

"Parted Eyes" in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Summary. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects the complex, even contrary perspectives on dreams prevailing during the Early Modern period. Characters from different worlds—fairies, royalty, and workmen—all discourse on the nature of dreams, and the hilarity of the play is the way these characters and their views collide. But comedy can also put provocative questions to the audience. From one perspective, dreams have an independent, supernatural reality, and from another, they are "vain fantasy." Likewise, at one moment the audience is caught up in illusion, and at the next, the audience reflects, judges, laughs and applauds from a distance. At the end of the play, after all the conflicts are resolved, the mortal characters leave the stage and the fairies appear and celebrate with music and dance. Then, when they leave, the actor who has played Puck steps out of his role and speaks directly to the audience, breaking the spell of drama to conclude the play. Not only in the epilogue but throughout, the audience has been caught up in illusion and also detached, conscious that the play is a play. Questions about the phenomenon of "lucid dreams" are part of the comedy of this play and remain unanswered.

Keywords: Theater, illusion, audience, lucid dreams

When Bottom wakes from his midsummer night's dream, he tries and fails to describe what he saw in the enchanted woods:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was . . . (4.1)

Bottom's dream was so wonderful to him that he garbles a passage from *1. Corinthians*--"the eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen"--and then decides that only a fantastic ballad can capture his experience in words. There is good comedy in Bottom's inability to comprehend his situation or articulate his feelings. His transformation with the head of an ass into the consort of the Queen of the Fairies, and back again, is hilarious in any production of the play. We laugh at Bottom's dream because it is only a dream, as the play is only a play. After all, how seriously should we take fantasy on a midsummer night?

But Shakespeare's genius is to surprise us with our own responses over the course of a play, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lays out serious issues for the audience without breaking the spell of the theater or spoiling the enjoyment. We ask questions that rise out of the characters and the story, and those questions compound. We wonder with Bottom how he was transformed. What are Theseus and Hippolyta—characters who belong to the classics—doing in the same play with Bottom and his crew? What brings fairies to the wedding of mortals? What about the lovers' dream? Hippolyta wonders how they could have shared it.

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Submitted for publication: January 2013

Accepted for publication: October 2013

Duke Theseus, after he has heard the lovers' story, mocks any of us who credit the reality of dreams, with his famous monologue about lunatics, lovers and poets. But we were there, in the theater and in the dream, so Theseus must be wrong, at least within the world of this play.

We follow the lovers' dream at night through the enchanted woods with King Oberon's henchman, Puck, who makes the plot of the play a confusion, while commenting to the audience about the folly of mortals. When the play is done, the actor who has played Puck steps out of his character to deliver the epilogue, and he thanks the audience on behalf of the company for indulging such fantasy. It was just a play. But he validates it as our dream: "you have but slumbered here,/ While these shadows did appear" (3-4). If the production captivated us, we might come back for another show, to be transported again. But the role of the audience was not a passive one. As we were taken in by the illusion of drama, we also recognized that the play was a play, and we responded consciously with laughter, applause, nudges, whispers. What is true of all plays is especially significant in this one: we watch, even as we are engaged. Like Puck, we are in the story and also out of it. Our eyes are "parted," as Hermia says about the experience of the midsummer night's dream after the lovers are awake:

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monologue about lunatics, lovers and poets. But we were there, in the theater and in the dream, so Theseus must be wrong, at least within the world of this play.

*Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When every thing seems double. (3.2)*

This subject can be understood according to theories of dreams current when the play was first performed: as this play shows, dreams can be projected by the dreamer, but they can also have an independent reality, in which the dreamer participates. Questions about the reality and the supernatural dimensions of dreams were prominent in print and popular lore in the Elizabethan period. London was a small metropolis surrounded by deep darkness at night (the forests around small towns were even deeper and darker), and children were made afraid of dreams of darkness. The subject of dreams is important in objective, scientific discourse today, but for almost all of Shakespeare's original audience, dreams had a reality external to the dreamer. They carried curses and blessings; they could tell the future with no reference to the past. In this play, characters are challenged by contrary realities, and likewise, the audience cannot resolve contrary points of view. In this way, when this play succeeds, the subject of dreams is articulated in the experience of the theater audience itself.

