

# "Bottom's Dream," or, remembrance of things to come

A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, based on the play by William Shakespeare, directed by Michael Hoffman

David Walsh  
31 May 1999

Shakespeare apparently wrote the play in the mid-1590s, when he was thirty or so, during the last decade of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It has been suggested, though not proven, that the piece was written for an aristocratic wedding and further conjectured that the queen attended the first performance. At any rate, according to its first printed edition in 1600, the play had already been “sundry times publicly acted” by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the theater company Shakespeare helped establish in the summer of 1594, when London theaters reopened after a two-year hiatus due to fear of the plague.

It is difficult to conceive of Shakespeare writing this earlier in his career, when he was still maturing as an artist and a human being. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains an element of looking at youth, it is not a youthful product, although an editor of a recent printing of his collected works writes justly that the play has “a special appeal for the young”. Nor is it possible to imagine the work being written in the first decades of the 17th century, under James I, as tensions mounted within English society and Shakespeare's own concerns altered and his outlook darkened, or perhaps simply deepened.

Commentators remark with some bewilderment on the variety of sources Shakespeare drew upon to construct his play—classical mythology, English and literary folklore and contemporary English life. They forget that it is, after all, a dream, and dreams have a logic of their own. The plot of the play, one of the few whose basic outline Shakespeare did not borrow from another source, concerns the fate of four couples and the staging of a play.

Theseus (the hero of Greek legend who slew the fearsome Minotaur), the “Duke of Athens,” and Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, whom Theseus has defeated in battle and captured, are planning their wedding day. Four young people, Hermia, Helena, Demetrius and Lysander, face difficulties because the two young men both love Hermia. Ending up in the woods, they endure a series of misadventures in the course of one night, some the result of supernatural intervention.

Out of pique, Oberon, the king of the fairies, plays a prank on his queen, Titania, causing her to fall in love with the first creature she sets eyes on. This turns out to be Nick Bottom, a weaver, who with some colleagues has been rehearsing a play (*The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*) in this same forest. Moreover, Puck, a mischievous fairy and Oberon's agent, has meantime given Bottom an ass's head and ears. The weaver passes the time with Titania and her attendant fairies until Oberon and Puck intervene and restore him more or less to his previous condition. In the end, Oberon and Titania are reconciled, the three other couples find their way to the altar and Bottom and his fellow workmen stage their play successfully at the wedding

reception.

According to the film's production notes, Michael Hoffman (*One Fine Day* [1996], *Restoration* [1995], *Soapdish* [1991]) has long had an interest in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Hoffman played Lysander in a production of the play staged off-campus by members of his university theater department in Boise, Idaho. Some years later, while studying Renaissance drama as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, he directed the work, a project that led to his first effort at directing a film. Hoffman is the founder and a current member of the Board of Trustees of the Idaho Shakespeare Festival in Boise.

I interpret Hoffman's interest in Shakespeare as a positive sign, an indication of a certain artistic seriousness. After making a number of relatively conventional films, he obviously felt he was in a position to turn his attentions to a work he deeply cared about. I would not question the sincerity of the effort or the criticism of the ordinary commercial film industry fare it implies. Unhappily, that by itself is not a guarantee of artistic success.

It is possible that Hoffman has been inspired by the efforts of Kenneth Branagh to make Shakespeare accessible to wide audiences. Branagh's work has its definite weaknesses, but Hoffman's is seriously flawed. This film seems pulled in different directions, by a variety of artistic and perhaps marketing impulses, and the result is not a coherent whole. One can understand why under current conditions the filmmakers would find it advisable to cast American film and television stars (Michelle Pfeiffer, Calista Flockhart), but it does create a momentum that is difficult to resist. Inevitably the casting of “names” will create a shift, perhaps only slight, in the emphasis particular characters and sequences are given. One senses, for example, that in an effort to attract younger viewers the scenes of the lovers in the forest have been given excessive prominence.

