

Original Paper

The Significance of Bottom in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

The importance of the character Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be discussed. He is the only character able to converse with both the natural and fairy worlds in the play. This makes his character special. This article will attempt to analyze why this is so.

Introduction

Harold Bloom calls William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "his first undoubted masterpiece, without flaw." (148) And no doubt, the most intriguing character in the play is Nick Bottom, weaver. Bloom says he is, "Shakespeare's most engaging character before Falstaff." (148) That is great praise, both for the play and Bottom, coming as it does from America's foremost Shakespearian scholar. So why is Bottom so unforgettable? His part in the play does not dominate the action like a Hamlet or even an Iago. Bottom is only the main character of one of four groups that intertwine to tell the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His importance, however, does not come from the number of lines or scenes he appears in. Bottom is the only human character able to converse with the fairy world in the play. Bottom is both natural and transcendental. He is as happy among elves as he is with his group, the mechanicals. For Bottom, and this is his significance, there is no discord, no confusion in the overlapping realms of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

An Explanation of the Play

As stated above, the *Dream* is the story of four interconnected worlds each with its own character. They need to be briefly explained in order to get a sense of Bottom's role in the play. Theseus and Hippolyta come from ancient myth and legend. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, has conquered the Amazons and will marry their Queen, Hippolyta. The lovers—Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius—come from no definite time or place. Hermia is in love with Lysander but Hermia's father Egeus is against the marriage. He wants Hermia to marry Demetrius and the Duke supports him. Helena is in love with Demetrius but he can only think of his marriage to Hermia. The Fairies and Elves—Titania, Oberon, Puck, Peaseblossom, Moth, Cobweb and Mustardseed—are from literary folklore and its magic. Oberon especially, through his agent Puck, wields great power over both the human and fairy worlds. And the Mechanicals—Bottom,

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Peter Quince, Flute, Snout, Snug and Starveling—come out of Shakespeare’s own countryside. They gather to perform a play (or interlude) at the wedding ceremony of Theseus and Hippolyta.

A *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is able to describe this overlapping complex world of relationships itself. A conversation Theseus and Hippolyta have in Act IV about the music of the Spartan hounds serves to illustrate the theme of the play: “So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.” (IV, i, 117) Amongst all the human characters mentioned above, however, Bottom alone experiences firsthand the discord and thunder the fairies inflict.

In order to get to the fairy world the characters must leave Athens. For example, Hermia and Lysander agree to elope and meet in the “wood” outside the city. Hermia tells Helena of their plans and she Demetrius. All four end up in the “wood”. The “wood” represents movement from town to country, organized society to the freedom of nature. As Stanley Wells says in his “Introduction” to the *Penguin Classics* edition of the play, “the wood is a place of liberation, of reassessment, leading through a stage of disorganization to a finally increased stability.”(222) Bottom’s group, the mechanicals, goes to the wood as well. They agree to meet in the wood to practice and make final preparations for their performance of the interlude *Pyramus and Thisbe* which they’ll give at the wedding celebration. Once in the wood all are affected by the fairies’ machinations. Oberon and Puck control the lovers’ feelings for one another. However, they are ignorant of the cause. The mechanicals, sans Bottom, are equally in the dark. Only Bottom has corporeal contact with this world.

Oberon, King of the Fairies, is upset with his wife, the fairy Queen Titania. She is more concerned with her changeling Indian boy than with the needs of Oberon. To rectify this, Oberon demands the boy but Titania refuses to give him up. At this, Oberon orders Puck to use magic to enable Oberon to get the boy. Puck puts the juice of a flower (a pansy) into Titania’s eyes. This juice acts like a love potion and Titania will fall madly in love with the next living being she sees. While she is pursuing her new love, Oberon will be able to take the boy.

Puck transforms Bottom into an ass and it is this Bottom Titania sees and falls in love with upon waking. In this ridiculous fantasy world Bottom is the one with the clear head. Bottom remains himself. He refuses to panic or be startled by his condition. He is what Bloom calls, “a superb comic,...a very good man, as benign as any in Shakespeare.”(152)

Titania is aroused from her sleep and into love with Bottom first by his voice, his rustic song. His asinine appearance is overlooked in the confusion of the senses that is the climax of this dream sequence. Bottom, however, can see Titania’s love is unreasonable. But he’s not a fool. He goes along. He does not reject it.

Titania believes she can change Bottom’s horrible appearance:

And I will purge thy mortal grossness so,
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.

(III, i, 153-54)

Bottom will gladly go along with that. He’s transfixed by this dream experience. And wherever it takes him he doesn’t really care. Titania makes it sound so good:

...I do love thee: therefore go with me.
I’ll give thee fairies to attend on thee;
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing, while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep:

(III, i, 149-52)

Bottom and Titania fall asleep in each others arms both content for different reasons; she in love, he thoroughly enjoying himself. Oberon, however, now has what he wants—the boy— and so instructs Puck to end the fantasy. Oberon and Titania are then reconciled. Except for Bottom, this reconciliation ends the dream sequences initiated by the fairies and brings us back to the human element in the play.

Analysis and Conclusion

It is up to Bottom, upon wakening into his reality, his human nature, to tell us the meaning of all this fantasy. And it is his explanation of his own reality that makes his character so special and transcendent. He is a mechanic, of the mundane everyday world. His dream has been glorious. He has gone to an ideal world of love and beauty. But Bottom awakes from his dream in a pleasant mood. He is happy to be back. His words give away his special understanding of the illusory world. He alone knows its part in our everyday existence:

eye of a man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen,
man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive,
nor his heart to report what my dream was!

(IV, i, 209-211)

Bottom is bringing what Bloom calls a, “synesthetic unity”(167) to the play. Bottom has made the attempt to piece together the reality behind illusory appearances, to find the, “concord of this discord.” (V,i,60) Bottom's willingness to accept people as they are and his willingness to accept himself as he is resonates and overshadows the other characters' stories in the play.

During *Pyramus and Thisbe* the stage audience and the real audience are asked to join in this illusion too. If we are literal minded we will be unable to cope, our minds closed to the importance of dream. But, if we are like Bottom, we will be able to understand its significance.

As *Pyramus*, Bottom faces the obstinacy of the wall character in the play. The wall is a mechanical, Tom Snout. But for us and the stage audience it must be a real wall acting as a partition blocking us to the open but unknown aspects of our natural transcendent world. In the play the wall will not allow *Pyramus* to meet face to face with his love *Thisbe*. So they arrange to meet at *Ninny's* tomb. But *Thisbe* is attacked by a lion and runs off. *Pyramus* comes to find *Thisbe's* bloody mantle and assumes she has been killed. He then stabs himself. *Thisbe* comes back to find *Pyramus* dead and she too stabs herself. Then, in the stage audience, *Theseus* mentions the characters who remain to bury the dead. *Demetrius* adds the wall but here Bottom breaks through our world once again when he suddenly starts up and speaks as himself, a man who has been to the fairy world and back : “No I assure you, the wall is down that parted their fathers.” (V, i, 342-43)

References

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