The title subject of this play is dreams, and the groups of characters in the play, the fairies, the royalty, and the mechanicals, all discourse on the nature of dreams and of plays. Their different views reflect the complexities of this subject when the play was written and to this day.

When a theater audience gets caught up in the illusion of a scene on stage, it "suspends" its "disbelief." Coleridge used these words to explain and justify not the drama but his own fantastic poetry: as readers, we "transfer from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for . . . shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge ch. 14). This term, "suspension of disbelief," has been appropriated to describe the responses of theater audiences, in particular. When the curtain is up and the lights are down, we forget who and where we are, and virtually, we live the lives of characters on stage. Coleridge's "poetic faith" is, he says, "for the moment," specifically in a poem. But in any play, "suspension of disbelief" is one element in a continuous dynamic. At one moment the audience is caught up in the illusion on stage, and at the next, the audience recognizes that the play is a play being performed; at one moment, the audience is altogether engaged in the illusion of speech and action, and at the next, the audience is made to respond at a distance, laughing at what it sees and hears.

Sometimes, at critical, memorable moments in Shakespeare's plays, the audience is driven both ways. Characters express thoughts and emotions compellingly but with theater metaphors, as if to remind us of where we are and what we see:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. (As You Like It, 2.7)*

*If this were played upon a stage now
Should condemn it as an improbable fiction.
(Twelfth Night, 4.2)*

*How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er
In states unborn and accents yet unknown.
(Julius Caesar, 3.1)*

*When we are born we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (King Lear, 4.6)*

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. (Macbeth, 5.5)*

The illusion is not broken, but even as we are caught up in the moment, we are made to recognize that life is like drama and the play is a play.

Maynard Mack describes the drama in performance as a continuous process of "engagement" and "detachment" by the audience: we identify with the characters and their speech and action, and also, we reflect from a distance. In the theater, the eyes and ears of the audience are always "parted," engaged in the illusion and also detached--seeing and , hearing and listening. We identify with characters that we also observe. Virtually, we enact the stories as we attend to them. We are transported and self-conscious both. (see Mack 275).

The experience of dreams has often been described in analogous and sometimes identical terms: the dreamer is split, as an actor and a spectator, in the drama of the dream. In *Religio Medici* (1643), Thomas Browne describes dreams as "mock-shows" and stage comedies, which we observe as we enact them:

*. . . the world to me is but a dream or mock-show, and
we all therein but pantaloons and anticks, to my severer
contemplations. (Browne Part 1, section 41)*

Dreams give us life in a theater where we are both actors and audiences.

*. . . in one dream I can compose a whole comedy, behold
the action, apprehend the jests, and laugh myself awake
at the conceits thereof. (Part 2, section 11)*

Turning this around, theater gives us dreams which are more and less engaging. We identify with characters and situations, even as we watch them. In Mack's terms, we are engaged and detached from illusion as we are directed by the text and the production.

The issue of the power and the duplicity of illusions in the theater relates to the controversy over the reality of dreams at Shakespeare's time. The traditional, popular view credited some dreams originating independently of the dreamer and revealing the future. Thomas Hill's *The moste pleasaunte Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreames* was published in 1576 and reprinted several times over thirty years at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Hill's book is incomplete, and his descriptions are inconsistent, but he represents the conception of dreams that prevailed:

*. . . dreames seene by grave and sober persons, so signi-
fie matters to come, and a spirit undoubtedlie shewing
to them, whiche by her nature is a Prophetesse, that sen-
deth forth such a motion and workemanshippe, throughe*

whiche the bodye as in her proper dwellyng, may either be defended from the instant evils and perils, or moved to the attayninge of good things to come and that with diligence workinge the same, that as it were into loking Glasses of the body placed, it might so beholde and fore-shewe al matters imminent. (from the "Epistle Dedicatory")

Hill argues on the grounds of his own experience--but also of sources that he identifies--that dreams can have an independent reality. He recognizes that daydreams and night-dreams can be projected from within by dreamers' imaginations, but he also describes dreams that reveal objective truths external to dreamers. dreams that promise and portend.

The best evidence of Hill's authority on this subject is strong attacks against the later editions of his book (Johnson 329-51). The idea that dreams could have independent reality provoked sarcasm in Reginald Scot and Thomas Nashe, in particular, who jeered at Hill and his view by name, decades after his book first appeared.

