To thoroughly discuss the presence of textual shapeshifting in A Midsummer Night’s Dream we must first consider a few questions: how is the drama in itself a composite of multiple consciousnesses, those of the spirits and fairies, of the reality of Theseus’ kingdom and characters, and of the rude mechanicals’ play-within-a-play? Considering the first-mentioned, how is the Dream a metadrama in which the possibility for linear narratives shifts into uncertain substructures and fantasies? Does the reality of Theseus’ kingdom supercede Oberon’s fairyland, or vice versa? I intend to discuss A Midsummer Night’s Dream as a shapeshifting text by means of linguistic device, animality, and parallelism which together allow the play to exist on three different yet interrelated dimensions of real: a quasi-English Athens presented through the authentic event of Theseus’ wedding, a mystical fairyland, and a subcategory of “hard-handed men” who perform a kind of Brechtian ‘dumb show’ in the very last scene of the Dream. Shakespeare’s logic of inversion in A Midsummer Night’s Dream is characteristic of the Carnival festivities of late sixteenth century England, when sexes were inverted, humans became animals, and clowns were imaginatively elected into positions of governorship. In the English Carnival, shapeshifting was exhibited within but not limited to the subcategories of carnality and sensuality, animality and bestiality, and social inversion, all of which are embodied in the Dream, a dramatic case of mundus inversus that has much in common with the surrealism of Jan Steen’s painting, “The World Turned Upside Down.” The viewer is placed in domestic dining room scene, crammed with six adults, two young children, and a temperamental baby girl wielding, in one hand, a spoon like a dagger in desperate search of a whetstone, and in the other, a beaded pearl necklace. On the kitchen table, a small dog pokes its nose into what appears to be a dish or half-broken bowl of food. The young daughter picks a utensil of some sort out of cabinet while the younger son blows into a piccolo. A heavily dressed woman sleeps, a violinist gives the young piccolo-player a turn at soloing, a minister with a mallard duck perched on the trap of his back recites scripture to an adjacent nun who listens with her pointer-finger raised as if in objection or at least interruption, and a cock-eyed man is sprawled out in a wide-backed chair gazing off in some distant stupor, and in the center of the painting, smirking straight out of it is a drunken fat-boned woman with a large mug of alcohol in her right hand, a pinch of a man’s high pant leg in her left. It is a sensual, soundful scene, if not depicting Carnival in England than some uncannily similar festivity. But what impresses itself in my mind with the greatest importance is the physicality of the two church affiliates in relation to everyone else in the scene. The minister and nun and standing half-bent over, but rigidly so, and seem to be having a most serious discussion, while everyone else, youngsters and baby and lapdog included, are in a state of carnal, consumptive, and musical mirth, especially the smirking woman and the man-in-stupor who are sexualized in the most preemptive and suggestive way, but surely sexualized. What this relation most affirms is the relationship between church and public, especially the idea that Carnival never presented any real threat to the governmental or religious authorities of the time. Instead, such Dionysian festivities were a pre-Lent deception by which the authoritative power was perpetuated. The consumption, sexuality, animality, and social
inversion were summarily a collapsing and blending of all physical traits, human and animal, piety, morality, and hierarchy into an all-encapsulating body sensuality, driven by food, sex, the primal human, and the desire for a metamorphic otherness. But however subversive or rebellious this once-per-year Dionysian climax could be, its body sensuality was scheduled and regulated in a kind of summer holiday that provided for its containment. Such exercise of power has a near-perfect correlation to Oberon’s authority over Puck, a control that is maintained by the small freedoms, as infrequent as they are, that Oberon allows Puck to have, whereby Puck can vent his knavery and mad energies; I will discuss this relationship further toward the end of this essay. Peter Quince’s play-within-the-play suggests the possibility that A Midsummer Night’s Dream is a direct comment on itself; that is, Peter Quince’s organization of Theseus’ nuptial play is commentary on the difficulties of writing and performing any play—but specifically one in late sixteenth century (1595) England—with nothing more to work from than a model from Greek mythology and may reiterate that the entire course of events, physical or fairyland, exist in a dream. A constantly evolving dream, from the very adaptation of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe to a crude and improvisational dramatic form to its casting and finally its performance. During casting Flute says, “Nay, faith, let me not play a woman. I have a beard coming” (1.2.41-42). This cross-gendering is not only a reminder that on the Elizabethan stage, women’s parts were played by boys and young men, but that in the mundus inversus of Carnival, women dressed up as men and men dressed up as women. The rude mechanicals’ version of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe echoes the romantic tragedy, Greek mythology, the Elizabethan ‘dumb show’, Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’—those caused by the stupidity of the actors (Quince’s troupe) much more than the absurdist qualities of the drama (Brecht)—and in subtler Carnivalesque ways the transcendence of social hierarchy and the animation and inanimation of the human being, or Snug [as Lion] and Snout [as Wall], respectively. The play-within-the-play then becomes a kind of incorporative disclaimer for Shakespeare, though this interpretation is less likely to be accurate than the interpretation that Quince’s play is a supplement to the act of staging a drama or, much less, comic relief for a Shakespearean festive comedy that is less humorous than it is dreamlike, fantastical, or extremely witty:

