

## I. Історико-літературний процес

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УДК: 82'01.111Шек

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2584-9046>

*Langdon John*  
(Petaluma, CA, USA)

### **Midsummer Moon: the moon goddess and the inversion of Ovid's Actaeon myth in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

**Ленгдон Джон. Місяць літньої ночі: богиня місяця й трансформація Овідієвого міфу про Актеона в «Сні літньої ночі» Вільяма Шекспіра.**

*Як і багато інших авторів, Вільям Шекспір неодноразово звертався до міфів та міфологічних образів, щоб донести або підсилити певні смисли й ідеї в епіці або поемі. Як великий експериментатор, він часто змінював структуру оригінального міфологічного сюжету заради потреб власного драматургічного тексту. Такий підхід особливо помітний у комедії «Сон літньої ночі», де сюжетну основу складають мотиви особистого перетворення й фінального возз'єднання, Шекспір переплітає класичну і британську міфологію, трансформуючи при цьому сутність Овідієвого міфу про Актеона, що є центральним у сюжеті цього твору. Драматург не лише змінює елементи міфу (приміром, притаманні персонажам риси), але також трансформує міфологічний пафос: суворе виключення, що передбачає вигнання і смерть, змінюється радісним включенням, що оспіває життя, сексуальний союз та оновлення, яке з нього випливає. У епіці, де замість мисливця фігурує ткач, трагічний німий олень Актеон перетворюється на комічного галасливого віслюка Основу, а вигнання і смерть Актеона обертаються дивним містичним союзом Основи з Титанією, королевою фей. Через поєднання приземленого з божественним Шекспір перетворює міф про покарання на піднесений і водночас трансцендентний досвід, зсуваючи смисловий фокус епіки на примирення, єднання та оновлення.*

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*Ключові слова:* міф, міфологічний сюжет, трансформація, Вільям Шекспір, «Сон літньої ночі», Актеон,

The influence of classical mythology on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes obvious at the beginning of the play with Theseus and Hippolyta's entrance. Yet from Shakespeare's opening in this dramatic experiment in transformation even the myths themselves begin to change, with mythic threads compounding and intertwining until they sometimes reflect very different ideas from those presented in the original myths from which Shakespeare derived his material. By the time Oberon and Titania enter slinging mutual accusations of infidelity, the fairies' dissention not only echoes underlying tensions between Theseus and Hippolyta, but the fairy monarchs themselves have also already become deeply entangled in Theseus and Hippolyta's mythology:

*Tita.* Why art thou here,  
Come from the farthest step of India,  
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,  
Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love,  
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come  
To give their bed joy and prosperity?

*Obe.* How canst thou thus, for shame, Titania,  
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,  
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?  
Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night  
From Perigouna, whom he ravished;  
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,  
With Ariadne and Antiopa?<sup>1</sup>

This promiscuity of English fairy folklore and classical myth marks the way that Shakespeare's play seamlessly weaves numerous traditions together – love and war, love and death, and magic and mortality – with an underlying emphasis on union, regeneration, and transformation, fashions new emphases, new perspectives, and new myths whole cloth out of the old.

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare W. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* / Ed. Peter Holland. Oxford : OUP, 2008, 2.1.68-80. Additional references to this play are parenthetical to this edition.

This mythic transfiguration remains consistent and seemingly deliberate throughout the play. The mechanicals also use myths borrowed from classical sources. Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe episode forms the basis of the play that they perform for Theseus. Bottom launches into an 'Ercules' monologue at a moments notice. Yet while these borrowed myths remain intimately familiar to the mechanicals, their modest comprehension of their own material frequently renders those myths simultaneously cartoonish and wondrous.

The mythic blend in Shakespeare's *Dream* seems to transform the rubric as much as it does the characters within the play, offering a key to understanding ourselves and our mutual human experience. Irish philosopher-poet, John Moriarty asks, "how otherwise than by unwinding an Ariadne's skein of myths, each myth an initiation into who we are, can we come home to the deeper and more difficult reaches of our psyche?"<sup>2</sup> In spite of the great variation in mythical structure and subject, Mary Magoulick noted that "[l]ooked at as whole structures, myths reveal a typical pattern".<sup>3</sup> Levi-Strauss further argued that "mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediation".<sup>4</sup> This structural view of myths in turn supports the more functional view that "[m]yths serve to explain and encourage worldview and good action within society".<sup>5</sup>

Henri Lefebvre observed, "Daily life is filled with myths which are often indistinguishable from the innumerable superstitions we hold".<sup>6</sup> Beyond the level of simple function or definition, myths also serve as a kind of rubric for broader human understanding. Myths change with experience and understanding. Mythic inconstancy remains commensurate with how much the mythic remains part and parcel of the structure of everyday human lives, constantly renegotiated in terms of the fluidity of our understanding. Myths and their component mythemes may be

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<sup>2</sup> Moriarty J. *Nostos: an autobiography*. Dublin : The Lilliput Press, 2001. P. v.

