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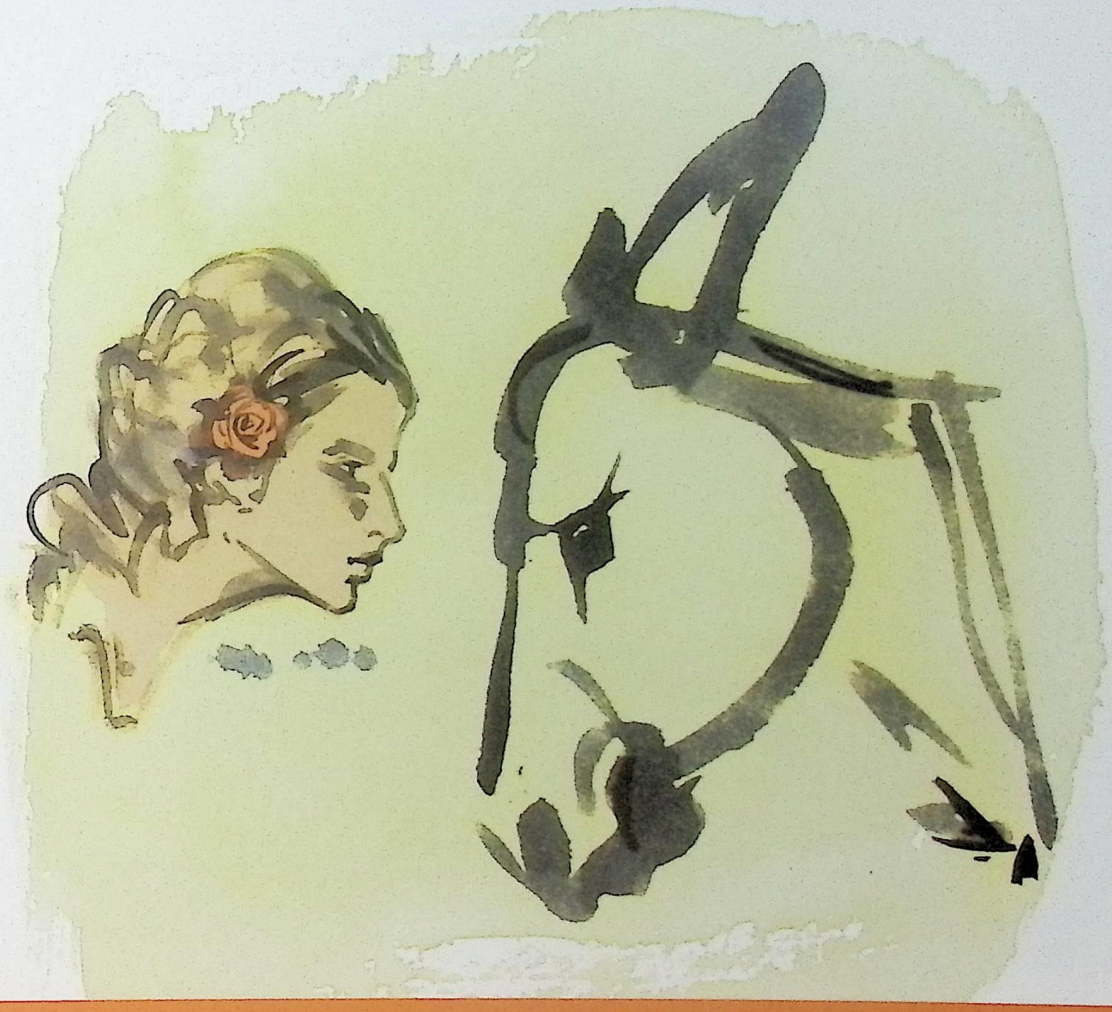

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Introduction

About the Play

A civilised society

The play begins and ends in Athens. Here is Duke Theseus's palace, and the home of Peter Quince the joiner. It is a civilized society in which every man knows his place, from the Duke (whose function it is to administer law and justice) to the humblest workman (who must take care not to offend the ladies). This is where we first meet the human characters: Theseus and Hippolyta are eagerly awaiting their wedding-day; the four young lovers have already got their relationships in a tangle; and the workmen have begun to plan a project far more adventurous than anything they have undertaken before.