QUINCE  Ay, or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine. Then there is another thing: we must have a wall in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisbe, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall.
SNOUT  You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom?
BOTTOM  Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify ‘wall’: and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper (3.1.51-60).

Like the composition of Wall, Quince’s acting troupe is roughly cast. And performs in as roughest a fashion possible, though never without the charm of comic entertainment and cleverness of dramatic irony:

BOTTOM [as Pyramus]  …
O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss,
Cursed by thy stones for thus deceiving me.
THESEUS  The wall methinks, being sensible, should curse again.  BOTTOM [to THESEUS]  No, in truth, sir, he should not. ‘Deceiving me’ is Thisbe’s cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy
... her through the wall. You shall see, it will fall pat as I told you (5.1.178-184).

SNOUT [as Wall]    Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so;
          And being done, thus Wall way doth go. Exit
THESEUS    Now is the wall down between the two neighbours.    DEMETRIUS    No remedy, my lord, when walls are so willful to
          hear without warning (5.1.202-206).

And as if these working-class dramaturges were together building a bridge across it, or forming a demolition team for its destruction, they breach the dramatic fourth wall with resounding comedy and inside-joke, actually influencing their chief audience member (Theseus) to wish Wall to curse and Demetrius to proclaim, essentially, that “walls have ears.” (Norton, 855). In line 181 Bottom comes out of character while the play is in progress, making insignificant whatever remnants of a fourth wall had previously withstood the actors’ foolishness, and addresses, nay, disagrees with the King himself! Quince’s first-timers bumble around speaking crude prose, mincing and mispronouncing key words and phrases. In the actual performance by the makeshift troupe, the actors’ (particularly Quince’s and Bottom’s) ignorance of the spoken English language causes them to inadvertently disobey sixteenth century English conventions; in the case of Quince, making “periods in the midst of sentences” (5.1.96) leading to total mispunctuation and therefore misinterpretation by a royal audience, and in the case of Bottom, the interspersing of unintentional puns. Both devices allow Shakespeare—in what resolution the Dream offers us—to attach to the denoted meanings of their passages connotations that would not otherwise have been possible. Although the most prevalent devices at work in the latter case are instances of homonym, the homonymnal pun is not isolated to the play-within-the-play, and is instead one of Shakespeare’s most frequently employed wordplays in the Dream: “bare” instead of “bear”, “Jew” to signify the first syllable of “juvenile”, to name a few. Thus we come to Shakespeare’s textual morphology, by which he can institute his cleverest sleights-of-hand.

The alternating guises of the characters, especially Robin Goodfellow—whose name itself alternates between “Robin” and “Puck” as he is addressed by Oberon and denoted in the play’s minimal amounts of stage direction—allows for shapeshifting to be scoped on a character level, isolating the personal space from the broader textual sphere. In his essay, “Titania and the Ass’s Head”, Jan Kott says of Robin: “Puck is not a clown. He is not even an actor. It is he who … pulls all the characters on strings. He liberates instincts and puts the mechanism of this world in motion. He puts it in motion and mocks it at the same time” (Kott, 216). In the very next paragraph, Kott calls Robin the stage manager and director of “the respective spectacles devised by Oberon.” However, though we cannot deny the shapeshifter, stage manager, or string-pulling Puckateer in his character, we must remember, as Kott does, that Robin does answer to an authoritative someone, and apologizes to Oberon if necessary. Though he may have certain recognized liberties in his invisibility, morphing, and the solitariness that accompanies such incognito talents, they are freedoms that Oberon seems to have perfectly in check, save for the sporadic distractions of power when Titania rebels against the question, “Am I not thy lord?” (2.1.63) with an intelligent independence that Robin simply does not have the capacity for. His impetuousness and inability to keep a calm frame of mind inhibits his possibility for acquiring an intellect.