<sup>3</sup> Magoulick M. "What Is Myth?" Georgia College State University, 2004, URL: <https://faculty.gcsu.edu/custom-website/mary-magoulick/defmyth.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Levi-Strauss C. *Structural Anthropology*. New York : Basic Books, 1963. P. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Magoulick M. *Op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre H. *The Myths of Everyday Life. Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*. 1962. XXXIII. P. 67-74.

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continually recast even as human understanding grows and changes. As Roland Barthes observed, “myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this [our human] society”.<sup>7</sup> We alter our myths as we change and as society changes, and our changing myths remain an intimate component of our comprehension and explanation of our world.

We refashion and recreate our myths to suit changing purposes and circumstances, and the results may differ significantly from the purposes and circumstances of those who originally envisioned or created the original stories. Leonard Barkin writes of the “persistence of classical myths into the art and thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”.<sup>8</sup> He says that “the telling of traditional tales is a vital activity in virtually all cultures and that these tales, even when apparently fantastical or frivolous, act as the bearers for highly significant statements whether an individual teller is consciously aware of them or not”, and this certainly seems true of the way Shakespeare used myths as referential rubrics within his works.<sup>9</sup>

When plays incorporate mythic structures or ideas, either directly or obliquely, these referential myths tend to be used in particular ways, most often as a kind of thematic rubric in order to make specific kinds of points. When integrated into dramatic structure, mythic material tends to draw philosophical or narrative parallels, with specific mythic elements tending to highlight essential ideas. The use of mythic elements in drama of the early modern period was frequently especially pointed. Geoffrey Bullough’s *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* is replete with instances where Shakespeare borrowed from mythology, in many cases from tales in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Yet, beyond merely borrowing as illustration or embellishment, Shakespeare remained an experimenter who often altered myths to suit specific purposes, which could be structural as well as narrative.

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes R. *Mythologies*. London : Jonathan Cape, 1972. P. 142.

<sup>8</sup> Barkan L. Diana and Actaeon: The Myth as Synthesis. *English Literary Renaissance* 1980. 10 (3). P. 317–59. URL: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/43446994?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43446994?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents). P. 317.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

In *Titus Andronicus*, for example, there are several comparisons between the character Lavinia and Ovid's Philomel in book 6 of *Metamorphoses*. Aside from the obvious parallel, however, the Philomel reference also serves as a narrative and a structural point of departure. Philomel's brother-in-law, Tereus, cuts out Philomel's tongue after he rapes her, so that she will be unable to identify him. Yet, Philomel eventually identifies her attacker anyway when she stitches his name into a sampler. When Demetrius and Chiron rape Lavinia in *Titus*, they not only cut out her tongue, but they also cut off her hands, so she will be unable to perform needlework similar to Philomel's. Shakespeare raises the stakes established by the underlying Philomel myth by giving Lavinia an additional challenge to overcome to successfully identify her attackers.

Despite the challenges, Lavinia eventually identifies Demetrius and Chiron anyway by indicating pages in Ovid and subsequently writing her attackers' names with a stick held in her mouth. Lavinia's struggle with the additional handicap imposed by those who assaulted her also reflects the play's explicit explorations of language, where Titus and his family tend to use language and linguistic constructs to reflect more solid and literal concepts than the rhetorical structures used by Aaron and his companions, who tend to use language more fluidly, in figurative ways, often with devastating results.

Naturally, specific myths are deliberately selected for individual plays, usually when they fit especially well with plot or character circumstances in particular instances. Shakespeare's manipulation of familiar myth markers renegotiates the literary interface with social understanding in ways that, not surprisingly, prove additionally substantive for a play's central ideas, either supporting or furthering them in some essential way. Part of what sets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* apart from other early modern plays is the various ways in which Shakespeare uses and modifies his mythical material, sometimes recasting or recrafting the mythic rubric to forge an intimate and inclusive mythology which is more central to the play.

