstrous shapes to frame' is also described in the *Metamorphoses*, translated by Arthur Golding (xiv, 63); there were, however, two famous stories of men changed to asses. One was the legend of the foolish King Midas, who refused to accept the general verdict that Apollo had beaten Pan in a musical contest, and was therefore punished by the god, who changed his ears into ass's ears, leaving the rest of his body human (Golding's *Metamorphoses* xi, 165–216). This story was dramatised by John Lyly in his *Midas* (1589; published 1592), in which Apollo inflicts 'The ears of an ass upon the head

¹ These actors are named in speech headings for the parts in Act 4, Scene 2, in the 1600 quarto of *Much Ado About Nothing*; see Greg, p. 279.

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of a king' (4.1.149–50), until eventually when Midas repents his folly, as the stage direction at 5.3.121 puts it, 'The ears fall off.'

The other well-known tale of the transformation of a man into an ass occurs in Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, translated by William Adlington (1566; other editions in 1571, 1582 and 1596).¹ In Book 3, ch. 17 Apuleius persuades his mistress Fotis, the servant of a witch, to steal a box of ointment and anoint him with it, in the expectation that he will be changed into a bird, only to find that he is completely transformed into an ass and, what is worse, treated as one by other asses and horses, and by the thieves who take him and use him as a beast of burden. Apuleius as an ass is made to serve the thieves, and later helps a young maid they have captured to escape; she promises to reward him: 'I will bravely dress the haire of thy forehead, and then will I finely combe thy maine, I will tye up thy rugged tayle trimly . . . I will bring thee daily in my apron the kirkels of nuts, and will pamper thee up with delicates' (Book 6, ch. 23). This may have given Shakespeare a hint for Titania's courtesies to Bottom. If these antecedents were not enough, Shakespeare could also have found in Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* the story of a young English visitor being transformed into an ass by a witch in Cyprus (Book v, ch. iii), and a description of a charm to 'set an horsse or an asses head upon a mans shoulders' (Book xii, ch. xx).

This is the most notable of many changes of shape and transformations in the play, and probably the most pervasive influence on it is that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, mainly as mediated through the translation of Arthur Golding (1567). Shakespeare may have known the Latin text,² but he would in any case have found in Golding's Ovid the story of Cupid's gold and leaden arrows (1.1.170; 1, 565 ff.), the personification of Hiems as an old man (2.1.109; II, 39); the story of Apollo and Daphne (2.1.231; 1, 581 ff.); the legend of Philomel (2.2.13; VI, 542 ff.); the story of the battle between Hercules and the Centaurs (5.1.45; XII, 236 ff.); the description of the death of Orpheus at the hands of the Bacchanals (5.1.48; XI, 1 ff.); and the tale of Cephalus and Procris (5.1.194; VIII, 874 ff.), as well as other suggestions for images.³ Golding's Ovid was also the main source for the story of Pyramus and Thisbe (IV, 68 ff.), and it was this version on which Shakespeare based the narrative action of the play staged by the mechanicals. Not only the general alignment of the 'tedious brief scene' of Pyramus and Thisbe with the story as told in Golding confirms this as the source, but the correspondence of a number of details which are different in other versions, such as the mantle dropped by Thisbe (5.1.141; IV, 125); the 'crannied hole' (5.1.156; IV, 83); 'Ninus' tomb' (5.1.137; IV, 108); and the mulberry tree (5.1.147; IV, 110).

Shakespeare probably knew several versions of the story, beginning with Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, where it is treated seriously and with some delicacy as a moral tale about true love. Other treatments, including Golding's, fall into unintended absurdities, and offered matter for Shakespeare to use or parody. Golding pads out his unwieldy lines with a liberal use of the pleonastic 'did', which Quince's prologue picks up to comic effect.

¹ In Bk. 1, ch. 4, another Circe figure is described in Meroe, a witch who has the power to turn 'divers persons into miserable beasts'. ² See p. 7 above.

³ See, for example, Commentary at 3.2.101 and 4.1.110–11.