The isolation of the Puck’s character space from the rest of the play is essential not only in its example of the authoritative power of church or state over the individual (again, the ruse of Carnival), but in emphasizing the separateness and interdependencies of the Dream’s parallel universes of presented reality and subversive fairyland, worlds not in opposition to each other,
but interrelated in a way in which the vitality of one necessitates the existence of the other. It is hard—I would say, impossible—to imagine Theseus’ kingdom in the Dream existing without Oberon’s; the fulfillment of the desires, ambitions, and love-interests of characters like Lysander and Hermia, individuals existing in the world of presented reality, necessitates a system of work comprised of tasks that include correcting directional problems and resolving unforeseen anomalies. This system is intended by Oberon to be carried out in as orderly a fashion as possible, and his intentions are met with two specific, exceptional difficulties: the “rash wanton” Titania and “that shrewd and knavish sprite / Called Robin Goodfellow” (2.1.33-34). Titania’s obsession with the Indian changeling boy distracts Oberon from directing fairies like Robin to carry out matters more pertinent to the maintenance of a relative emotional and psychological homeostasis in Theseus’ kingdom. Furthermore, Oberon’s malcontent with Titania prevents Oberon from fulfilling the necessary task of babysitting Robin, which indirectly leads to the mishaps—whether intentional or unintentional, it does not matter here—that turn what was once an almost perfect love square into chaotically disconnected love parallelogram. We learn in the very first scene of the play of Egeus’ distress over his daughter’s unwillingness to marry the man (Demetrius) who has Egeus’ consent:

EGEUS Full of vexation come I, with complaint
   Against my child, my daughter Hermia.—
   Stand forth Demetrius.— My noble lord,
   This man hath my consent to marry her.—
   Stand forth Lysander.— And, my gracious Duke,
   This hath bewitched the bosom of my child (1.1.22-27).

And the urgency of this conflict of interests is highlighted by the fact that Theseus’ wedding to Hippolyta is fast approaching. We are instantly reminded that an Athenian King and soon-to-be-Queen would be frustrated by the presence of ill feelings among the attendants of their wedding, and so would logically want the most significant conflicts resolved before their “nuptial hour”. Robin can be both wherever and whatever he wants: Enter [ROBIN GOODFELLOW the] puck [invisible] or ROBIN [shifting place], that is, throwing his voice out of its normal key to sound like Lysander or Demetrius, using one to provoke the other to follow and become lost in the foggy forest. He is Oberon’s “mad spirit” and represents the only loose-cannon employee of the fairy kingdom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. While the King of Fairies reigns in fairyland, Puck is its Lord of Misrule, embodying much more devilish version of a Carnival clown in a position of authority. By obeying his King, Puck maintains an independence of errand that allows him to be the leading participant in the sport of knavery whenever the chance arises: ROBIN [aside] What hempen homespuns have we swagg’ring here
   So near the cradle of the Fairy Queen?
   What, a play toward? I’ll be an auditor—
   An actor, too, perhaps, if I see cause (3.1.65-68).

The obvious parallelisms in A Midsummer Night’s Dream are those that exist between Theseus and Oberon, Hippolyta and Titania. They are first specifically suggested by Robin when he says, “The King doth keep his revels here tonight. / Take heed the Queen come not within his sight” (2.1.18-19). We have recently been introduced to Theseus, King of Athens, and his captured Amazonian bride and soon-to-be-Queen Hippolyta; here Robin refers to Oberon as the King and Titania as the Queen, and we gain our first glimpses into the parallel universes that are Athens and fairyland. And their relationships—Theseus with Hippolyta and Oberon with Titania—are near-perfect parallels as well: the same rebelliousness of character in Hippolyta can be found in Titania’s refusal to give up her changeling boy.
Because Oberon’s manipulation of Theseus’ kingdom cannot be regarded has harmful to the young lovers, it in turn cannot be considered parasitic, as demonic and satanic as Puck’s darkest passages seem to be. Considering the ‘dumb show’ subcategory of the rude mechanicals aside, and given that both universes benefit in some fashion from one another, the interrelatedness of the two worlds, a quasi-English Athens and a mystical fairyland, can only be regarded as a fantastical and densely Carnivalesque form of mutualism where one can never be sure if things are what they dream.

Works Cited


Structure in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

I - Characters and structure

Multiplicity of lines. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is remarkable for the many levels of its text. The play is different from *Romeo and Juliet* or the *Taming of the Shrew* (which have one main plot) because of the various levels of plots and characters. There are 4 levels: Theseus and Hippolyta, the young lovers, the mechanicals, and the fairies.