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Just as the blend of Ovidian myth with British fairy tradition displays a particular kind of mythic renegotiation, so Shakespeare's inversion of the Actaeon myth retains that myth's structural focus on Diana while inverting the mythic moral, making it inclusive as opposed to the exclusivity which is central to Ovid's original version of the story. When viewed through the lens of Moriarty's 'initiation into who we are' as a kind of mythic human collective, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* arguably offers a vision of a humanity moving towards unity and reconciliation. Through the course of the play, characters move away from individual divisions, between suitors, relatives, and even monarch and subject, mortal and immortal, while moving towards the union—marriage, the reconciliation, and procreative joining.

Shakespeare embellishes this inherently comic theme of unification with a mythic embroidery of transformation. Love itself may be seen as a loss of self. In merging with another and becoming a romantic couple, one's former, single self may be said to have been enlarged but also lost in the process of enlargement. The becoming process of love is transformative.

Hence, in *Dream*, enchanted lovers suddenly see with new and different eyes, a man is transformed into an ass, and the general atmosphere of the play shifts from the threat of execution introduced by old Egeus at the beginning of the play to one of union and the joyous resolution of marriage. The play itself becomes a kind of fugue on human 'becoming', on transformation into a more unified and complete state of being which is ultimately underscored and supported by the inversion of Ovid's Actaeon myth around which Shakespeare constructs so much of the play.

Aside from classical sources like *Metamorphoses* and *Apuleus*, and the inclusion or mention of mythical figures like Theseus and Hippolyta, Cupid, and Diana, *Dream* also incorporates different kinds of fairies from British folklore. Among the fairy servants to Titania and Oberon, is Oberon's hobgoblin jester, Puck, who perceives the world very differently from his master. Although Oberon makes the point that Puck cannot see all that the fairy king can see, there is also a marked difference in the tone of their worldviews. Where Puck sees the

coming dawn in terms of “[d]amnéd spirits” who “[t]roop home to churchyards”, Oberon sees the dawn as a kind of blossoming transformation with “the eastern gate, all fiery red, [o]pening on Neptune with fair blessed beams” (2.1.394 and 403–4). Of these two oppositional perspectives, it is Oberon’s more expansive and transformative view which ultimately triumphs in the play. Theseus’ legal pronouncement that he will “overbear” Egeus’ will in Hermia’s choice of marriage partners also banishes death (4.1.178). Theseus removes the threat of death or isolation which had been hanging over Hermia for choosing to love Lysander, and love and union triumph over “the pale companion” whose ghostly specter had been raised at the beginning of the play (1.1.15).

From the beginning of *Dream*, we find ourselves surrounded by moonlight which seems to stream into the play from all directions. Moonlight bookends the play, being mentioned by both the very first and the very last characters to speak. Theseus’ opening lines throw the moon into immediate focus:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour  
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in  
Another moon: but, O, methinks, how slow  
This old moon wanes! she lingers my desires,  
Like a step-dame or a dowager  
Long withering out a young man’s revenue. (1.1.1–6)

Mentioned 42 times in the text, more than in any other Shakespearean play, moonlight shines in the forest, comes through the casement, and, finally, is even personified, becoming a character in the play within a play – the *mis en abyme* of Pyramus and Thisbe. The central action takes place within the temporal boundaries of a moonlit night, which, in terms of theatrical production, lends *Dream* a distinctly dreamlike quality. It suggests a stage picture with a softer overall tone than a stage washed in the proverbially harsher light of day. In Puck’s closing monologue, the moon is mentioned obliquely once again, as the only potential source of “shadows” at night.

The moon in *Dream* remains consistently mutable, and the fabric of the play also changes the very nature of the moonlight within it. By the play’s end, the “step-dame” or “dowager” has disappeared, to be replaced by a moon that seems in opposition to

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the metaphorical wolf, so much so that the hungry wolf “behows” that moon (5.1.363). Like the appearance of the moon, the transformation of elements within the play, and of the tenor of the play itself, begins immediately, with the opening lines, and works its way through the play. Theseus’ dowager comment is followed by Hippolyta’s moon, which takes a different form in the person of the moon goddess, Diana:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night.  
Four nights will quickly dream away the time.  
And then the moon, like to a silver bow  
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night  
Of our solemnities. (1.1.7–11)

Becoming active and athletic, this bow bending moon marks a distinct contrast to Theseus’ aging moon. No longer withering revenues, Hippolyta’s moon beholds solemnities like a witness to an act of assumption. Her moon evokes the goddess, not lingering, but instead drawing her bow in preparation.