Certeinlie men never faile to dreame by night, of that which they meditate by daie: and by daie they see diuers and sundrie things, and conceive them in their minds. Then those mixed conceits being laid up in the closset of the memorie, strive together; which, bicause the phantasie cannot discerne nor discusse, some certeine thing gathered of manie conceits is bred and contrived in one together. And therefore in mine opinion, it is time vanelie employed, to studie about the interpretation of dreames. He that list to see the follie and vanitie thereof, maie read a vaine treatise, set out by Thomas Hill Londoner, 1568. (Hill 9)

This conflict is personal, not abstract and theoretical. In Shakespeare's age, and in our own, such contrary points of view do not exclude each other—certainly not in the theater. On one hand, dreams are "the children of an idle brain," and on the other, they are substantial and portentous: "dreamers dream things true" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.53, 98).

"I have had a most rare vision." Now that the night is over, Bottom wonders whether he was dreaming, and he feels for his long ass's ears which have now disappeared. He enjoyed his dream, literally more than he can say, and he knows he will not be able to describe it without help. He will turn to Peter Quince, because it takes a ballad-maker to express the impossible. We laugh at Bottom's puzzlement, but on reflection, we see that the broad questions for Bottom and for the other characters in the play have not been resolved. Where do dreams come from, and what do they signify? He credits his dream as real and substantial, but his monologue is also laughable. We get caught up in Bottom's dream, even as we recognize that it is only the dream of a character in a play.

Imagine Bottom's comical soliloquy as it was delivered in Shakespeare's open-air Globe Theatre--downstage center in bright sunlight, suspended between the "heavens" above the stage and "hell" underneath, surrounded by the audience, the wealthy in seats above and the "groundlings" standing below. There can be no illusion of a scene in the woods performed on an empty stage like this one. The audience knows the actor who plays this role, and throughout the show, the actor has played out from the stage, sometimes teasing the audience, sometimes extemporizing off the script, even when there were other characters on stage.

But this is an important and compelling moment in Shakespeare's theater: Bottom is situated at the very center of "the globe." The audience laughs but is at the same time caught up in the moment, identifying with the character and his speech. Inducing complicated, even contrary perspectives in the audience is a recognizable technique in Shakespeare's plays. By this technique, this play represents the complex realities of dreams.

Just before Bottom's monologue, the pairs of mortal lovers, waking from their dreams, know no better than he does what to make of their experience. Can a dream be shared? Can it have changed them and their affections? Left alone on stage, no more sensible than Bottom, they reflect on the equivocal reality of dreams:

*These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.*

*Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.*

*So methinks;
And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,
Mine own and not mine own.*

*That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. (4.1.186-93)*

(Additional examples include *The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.77-79, *Twelfth Night*, 3.4.120-21, 2. *Henry IV*, 1.1.171-72, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.260-67.) The lovers are confused by what they have been through, and in their confusion they ask a serious question that cannot, logically, be answered: are we now awake? What is a "parted eye" that "sees double"? This is not a comical scene, and it does not advance the story. So we can take this dialogue as a significant point of reflection for the audience. No one can stand outside experience and judge its reality. But just as the lovers, we are intrigued, as the dream they shared seems to have extended to the lovers' waking world and changed it.

The puzzlement of the lovers is like Bottom's, and the "parted eye" is ours as well as theirs. The lovers are themselves an audience, not knowing what to make of this story: they half-remember, and they ask what this midsummer night's dream means. Like the theater audience, they have been caught up in a dream; now that they are awake, they are detached from the illusion and will become an audience themselves to the play put up by Bottom and his crew.

Back at the castle to celebrate the multiple weddings, Duke Theseus, who is responsible for civility and good sense in Athens, calls the lovers lunatics (like poets). But Hippolyta responds that even she has to wonder about a dream that is shared:

*But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-27)*

She says that the story the lovers have told gains its credibility by its "constancy"--its consistency and its completeness—as that is how we judge reality. Theseus dismisses this claim as "imagination," and he indicts "poets," in particular, who believe they can achieve "constancy" even out of some arbitrary place and name. He invites the mechani-

cals to put on their play to celebrate the marriages of all the couples, and he is generous in rewarding them for their effort. But by then, all the audience on stage, including the pairs of lovers, laugh at the mechanicals' incapacity to create a dramatic illusion that transports them.