Into the forest

Theseus and Hippolyta remain in Athens whilst we (as audience or readers) accompany the lovers and the workmen on their separate expeditions outside the city walls and into the forest that surrounds Athens. The forest belongs to the fairies, and Athenian law does not operate here: Oberon, the fairy king, tries to impose some kind of rule, but he is not a god and he makes mistakes. The first scene in the forest shows us the fairies at their best and at their worst. At their best they are caring for the wild flowers: at their worst they are quarrelling furiously, and their quarrels have serious repercussions in the lives of human beings.

Midsummer madness

The lovers and the workmen enter the fairy realm and soon become aware of the strangeness of their surroundings. It is a strangeness that grows more frightening as night approaches, and although most of the workmen manage to escape (with some damage to their clothing), the lovers become more deeply embroiled in their own problems until, quite exhausted, they lie down to sleep, feeling alone and afraid.

The time spent in the forest is the period immediately before Theseus's wedding, which has been arranged so that

> the moon, like to a silver bow
> New bent in heaven, shall behold the night

Of our solemnities. (*1*, 1, 9–11)

Before a new moon is seen, the only night light comes from the stars—and even these are 'overcast' when Oberon orders Puck to mislead the quarrelling lovers (*Act 3*, Scene 2).

But although the night is dark, it is very short—the shortest night of the year. In England, and in most European countries, the night before midsummer day has always been associated with magic, fairies, and lovers. It is also a time for madness, and the phrase 'midsummer madness' is still used to describe a state of mind which is abnormal (perhaps affected by the heat of the sun—or by fairy power) but which does not last long.

A return to order

Light dawns when Theseus and Hippolyta come out of the city in order to pay some kind of homage to the midsummer season. Slowly the lovers recover from their temporary 'madness'—and we all return to Athens and civilization, where the play ends with three weddings—a triple celebration of this civilization. Without an ordered society, marriage is impossible; and every wedding—every permanent bond between two people—strengthens the society in which it occurs.

Finally it is the turn of the fairies to enter 'foreign' territory: they come from the wood to the palace in order to bless the three marriages within the play—and perhaps another marriage, which Queen Elizabeth herself attended and which may well have been celebrated by a performance of Shakespeare's play. The bride, Elizabeth Carey, was the Queen's god-daughter, and both her father and her grandfather (Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain) were patrons of the company of actors to which Shakespeare belonged, and for which he wrote his plays.

A popular favourite

The play has always been popular with audiences. It was a favourite in the nineteenth century, when it was performed in London with real rabbits, and there have been many open-air productions in the twentieth century, as well as a very imaginative American film; parts of the plot have been used for ballet and opera, and it has inspired painters and musicians. Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March', first written in the early nineteenth century to introduce Act 5, is still the most popular music played at English weddings when the newly-married couple walk out of the church together.

Leading Characters in the Play

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are four story-lines, and four sets of characters:

1 The Royals:
Theseus
Hippolyta

These two are originally figures from Greek mythology. There are many narratives which tell how Theseus, a legendary ruler of Athens, fought with various monsters and killed the Minotaur that threatened to destroy the island of Crete; how princesses fell in love with him; and how he defeated an invasion of Amazons, and married their Queen, Hippolyta.

The Amazons were a nation of women-warriors, who despised men and refused to marry them. It was thought that they came originally from Africa, and that they conquered almost the whole of Asia before they were defeated by Theseus. Theseus and Hippolyta take little part in the action of the play, but their marriage provides a framework and an occasion for the stories of the other characters.