The transformative quality ranging through *Dream* leaves no aspect of the play’s moonlight untouched. By extended metaphor, tailor Starveling’s portrayal of moonlight in *Pyramus and Thisbe* simultaneously “disfigure[s], [and] to present[s], the person of Moonshine” (3.1.56–7). With the mechanicals’ perspective both more limited and more expansive than that of the play’s other characters, a literal form of moonlight is quickly deemed essential for their play and Starveling loyally follows the other actors about the performance space with a lantern impersonating the moon. While Robin Starveling’s synecdoche, with lantern, dog, and thorn bush, confronts the audience with the gross comic inadequacy of his portrayal, his dogged earnestness also seems to reflect the often calm and steady nature of moonlight itself. In his unwitting ‘disfigurement’ of the moon, Starveling also manages to capture some of its essence.

This may well illustrate the lion’s share of Shakespeare’s central point. The moon’s reflection on water, even when broken by ripples, still conveys the idea of the entire moon to an onlooker. When we see the broken reflection, we do not conclude that the moon in the sky has broken into shifting fragments. We still think of the whole moon above us. So, the insufficiency of the tailor’s



imperfect impersonation underscores the idea that each of the fractional moons in the play, Theseus' dowager, Hippolyta's bow, and even Starveling's lantern, also represents and somehow reflects the whole moon of common human experience. The various representations of the moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* coalesce in this way with each facet participating in the idea of a larger whole. In this sense, all of *Dream's* moons together, including Titania herself, draw together to adhere into a greater kind of moon – the unifying feminine moon of creation, unification, and regeneration.

When viewed from a Jungian perspective, as an archetype or mythical symbol of the mysterious feminine, the moon in *Dream* also symbolizes the unfathomable power of transformation or transcendence that takes place in the characters and relationships over the course of the play. J. C. Cooper wrote that the moon represents “the feminine power, the Mother Goddess, Queen of Heaven, with the sun as the masculine”.<sup>10</sup> On a deeper level:

the moon is universally symbolic of the rhythm of cyclic time; universal becoming. The birth, death and resurrection phases of the moon symbolize immortality and eternity, perpetual renewal; enlightenment. The moon also represents the dark side of Nature, her unseen aspect; the spiritual aspect of light in darkness; inner knowledge; the irrational, intuitional and subjective; human reason as reflected light from the divine sun.<sup>11</sup>

Under the soft but insistent light of the irrational intuitive, the various lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* work their way through their individual – and sometimes collective – scenarios resonant of exuberant madness. Indeed, they must do so, for in mythic terms it is often only through madness, by crossing a significant intellectual, spiritual, or emotional threshold that we reach transcendent understanding. The mystery of this great transformation, the unravelling of this particular Ariadne's skein, is the basis of human transcendence of our mundane selves, and the changing of our lives and their trajectory into the realization of greater potential than we might initially have possessed. Jan Kott,

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<sup>10</sup> Cooper J. C. Moon. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*: London : Thames and Hudson, 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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in his exploration of specific carnival elements – the inversion of the natural – in *Midsummer*, notes that “in the carnival rites, the fool is wise and his madness is the wisdom of the world”.<sup>12</sup>

Each more fool than lover in his respective context, neither Actaeon nor Bottom suffers from a transformation which is associated with more traditional forms of love. Rather, each of them stumbles into encounter with powers from a realm beyond their own. Each encounters a supernatural or divine presence with which he might never have contact under ordinary circumstances. Neither encounter comes about by choice. Each happens accidentally, as each male wanders into the inner sanctum of their respective supernatural females. Actaeon almost literally stumbles into Diana’s “valley, dense with pine and tapering cypress”,<sup>13</sup> while Bottom’s quintessential player’s urge to song brings him near the place Oberon describes as a “bank where the wild thyme blows” (2.1.249). Both Ovid’s and Shakespeare’s descriptions are pointedly sensual, suggesting the vulvic and the sexual act of male intrusion. Yet, perhaps the most profound difference between the two encounters is the time of day that they take place. Joseph Campbell tells us that, “Actaeon chanced to see the dangerous goddess at noon; that fateful moment when the sun breaks in its youthful, strong ascent, balances, and begins the mighty plunge to death”.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Bottom meets Titania at night, under soft moonlight. Where Actaeon confidently saunters while taking a respite from his hunt, Bottom has been abandoned by his friends, who flee him in terror after Puck’s capricious transformation gives him an ass head. Bottom loudly sings his quasi-braying songs so “that they shall hear that I am not afraid” (3.1.117).