There are connections between:

- Theseus & Hippolyta and the young lovers: made by Theseus, member of court.
- The young lovers: connection through marriage.
- The mechanicals: difference in substance, in social background. Bottom does represent the bottom in many ways, carpenter, weaver, taller...

It is not so much similarity as contrast. It is more from one social circle to the opposite. Shakespeare often involves the lower order of society. The justification is not simply methodological but also social. In the end, the play is a picture of the society (with top and lower orders). There is a gradation in that social order: from the Duke to the normal people. This enable Shakespeare to make philosophical and social comments on the way society works (harmony, balance, social order). High society does not necessarily embodies perfection.

The introduction of Bottom has a farcical dimension, linked to the Duke and his lover. The connection between the Duke and Bottom exists because the play is put up to pay homage to the Duke and his future wife.

Fairies and friends: break in social circle but also in tone. Fairies take us into the realm of fantasy. There is a balance between couples: the Duke and the future Duchess, Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania. The first two couples are to be connected.

Opposition between mortals and immortals. Oberon and Titania argue, they are supposed to be invisible. Theseus and Hippolyta are flesh and blood mortals. Oberon and Titania fall in love at first sight, have exaggerated demands and quarrel like any ordinary couple: they behave like old mortals.

The plot has been compared to a dance in which you exchange partners with 3 positions:

- Hermia and Lysander.
- Hermia rejected, Lysander and Demetrius fighting for Helena.
- return to harmony.

It also follows the musical tone of the play.
II - Plot and structure
A - City of tension which seems to jeopardize the forthcoming activities

Conflict between father and daughter. Impact on the whole society: Elizabethan theory about balance. The rebellion by two individuals also implies a rejection of the norms of society. The lovers rejecting the laws of Athens have to leave and go to the woods.

Rejection of authority (both the father’s and the Prince’s authority). Consequently, the woods function as a sheltering place.

B - The forest

Opposition between the town and the country: Athens—wood and culture—nature. The woods are a rich symbolic place in literature: they are a going back to nature, a return to something which is simple and unsophisticated. The wood is a place of freedom as opposed to the constraints of the law of society, where one can break the rigidity of concentration of the city life. It is a beneficent place where the spirit of rebirth and rejuvenation is to be found.

It is a place of fun (break of rigidity) but also a dangerous place because it is dark and you can face a lion (Pyramus and Thisbe). Wild animals and wild men. It is a kind of maze, a labyrinth where you are likely to lose your way and yourself (it is nearly what happened to Titania).

The wood is the symbol of the unconscious (c.f., E. Young). We are in the realm of fantasy and imagination. It destabilizes but at the same time, it is also the forest that enables the return to contentment and order. It is a kind of necessary passage. The disorder of the forest enables a return of the end:

- wood v. Athens
- rational v. irrational
- night v. day
- waking v. dreaming

The play is a parenthesis in everyday life, it is festive. Holiday time: allowed to break the rules (law v. transgression).

C - Return to harmony - recovery - wedding festivities

It is a comedy: all is well that ends well. It would be wrong to say that the end is a return to the beginning: you cannot forget what happened in between: they achieved serenity and acceptance of authority. The final act is often interpreted as a conclusion (postlude) to the whole play (see Act 5, scene 1, l.414: Puck’s and Oberon’s comments at the end of the play.

III - A play within the play

The play has an embedded structure, with a flash of genius which contributes to the success of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Introduction of a ridiculous character, Bottom, whom Titania must fall in love with (Oberon’s plan is to make Titania ridiculous). Pyramus and Thisbe are parallel to the main subject. The play is about going into the woods and face the danger.
The tone of the subplot turns into comedy and verges on farce. These actors are unfit to be actors: this creates a discrepancy between the main plot and the subplot, which is very funny.

The play reminds us of Romeo and Juliet: split, tension, family disunion but the most important justification is probably Shakespeare’s reflection on dramatic art: absence of women, problems of representation (moon..), and liability (the lion is not a real lion: how to persuade the public..). It is a mockery of bad drama: plenty of mispronunciations. Good example of "mock tragedy".

It is easy to consider the subplot as a parody of the main plot. The play is very complex, and parallels the complexity of themes and tones, and so many disconnected elements fit in so nicely in the end: that can account for the success of the play. The beginning and the end are set in the city, the middle is set in the woods.