2 The Lovers:
Hermia and Lysander
Helena and Demetrius

These are creatures of Shakespeare's imagination, although he took their names from the classical traditions that gave him the persons of Theseus and Hippolyta, and an idea for their story from one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* Because the lovers are Athenians from ancient Greece, they worship the gods of Greek mythology: Hermia is prepared to become a nun in the service of Diana, goddess of chastity, and Helena blames Cupid, the mischievous god of love, for all her misfortunes.

But these lovers are not figures from the dim and distant past. Hermia is a hot-tempered young woman who is very conscious of the fact that she is smaller than Helena, and rather jealous of her friend's fair-haired beauty—whilst the tall, blonde Helena suffers agonies of unrequited love for the man (Demetrius) who once promised to marry her and who has now fallen in love with Hermia.

3 The Workmen:

Often, when these comedy characters are mentioned in the play, the audience is reminded that they too are Greek—'Hard-handed men that work in Athens here' (5, 1, 72). But we ignore the reminder. The amateur actors behave like sixteenth-century Englishmen. When these characters wish to express themselves emphatically, or to utter a mild

oath, they do not call upon the classical gods. Instead they swear 'By'r lakin' or 'Marry'—invoking the Christian Virgin Mary.

Their names declare their occupations.

Quince the carpenter; his name is taken from the 'quoins'—wedge-shaped pieces of wood used in building.

Bottom the weaver, so called because in weaving the thread is wound on a reel or 'bottom'.

Flute the bellows-mender; a whistling sound is produced when bellows are squeezed to blow air either on to coals (to make the fire burn) or into church organ-pipes.

Snout the tinker, who repaired the 'snouts'—spouts—of kettles.

Starveling the tailor, who owes his name to the popular belief that tailors were always very thin.

Snug the joiner, who must make the pieces of wood fit snugly together.

Although they are called 'rude mechanicals' (*3*, 2, 9), it must not be assumed that these workmen have had no education. Snug, obviously, was not very bright at his lessons, and he confesses that he is 'slow of study' (*1*, 2, 59). But Elizabethan tradesmen certainly sent their sons to school, and this is perhaps where Bottom learned the long words that he is so proud to use (although he is not very sure of their meanings). Peter Quince is the most intelligent of the workmen: he can correct mispronunciations and misunderstandings, and he knows about the fables of classical mythology—part of the national curriculum of the grammar school.

4 The Fairies: Every community has its own superstitions concerning beings that are neither human (although they may appear in human form) nor divine. These are immortal, and usually ageless. They possess some magical powers, and they can use these either to assist mortals or to annoy them. The beliefs vary from one nation to another, from one county to another—and sometimes one small village cannot agree with its nearest neighbour about the invisible creatures that live in the nearby woods, or underneath the hill, or at the bottom of the garden. Modern technology has made the whole world one 'global village'—and just what creatures inhabit cyberspace?

Titania is the fairy with the longest history. The Roman poet Ovid gives this name to Diana, goddess of chastity, and although Shakespeare's fairy queen is certainly not a goddess, there are some similarities between Titania and the pagan deities. Early in the play Titania speaks (*2*, 1, 123–37) of having women followers (like an order of nuns) who devote themselves to her service. Most importantly, she is convinced that her quarrels with Oberon have caused havoc in the lives of the 'human mortals': the fairies have neglected the proper ceremonials, and as a result the elements—wind, rain, and sun—have been disturbed (*2*, 1, 81–117). Titania is, however, quite unlike the classical goddess of chastity, because she is married to Oberon.

Oberon Titania's husband first appears as king of the fairies in a French romance written in the fifteenth century and translated into English shortly before Shakespeare wrote his play.

Shakespeare gives Oberon a wife, and he also suggests that, like Titania, Oberon belongs to the period of classical myth. Titania accuses Oberon of being in love with Hippolyta; and Oberon in turn accuses his wife of giving too much assistance to Theseus (*2*, 1, 76–80). There is no 'truth' in these mutual accusations, of course; as Titania says, they are 'the forgeries of jealousy' (*2*, 1, 81).