Ovid plainly tells us that it is not love or lust but, “chance [that] was the culprit” (Ovid, 101) in sealing Actaeon’s fate. For as Diana, chaste goddess of the hunt, and goddess of the moon, bathes naked in the wood, “as fate would have it, Actaeon, Cadmus’ grandson wandered into the glade. His hunting could wait, he thought, as he sauntered aimlessly through the unfamiliar

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<sup>12</sup> Kott J. *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*. Evanston, IL : Northwestern University Press, 1987. P. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ovid. *Op. cit.* P. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell J. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. P. 111.

woodland” (Ovid, 99). Having temporarily abandoned his hunt, Actaeon subsequently sees Diana “quite naked” (Ovid, 101), in spite of her nymphs immediately crowding around her to screen her from his gaze. For this accidental glimpse, Actaeon “had antlers sprout from his brow and his dogs were allowed to slake their thirst on their master’s blood” (Ovid, 99). Actaeon the hunter, turned into a stag, is pursued by his own hounds until “they buried their noses inside his flesh and mangled to pieces the counterfeit stag who embodied their master” (Ovid, 104). The hunter/slayer falls, dying by the metaphorical sword – the hunting skills – that he wielded during his life.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare inverts Ovid’s myth so that Bottom, instead of being literally hounded from the glade, is included, invited, and even commanded into Titania’s fairy bower. Bottom is drawn in instead of being pushed out, whereas Actaeon is pointedly excluded and expelled from Diana’s glade. In further contrast with Actaeon, Bottom is not a hunter or slayer, but a weaver. He assembles rather than dissects. However awkward he may be in any number of ways, Bottom’s profession marks him, not as a destroyer, but as a maker, as one who assembles strands to create a whole. Even in his eagerness to play every part, he seems to weave all the roles together, his character bursting with ideas about how to play this or that, or how to modify a performance to suit any mood, or any requirement. His companions echo this, being a carpenter, a bellows-mender, a tinker, a joiner, and a tailor. These are creators, those who make and repair instead of destroying. Much like actors, the craftsmen in *Dream* fabricate and build. These bumbling craftsmen seem to personify the play itself.

Bottom’s transformation is not the cruel, ironic vengeance of an angry goddess, but results instead from a mischievous prank played by a fairy trickster – with Puck evidently finding rich sport in literalizing the ass metaphor. The trickster is the “epitome of the principle of disorder”, and his or her presence in any story or myth almost universally signifies a subversion of the natural order of things. Loki tricks the blind god, Hod, into killing Baldur with an innocent sprig of mistletoe, for example and in the Diné (Navajo)

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creation myth, Coyote brings death into the world by tossing a stone into a pond before First Man can toss in a piece of wood.<sup>15</sup>

As the darker, shadow side of godhead, Tricksters represent the inversion of the usual order, and sometimes they even seem to negate the sacred. Even in moments of profanity, however, the tricksters also embody the sacred wisdom of the unconventional. They represent the creative impulse which contradicts logic or behaves in counterintuitive ways. They often promote or underscore the presence of profane or base attitudes or methods in cosmic function. Puck's profound powers of transformation seem to be most frequently used for cruel jests. He skims the cream from the milk to "bootless make the breathless housewife churn, and sometime make the drink to bear no barm, [and] mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm" (2.1.37–9).