It may seem a small matter, but the excision of Bottom's marvelous exchange with Titania's four fairy assistants (usually played by children) is a genuine loss. Bottom addresses the fairies with utter equanimity and good humor, as if such an encounter were an everyday occurrence.

*Bottom:* ...I beseech your worship's name.

*Cobweb:* Cobweb.

*Bottom:* I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb. If I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you.—Your name, honest gentleman?

*Peaseblossom:* Peaseblossom.

*Bottom:* I pray you commend me to Mistress Squash, your mother, and to Master Peascod, your father. Good Master Peaseblossom, I shall desire you of more acquaintance, too.

Hoffman has seen fit to relocate the play to Tuscany at the end of the

19th century. I have no objections, it is simply not clear to me why he has done it. The choice seems to fit a more general pattern of weakly or unclearly motivated artistic decisions. A great deal is made, for example, of the characters riding around on bicycles. Producer Leslie Urdang explains, "The bicycle, which plays a part in Michael's script, was a relatively recent invention which also brought a new kind of freedom to travel without being shut up in a coach."

When was it a "relatively recent invention"? The bicycle might or might not be a logical phenomenon to explore *if* one were working on a piece written at the end of the last century. Urdang forgets, however, that the director's choice of time period was itself arbitrary and any association the play has with that particular moment in history was made entirely in his brain.

Confronted with interpretations and devices that seem external to the play, the spectator may begin to suspect that the director is, in fact, playing for time because he finds it difficult to penetrate the piece, despite a genuine feeling for it. One has the sense of a production going around and around but never getting terribly close to the play's essence.

The filmmakers' view of Bottom seems to me essentially shallow. Kevin Kline, who plays the part, calls the character "the paradigm for all ham actors—he wants to play all the parts, and he thinks he's God's gift to theater." Having arrived at this conception, that Bottom is "the king of amateur dramatics," Hoffman, working backwards, asks, "What if Bottom ... has delusions of grandeur about himself as an actor because he doesn't have any love in his life?" So the director has created an unhappy marriage and a shrewish wife (who appears in a wordless scene), and his film suggests that "Bottom really falls in love with Titania." This is all very well, except that Shakespeare never suggests any such thing. In their first scene together, Bottom desires more than anything else to get away from the love-smitten fairy queen, although he is prepared to put up with her attentions; in the second, he gives his food order (still an ass, he requests "good dry oats" and "a bottle of hay") and promptly falls asleep.

To get at the play, it seems necessary to pass beyond this film version, although for a moviegoer it might, with luck and good will, be a starting-point.

Bottom, it seems to me, is much more than the filmmakers permit him to be. He clearly represents something special, the central figure in this play and one of Shakespeare's greatest inventions. His name already suggests a great deal: the body part, the lowest level of society, the core of a thing; Bottom also apparently refers to "the center of the skein upon which the weaver's wool is wound".

Bottom is the favorite of the artisans; during the time he spends away from them in Titania's company, they are at a loss. He has, according to Francis Flute, "the best wit of any handicraftman in Athens," and "the best person, too," adds Peter Quince. "O sweet bully Bottom," cries Flute, sadly.

The weaver is unfailingly thoughtful and considerate, and apparently unfazed by any of the astonishing things that befall him. When Titania unexpectedly proclaims that she loves him, he replies, "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that." Nonetheless, it is not unthinkable, for "to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays".

Offered the part of a lover in the workmen's theatrical, Bottom expresses the desire to play a "tyrant" instead. No one is less fit for such a part. So concerned is he about the ladies in the audience becoming frightened because a lion appears in the piece, he explains that were he to play the part, "I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale."

Worried as well about the impact on the female spectators of his character killing himself, Bottom suggests adding a prologue in which he will explain that "we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus [his character] is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell

them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. That will put them out of fear." I think Harold Bloom is entitled to assert in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* that Bottom is "a sublime clown ... a great visionary ... and a very good man, as benign as any in Shakespeare".