In the play, however, these 'forgeries' serve two useful purposes. It is common for husbands and wives to taunt each other about past love affairs, and this quarrel makes Oberon and Titania seem much more real. Also, because we recognize Hippolyta and Theseus as full-sized human beings, we are encouraged to think of the fairy king and queen in the same dimensions. Shakespeare does *not* want us to do this with the other fairies who are their attendants and courtiers.

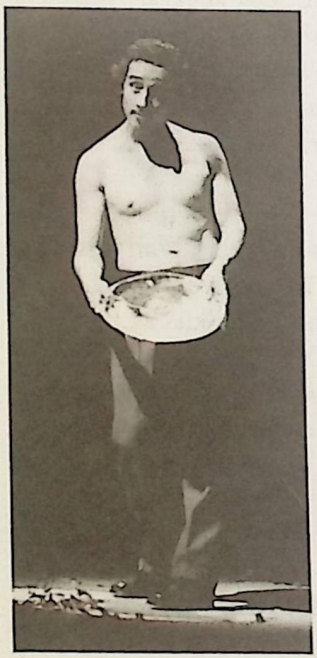
Peaseblossom
Cobweb
Moth
Mustardseed Only four of the fairy attendants have names, but as we read we imagine that there are many more than four of these tiny creatures. Certainly one nameless fairy has a 'speaking part', and it is he (or perhaps she) who first describes fairy forms and activities. We are told (in *Act 2*, Scene 1) that the fairies are very small: compared to them cowslips are 'tall', and acorn-cups make safe hiding-places. The four names suggest that their owners are not only tiny but also very fragile: a cobweb is easily brushed aside, and moths must be handled very delicately.

Shakespeare had no source for these fairies except his own invention. English children today recognize them easily, but they were quite unknown before *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. When narratives composed earlier than this play tell of 'fairies' they refer to

quite different creatures who are the size of human beings and usually hostile to mortals. A particularly unpleasant trait of these 'old style' fairies was their habit of stealing beautiful human children from their cradles, and substituting weak or ugly fairy children—'changelings'.

Shakespeare's fairies, however, care about human beings. They also (we are told) look after the wild flowers in the woods. But their chief occupation is dancing, usually in a formal circle, and it seems as though this activity casts some kind of spell, making the place safe and even holy. Oberon explains carefully that he and the fairies of his court are not evil spirits, like the ghosts of damned souls who can only appear during the hours of darkness (3, 2, 388–93). Yet the fairies are particularly associated with night, and they are most awake when mortals are asleep.

Puck



Probably the most famous of all Shakespeare's fairy characters is Puck—but Puck is not the product of the dramatist's own imagination. Until Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it was possible to speak of *a* puck, or *the* puck. A puck was simply a *kind* of fairy, and stories about pucks are common throughout the British Isles. They were mischievous beings, able to change their shapes into human or animal forms, and especially likely to appear as flickering lights to mislead travellers in the night. At heart, however, the puck was a friendly spirit—and sometimes called 'Robin Goodfellow': he was sympathetic to the mortals who spoke politely to him; kind to lovers; and always ready to help the housewife who tried to keep her home clean and tidy. Shakespeare refers to many of the qualities that tradition attributes to the puck, and he places this fairy at the centre of his play. Puck is given an official position in the fairy court, where his job is to 'jest to Oberon, and make him smile' (2, 1, 44). He is Oberon's agent when the king of the fairies tries to help the human lovers; and it is he who is responsible for all the complications that arise in the play.

Perhaps it is also Puck who expresses the feelings of the audience when he contemplates the situation and remarks, with gentle amusement, 'Lord what fools these mortals be' (3, 2, 115).

Synopsis

Act 1

Scene 1 Theseus passes judgement on Hermia, who refuses to marry Demetrius and agrees to run away with Lysander. They confide in Helena, who is already in love with Demetrius.

Scene 2 Some Athenian workmen plan to produce a play for the wedding-day of Duke Theseus.

Act 2

Scene 1 Oberon and Titania are quarrelling, but the fairy king sends Puck to fetch a magic flower—which will also help Helena to secure the love of Demetrius.