The mechanicals' play is captivating to the stage audience and to the theater audience, but only as popular festivity can be. The mechanicals fear that their play will be frightening, and so they feel the need to explain to their audience the difference between illusion and reality:

BOTTOM: Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say, we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (3.3.16-20)

No one at court is deceived by illusion as this play is performed. When it is over, everyone allows that the play was a play and should quickly come to an end --"no epilogue, I pray you." The best the mechanicals could do was a simple and silly, incapable illusion. The audience on stage laughs at this buffoonery, but what follows transports the theater audience again.

The wedding party and the mechanicals leave, and suddenly the fairies emerge, dancing and singing, claiming the domain of the court and the theater for only themselves and their magic. We thought we left them behind in the woods, but they fill the stage again, to celebrate the weddings. There is no more drama but only the magic of song and dance. Kathryn Lynch calls the fifth act return of the fairies "a failure to sustain the ambiguity" of dreams: "although [the fifth act] seems to celebrate visionary possibilities, [it] relapses into complacency and underscores the problems of accommodating genuinely transformative experience to reductive categories" (Lynch 100.) Lynch is right, that the ending of the play is written as pure celebration. But whether it succeeds in transforming the theater audience is a challenge not to the text but to the production.

When Puck delivers his epilogue to the audience on behalf of the whole troupe of players, he confirms the effectiveness of the fairies' magic and of the magic of the theater. On one hand, the epilogue takes Theseus' skeptical view, as the actor who plays Puck apologizes to the audience for putting on a silly show. But the epilogue is also a celebration of the dream.. Now that the wedded lovers have proceeded to their nuptial beds, the fairies have taken over the theater and Puck credits the audience's "visions" that were the play:

*If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.*

Puck calls the lesson of the play a "weak and idle theme" and asks the audience for forgiveness on behalf of the company for putting them to sleep. This completes the comedy, rounding off the play with a joke, but it also involves the audience a final time in the title subject of the play. Dreams are mysteries that we can enjoy in the theater and also credit and value.

The experience of the audience can be compared to a "lucid dream," to borrow a concept from science and lore. The lucid dreamer is conscious of dreaming, while watch-

ing and sometimes even participating as a character in the dream. If a play in performance is like a dream, the audience responds in two modes of consciousness, caught up in illusion and also viewing and reflecting from a distance. Aristotle describes the phenomenon of lucid dreaming as imagining a dream within a dream: "often, when one is asleep, there is something in consciousness which declares that what then presents itself is but a dream." Jackson Cope (see above) cites Ortega y Gasset on the "shivering recognition" that the theater is "consciously aware of its own theatricality, and engulfing the spectator until he is aware that he stands both before and behind the mirror which the theater holds up to the theatrum mundi" (p. 7). From this standpoint, waking and dreaming are not contrary but related and dynamic. Allan Hobson describes lucid dreaming as real, if paradoxical:

"Lucid dreaming is the rare but robust awareness that we are dreaming and that we are not really awake. . . . Lucid dreaming is thus paradoxical, even at a subjective level, in containing elements of both waking and dreaming consciousness (Hobson 41)."

Throughout this play, the relationship between the characters and the audience changes continuously. The one-penny "groundlings" misbehave on cue, distancing all the audience from the stage and the illusion of drama. But there are moments when Shakespeare's audience (not only the groundlings but those in the balconies) for special dialogue and soliloquies (like Bottom's). The process of engagement and detachment in drama, described above, can be taken as a version of lucid dreaming, as the audience reflects and is aware that the play is a dream, not only by name.

Hermia's "parted eyes," when she wakes from the woods, can be diagnosed as like Puck's and like the audience's when the play is over. All of the lovers are confused and doubtful about what they have experienced and whether the night's dream is over:

*Are you sure
That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. (Demetrius, 3.2)*

The dream has had unaccountable effects. It was shared, predicted the future, and restored the pairs of lovers, two by two. Can such a happy ending be grounded in reality?

The abstract subject of lucid dreams has attention now as never before by theorists and historians, and certain questions about this subject can be found in this play. The reality of lucid dreams is unchallenged. But are they certain? Are they independent? Can they be shared? Can they foretell? Helena responds in the only way she can: "I understand not what you mean by this."

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