The presence of such a benign spirit at its center must have played some part in making *A Midsummer's Night Dream* the gentlest of Shakespeare's works. Bottom's tact, courteousness and courage have a soothing effect on the entire proceeding. Aside from the threats made against Hermia by her own father in the opening scene, there is little violence or hint of violence in the piece, even on the order of the verbal ferocity (and nihilism) of *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Love's Labour Lost*, or the off-stage tyranny of a usurping duke suggested in *As You Like It*.

The sweetness of the language is almost unbearable. Here is Oberon to Puck:

*Thou rememb'rest  
Since once I sat upon a promontory,  
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back  
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath  
That the rude sea grew civil at her song  
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres  
To hear the sea maid's music?*

And further:  
*I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses and eglantine.*

Puck plays his pranks, and Oberon takes his relatively harmless revenge on Titania, but this is not a nightmare, it is a dream born of a warm summer night. Oberon takes pity on Helena, "a sweet Athenian lady ... in love with a disdainful youth." Puck says, although mistakenly, of Hermia lying near Lysander: "Pretty soul, she durst not lie/Near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy." Later Oberon instructs Puck to prevent a fight between jealous Demetrius and Lysander, and declares his intention to release Titania from her spell, "and all things shall be peace". Or, as Puck puts it, even more suggestively, "Jack shall have Jill./Naught shall go ill."

Coming upon the lovers, who were so recently at odds with one another, sleeping peaceably side by side, Theseus exclaims to Demetrius and Lysander: "How comes this gentle concord in the world,/That hatred is so far from jealousy/To sleep by hate, and fear no enmity?" Still "Half sleep, half waking," Lysander himself is amazed and can offer no rational explanation.

The cruelest exchanges in the play take place between the foolish lovers, but their sentiments are precisely *not* to be taken entirely seriously, as each of the four is capable of making an emotional about-face at any given moment.

The extraordinary spirit of the piece and the astonishing light touch of the author must be bound up with what one perceives as, if not a utopian vision, at least the suggestion of a world of infinite possibility. After all, this is the only one of Shakespeare's plays in which a man on the Bottom sleeps with (or by) a Queen, at her instigation no less. In the forest in the middle of the night in a dream all things pass into one another and are transformed, love and hate, man and animal, spirit and matter.

Of course, only in a dream. Shakespeare provides his own criticism of this fantastical vision. Duke Theseus, the voice of rationality and authority, comments disapprovingly about the goings-on that the four lovers report:

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.*

*One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:  
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.  
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.*

I take as a given that every significant artist possesses within him or herself the vision of men and women freely living, and loving, even if that should only emerge, out of despair, in the form of its opposite. In *A Midsummer's Night Dream* Shakespeare looks backward and forward in time in his giving shape to “things unknown”. On the eve of the modern era he still felt the gravitational pull of a golden age, real or imaginary, that existed prior to legal obligation, property, money, castes and classes, a time when humankind and nature lived in perfect harmony. The presence of such a primordial condition is palpably strong in this play. I find it very suggestive that Harold Bloom, who would not share the social conceptions being advanced here, writes: “Like William Blake after him, Bottom suggests *an apocalyptic, unfallen man*, whose awakened senses fuse in a synaesthetic unity.” (My emphasis.) Blake, of course, made his presence felt nearly two centuries later by which time something quite new had developed within the social organism.

In what way does Shakespeare look forward? Great artists are possessed of great intuition, which appears to many as a magical power. How was it that Shakespeare decided to place “A crew of patches, rude mechanicals/That work for bread upon Athenian stalls” at the center of this extraordinary, visionary work? I do not know for certain, but I think a simple accident is the least likely explanation.

After he has lost both his asses' ears and his royal, supernatural admirer, Bottom tries to sum up, although words fail him for once, the experience of that marvelous world, where fairies, as Titania instructed, fed him “apricots and dewberries,/With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries,” where they plucked “the wings from painted butterflies/To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.”

Bottom tells us: “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of 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. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called ‘Bottom's Dream’, because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke.”

It is precisely a feeling for the depth of this “bottomless” vision that is almost entirely absent from Hoffman's film and, of course, from so much of contemporary culture.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**