Scene 2 Oberon sprinkles magic juice on Titania's eyes; Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, and anoints his eyes so that he falls in love with Helena. Hermia is left alone in the forest.

Act 3

Scene 1 The workmen meet in the forest but Puck interrupts their rehearsal, puts a false head on Bottom, and leads him to Titania—who falls in love with him.

Scene 2 Oberon discovers Puck's mistake and tries to correct it by sprinkling the juice on Demetrius's eyes. Now Helena thinks she is being mocked by Hermia and the two men. Oberon orders Puck to keep the rivals apart until the situation can be remedied.

Act 4

Scene 1 Bottom teases the fairies until he falls asleep. Oberon takes the spell off Titania's eyes, and all the fairies depart, leaving the lovers to be woken up by Theseus. Finally Bottom wakes up.

Scene 2 Bottom returns to Athens, and the workmen prepare to go to the palace.

Act 5

Scene 1 After their wedding Theseus and Hippolyta, with the other four lovers, watch the performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' before going to bed. When the mortals have retired, the fairies return to bless the marriages.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Commentary

Act 1

Scene 1

Only four days now . . . Theseus can't wait for his wedding-day, but his intended bride Hippolyta tries to soothe his impatience (which she appears not to share) with the promise that everything will happen in due course. And there will be all the proper pomp and ceremony for this great occasion in the civilized and law-abiding Athenian court.

But suddenly the gracious calm is broken by an angry father. Egeus drags his rebellious daughter Hermia before the highest authority in the land in a desperate attempt to force her to marry Demetrius, the man of *his* choice. The rhythms of the verse alter, allowing Egeus to splutter out his indignation whilst Theseus attempts to talk sense to a sullen and resolute Hermia. She must choose between Demetrius and death, and not even Theseus can deny the 'ancient privilege of Athens' that allows Egeus to make such demands on his child. But he is able to offer another option: Hermia could become a nun!

Undaunted, Hermia persists in her loyalty to Lysander the man she really loves. Theseus—perhaps playing for time—gives her four days to change her mind. Her decision must be made on his wedding-day.

Theseus, clearly, is sympathetic to Hermia's cause—and his sympathy influences the feelings of the audience. With great tact he draws Egeus and Demetrius away with him, leaving the two lovers alone on stage. They lament their woes in verse that draws attention to itself *as* verse—poetic and unrealistic:

> **Lysander**
> The course of true love never did run smooth;
> But either it was different in blood—
> **Hermia**
> O cross! too high to be enthrall'd to low.
> **Lysander**
> Or else misgraffed in respect of years—
> **Hermia**
> O spite! too old to be engag'd to young.

It is a skilful technique. Hermia's situation could be very serious—a matter of life or death—and Shakespeare wants the audience to

sympathize with the dilemma. But he does not want to make them over-anxious and this artificial, 'patterned' verse serves to remind us that this is a play—a comedy—and no one is seriously in danger. We can wonder how things will work out; but we can be sure that the ending will be a happy one.

After we have heard Lysander's plot to escape from Athens, we meet the last member of the set of lovers. We already know that Helena is desperately in love with Demetrius, and an audience should be able to see that in every way, Helena is the opposite of Hermia: she is tall and fair where Hermia is small and dark, and whilst Hermia is quick, hot-tempered, and energetic, Helena is slow to anger and languid. Now she seems almost to be *enjoying* her misery in her lyrical rhyming verse, and she has no hesitation in betraying Hermia's confidence: she will tell Demetrius of the lovers' flight into the forest, Demetrius will be sure to follow Hermia, and then Helena (expecting more humiliation from the man she loves) will chase after Demetrius.

SCENE 2 The next scene is in complete contrast: passionate emotions and artificial, patterned verse give place to everyday concerns and easy, colloquial prose—although there is conflict here too, in the power struggle between Peter Quince and Nick Bottom.