The ass head that Puck places on Bottom seems particularly base. The ass's long ears echo the ass ears of a medieval fool's cap, making a comical contrast to the stag's graceful antlers. Actaeon's transformation into a stag, despite the tragic irony, still suggests a certain nobility of form. Yet, in contrast, Bottom's transformation into an ass suggests far more than a mere humble beast of burden. Jan Kott states the obvious reference that "the ass does not symbolize stupidity. From antiquity up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all quadrupeds was supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus".<sup>16</sup> When transmuted, Actaeon appears as a mute but graceful figure. Voicelessly pursued by his own violent ravaging hounds, he is unable to protest as his hunting companions urge the dogs to take him down. In contrast, the transformed Bottom seems humble and gentle, yet helplessly and spontaneously punctuates his speech with loud braying. He also seems almost shyly unaware of his own sexual virility. Just as the weaver's initial character appears to be an almost polar opposite to the hunter's, so do the subsequent transformations reflect these polar differences as the ass differs so greatly from the stag.

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell J. *The Masks of God*. P. 273.

<sup>16</sup> Kott J. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. P. 227.

In a similar fashion, Titania, “a name Ovid uses for Diana”, parallels Diana, but also represents a kind of inversion of her namesake goddess.<sup>17</sup> Echoing the goddess Diana, the powerful fairy queen remains consistently associated with the moon throughout the play. Not only does Titania refer to the moon frequently, but other characters also underscore the parallels beginning with the very first line spoken to her, Oberon’s greeting, “Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania” (2.1.60). The fact that both Diana and Titania are associated with children in their respective narratives further extends this metaphor. Diana is the goddess of childbirth as well as chastity, and Titania, is not only the initial caretaker of the disputed changeling boy, but also speaks a host of lines replete with images of pregnancy and childbirth. Yet, in their response to their masculine interlopers Diana and Titania differ greatly. Where Diana uses her power to exclude and expel Actaeon, Titania invites, even commands Bottom to come into her bower.

Titania contrasts Diana in other ways. Diane Purkiss tells us “[W]hen Diana’s votaries got themselves pregnant, the goddess was not exactly a fountain of sympathy; she exiled or killed them for their transgression”.<sup>18</sup> Titania, on the other hand, seems to derive a vicarious thrill from her voluptuous descriptions of her votaress’ pregnancy. And unlike the chaste goddess, the fairy queen is no stranger to masculine company. Not only is she Oberon’s “rash wanton” (2.1.63) queen, but, during the course of their opening argument, Oberon mentions that she has also had a relationship with Theseus. Whether Oberon speaks the truth of her affair or not, she has at least certainly shared her bed with Oberon, as their quarrel has precipitated Titania forswearing “his [Oberon’s] bed and company” (2.1.62).

By the time she initiates her liaison with Bottom, of course, Titania has had her eyes anointed by Oberon – the love potion changing her perception and prompting her to fall in love, or lust, with the transformed Bottom. The origins of Oberon’s love potion

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<sup>17</sup> Frosch T. R. The Missing Child in “A Midsummer Night's Dream”. *American Imago* 64. 2007. No. 4 (Winter). P. 488.

<sup>18</sup> Purkiss D. *Fairies and Fairy Stories: A History*. Stroud, Gloucestershire : Tempus, 2007. P. 192.

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itself specifically echo ideas of erotic union in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon's discourse on the "love in idleness" (2.1.168) flower describes a blossom that has been pierced by the arrow shaft of Cupid, the male god of love and desire. Although Freud is hardly the only one to have noted that "flowers represent the female genitals", or that the male genitalia may be "symbolized by objects that have the characteristic, in common with it, of penetration into the body and consequent injury, hence pointed *weapons* of every type", Shakespeare's love potion anticipates Freud's categorization of such psychological symbols.<sup>19</sup> The implications of Oberon's flower juice could hardly be more explicit.

Contrary to the popular theory that *Dream* may have been written as a nuptial entertainment, Gary Jay Williams has argued that this may not be the case. Yet, in spite of darker elements within Jan Kott's "cruel dream", however, and although the dramatic tension within it seems potentially dire at times, there also seems to be something more mediated about the play which parallels the Actaeon myth inversion.<sup>20</sup> Although Egeus' initial demand that his daughter, Hermia, either marry Demetrius or be put to death, it has been frequently noted that Theseus immediately introduces another option to Hermia, suggesting that she may also become a nun. While this option may appear as cheerless as Theseus describes it, it also remediates the threat of imminent death. Because the episode takes place at the very beginning of the play, serious doom is suddenly removed from the dramatic table. Instead, Theseus effectively sweeps away the dust of potential death with an option which is neither fatal, nor forever hopeless, nor even necessarily always unpleasant.