A group of workmen are intending to put on a play to celebrate the Duke's wedding. As Quince introduces his actors, calling them 'man by man, according to the scrip' and naming their occupations, it is clear that these are *English* workmen, from Shakespeare's own Elizabethan period. The play they have chosen to perform is based on a sophisticated story from Greek mythology—and it is hopelessly unsuited to their talents and understanding.

Although some of the company are hesitant, Bottom the weaver is confident that he could play every single part himself. Quince needs all his tact and diplomacy to persuade him that he can play no part but Pyramus ('a most lovely, gentlemanlike man'). Once this is settled it only remains to fix the time and place for the first rehearsal: 'tomorrow night . . . in the palace wood . . . by moonlight'.

ACT 2

SCENE 1 In another complete change of mood and scene, the audience arrives in the forest before the lovers and the amateur actors have time to escape from Athens. Here all is fairyland and prettiness—at least to begin with, as Puck and the anonymous Fairy establish the scale of things by describing their activities. But soon we hear of yet another conflict.

There is a child at the centre of this quarrel. Titania and Oberon, being spirits, can have no children. Titania has adopted a little orphan boy—but Oberon wants the child to become one of *his* followers. The fairy king and queen have been quarrelling for a long time over this very human business, and the quarrels of supernatural beings bring supernatural disasters. The seasons of the year have got mixed up: harvests are ruined by tempests, and roses are blooming in winter; the climate is wet and cold, and 'rheumatic diseases do abound'. The human beings are suffering, but although Titania is sorry for them, neither she nor Oberon will relent.

Oberon, however, has a scheme for getting his own way. In one of the play's most beautiful passages he describes the magical powers of a certain herb, 'love-in-idleness', which had once been hit by one of Cupid's arrows and consequently acquired that arrow's potency. Oberon plans to use this charm to distract Titania and aquire the boy—but the flower's uses do not stop there.

Drawing a black cloak around him ('I am invisible'), Oberon listens to the arguments as Demetrius tries to shake off the adoring Helena, who has followed him to the woods as he pursues the runaway lovers. She is undeterred by his threats of violence and the danger of the solitary wilderness—and invites him to do his worst:

> I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
> The more you beat me I will fawn on you.
> Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me . . .

The unseen Oberon decides to protect Helena and change Demetrius' mind—but when he gives instructions to Puck ('Thou shalt know the man By the Athenian garments he hath on'), the audience can guess what will happen next.

SCENE 2 Titania dismisses her attendants, and sleeps. For 'the third part of a minute' she is at Oberon's mercy. Quickly he sprinkles the flower-juice on her eyelids, with a magic spell. Titania sleeps on, invisible to other characters now appearing on the stage.

Lysander and Hermia are tired and lost—but in complete harmony with each other, speaking in easy rhyming couplets and taking delight in the innocent double meanings that their loving language produces. Soon they too are asleep, keeping the modest distance which Hermia thinks suitable for 'a virtuous bachelor and a maid'. But that space between them is enough to convince Puck that he has found the 'lack-love' described by Oberon. Again the magic juice is sprinkled—and now Demetrius and Helena run across the stage . . .

Helena is exhausted, but still has breath to lament her situation—and increase the delightful suspense of the audience—before she notices the sleeping Lysander:

> But who is here?—Lysander, on the ground?
> Dead, or asleep? I see no blood, no wound.
> Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake!

Lysander's reaction is instantaneous—

> And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake!

His exaggerated declarations of love seem like cruel mockery to Helena. She runs away from him, leaving Lysander to turn on the sleeping Hermia with a violent hatred that must somehow be reflected in her dreams. When she wakes, she finds herself quite alone, abandoned in a dreadful wood.

ACT 3

SCENE 1 As Hermia wanders away into the forest, the workmen assemble for their first rehearsal. Staging the play in the great hall of the palace will present some practical problems—but Bottom is endlessly resourceful: moonshine can come through the chamber window, 'Lion' can show his face through his mask, and 'Wall' can make himself known by 'some