In contrast, Diana remains the stern goddess of the hunt. Her alternatives seem to be only life or death and are much more steeped in the absolute. The deadly earnestness, ferocity, and relentlessness with which the goddess levels her punishments parallels other old folk or fairy tales, where the punishment may be so out of proportion with the crime that the outcome becomes

<sup>19</sup> Freud S. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* / Translated by G. Stanley Hall. New York : Boni and Liveright, 1920. Part Two, X, Symbolism in the Dream.

<sup>20</sup> Kott J. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. P. 219.

simply horrible. Divinity remains sacrosanct. The mortal cannot and dare not interact with the immortal except under the rarest of conditions.

In terms of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play's drive towards reconciliation and union presents just such a condition. Marriage represents not only the union of two people, but also admits a divine element to the proceedings. The union is a holy one, and the liaison of Titania and Bottom in *Dream* may be seen as an anticipation of the union sought by all the other couples in the play. Instead of stern retribution for Actaeon's trespass into the territory of divine chastity, *Dream* offers not only the potentially fertile union of male and female, but also the union of the profane with the divine, a brief liaison of mortal with immortal that represents the divine spark of ultimate creation. In a larger sense, Bottom and Titania's liaison symbolizes the ongoing connection of the mundane or mortal world with that of the gods. It is the *heiros gamos* (sacred marriage) of absolute completion in which both feminine and masculine discover and complete each other, and the anima and the animus (in Jungian terms) are united and made whole. Bottom's union with Titania also unites him with her character's links to nature and fertility. She provides him with fulfillment of his appetites, as humble as they may seem. She not only lends him fairies to help scratch his itch, but also to fetch him delicacies, and the parade of sensual imagery in their scenes together further underscores the ideas of fertility and reproduction which underlie so much of the play.

Thus, Bottom and Titania embody the consummation sought by other characters. The profound desire for union which begins with Theseus and Hippolyta, tumbles through the woods with the four lovers, and also echoes through the Pyramus and Thisbe episode. If we view the Actaeon myth as a staunch defense of the virtues of chastity and separation, and if we see Pyramus and Thisbe as a kind of sacrifice in effigy to assuage the potentially fatal dangers of love, then Bottom and Titania may be understood as representing renewal and regeneration – a reconciliation of the divine spark with the mortal world. Where the sacrifice of Pyramus and Thisbe may be understood mythically as a symbolic

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sacrifice which dispels the threat of death with laughter, then the liaison of Bottom and Titania provides the fertile ground upon which the rest of the couples may base successful reproductive unions. Mircea Eliade neatly encapsulates the idea.

...the myths and rites of the Earth-Mother chiefly express ideas of fecundity and abundance. These are religious ideas, for what the various aspects of universal fertility reveal is, in sum the mystery of generation, of the creation of life. For religious man, the appearance of life is the central mystery of the world. Life comes from somewhere that is not this world and finally departs from here and goes to the beyond, in some mysterious way continues in an unknown place inaccessible to the majority of mortals.<sup>21</sup>

That Titania's world intersects with Bottom's provides not only the central irony of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also its central mystery. As Bottom notes, this is "a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was" (4.1.202–3), and it seems only fitting that Bottom grope for an adequate description of his experience. In the end, of course, he merely expends his energy in describing how ineffable his experience has been.

The price of union with the divine, of having laid one's mortal eyes upon the immortal, is silence. Actaeon's agonized muteness, in his repeated and futile attempts to call out to his hounds and his companions to identify himself, culminates in the absolute silence of his own death. Bottom's more metaphorical silence stems partly from his own inability to process and express his experience. Having undergone his transformation and having experienced a profound union with forces and a being beyond his experience or understanding, it may not be that he lacks the words or wit to describe what has happened so much as that he lacks any context into which he could coherently couch such a description. As the classic man out of his depth, Bottom has finally encountered a situation in which even he, with his awkward gift for gab, has been left speechless. Barely able to conceive of what has happened to him, he remains unable to truly grasp the experience. He possesses no intellectual or verbal tools adequate to the task because none really exist. This leaves him speaking "not a

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<sup>21</sup> Eliade M. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. San Diego : Harcourt, 1987. P. 147–148.



word" (4.2.30), and he returns to the simpler and more manageable task of his performance and his friends, leaving the woods, and the profound experience of his brush with the divine, behind him.

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