

SAA 2020

*A Midsummer Night's Dream: New Perspectives*

Leaders: Sarah Lewis, King's College London and Gillian Woods, Birkbeck University of London

Michael Drayton's *Dream*  
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My essay will examine the reception of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Caroline England through the lens of Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia* (1627), one of Drayton's most praised poems and which may even have been staged in the eighteenth century. *Nymphidia* is a fairy poem clearly based on *Dream*, but with a twist. In *Nymphidia*, Oberon, the King of Fairies, becomes enraged when he discovers his wife, Queen Mab, is in love with a fairy knight. That knight challenges Oberon to single combat, but an upset Mab prays to Proserpine to end the conflict. Proserpine gives the men water from Lethe, both promptly forget about the entire affair, and the entire party returns happily to the Fairy Court at poem's end.

The most obvious narrative change I am interested in is the reversal of what since Louis Montrose's seminal "Shaping Fantasies" we have taken to be the gender politics of *Dream*, and particularly whether *Nymphidia*'s changes reflect the influence of Henrietta Maria, Charles I's queen and a noted patroness of the arts. I also want to investigate how *Nymphidia* might reflect Drayton's attitude toward the Caroline court more broadly; Drayton was notoriously frosty toward James I, but his attitude seems to have warmed once Charles came to the throne. The other poems published in the same volume as *Nymphidia*—including the pseudo-Shakespearean *The Battaile of Agincourt* and *Miseries of Queene Margarite*—will be an important interpretive context in this consideration. Finally, if space allows, I also want to use *Nymphidia* as a window to the broader reception of *Dream* in Caroline England (and/or as print commodity even later in its history). We tend to think of *Dream* as a quintessentially Elizabethan play, but in what other ways was the play rewritten and how might they have been significant in their moment?

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**Bottom's (Be)erotics**

Keith M. Botelho

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Animal reference abounds in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, yet often ignored in discussions of the play are intriguing mentions of that little beast, the bee. These creatures, what Sir Thomas Elyot in his 1531 *The Book Named the Governor* called "perpetual figures of just governance or rule," are often overshadowed by charismatic megafauna and other four-footed beasts or birds in the play (asses, lions, horses, hounds, nightingales, etc.). In this essay, I not only want to bring attention to these references to "humble-bees," "honey-bags," "waxen thighs," and "honeysuckle" that Titania and Bottom reference in the third and fourth acts of the play (and the attendant violence that Titania wants to inflict on the insect), but I also want to argue that these moments are part of a larger network of bee-centric poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where honey and the gathering of pollen by bees becomes an

erotic trope. Thus, Shakespeare's apian references in the play are part of a tradition that I call an early modern (be)erotics, where Renaissance poets (most notably Barnfield, Chapman, Carew, Campion, Marvell, Lovelace, and Herrick) use sexually-charged references to the gathering and storing of honey.

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John Kunat  
SAA 2020

"The law of Athens yields you up":  
Sovereignty and Political Authority in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare queries the nature of sovereignty and political power by establishing two parallel realms: Athens and Fairy Land. Theseus is described as the "duke" rather than the "king" of Athens, indicating his sovereignty is not absolute but instead depends upon a superior form of authority. This superior authority is revealed to be the law when Theseus rules against Hermia in the suit regarding her marriage. However, Hermia refuses to acknowledge the law and instead seeks to escape from Athens, placing herself outside Theseus' jurisdiction. Hermia justifies her action by appealing to the law of love, which is superior in her mind to the law of Athens, the patriarchal right of her father or even ducal sovereignty. Fairy Land is a parallel realm to Athens ruled over by a "king" rather than a "duke." Oberon's will and pleasure rather than law is sovereign in this nighttime realm. When he demands the "lovely boy" from Titania, he does not appeal to the law but instead demands she yield him to his desire. Unlike Theseus' sovereignty, Oberon's is not limited territorially. Titania cannot escape his power by fleeing to a different jurisdiction since his rule is global in nature. Yet, as a queen she can resist his commands in a way that subjects, such as Puck, are unable to do. Titania simply refuses to acquiesce to Oberon's will, and he is powerless to command her. Instead, he must resort to a stratagem that leads her to release the boy voluntarily. A similar form of regality is evident in Hippolyta, who, like Titania, is a queen, but one who ruled in her own right rather than as a consort. Oberon manipulates Titania, whereas Theseus conquers Hippolyta, with marriage transforming his sword from an actual weapon into a phallic implement.

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Shakespeare Association of America, 2020  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream: New Perspectives*

"I shall do thee mischief in the wood":  
Demetrius and Dude Bro Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with an introduction to Theseus's Athenian Dude Bro culture. While not a typically scholarly term, modern culture has supplied us with an apt

description for understanding the play in the slang term Dude Bro. The duke's court is full of Dude Bros, which have in the past been called many other names, and which currently can be amassed under the heading hegemonic masculinity. Reconsidering the characters' source materials from *Plutarch's Lives* intensifies the fruitless self-replication of Athens' bachelor government. I argue that Demetrius's troubling metamorphosis provides the remedy the play's Athenian court needs to move away from a system of government of forced marriage, and toward a more congenial coupling in companionate marriage, in recognition of the need for both partners to give consent.

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Anne Llewellyn Morgan

SAA 2020

*A Midsummer Night's Dream: New Perspectives*

The Ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Medieval "Entry into Jerusalem" Plays

This paper will discuss Bottom and the idea of the ass in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, bringing together two recent trends in critical approaches to Shakespeare: animal studies and reconsiderations of the relationship between medieval and Shakespearean drama. The ass is an animal with complex meaning and symbolism, suggesting foolishness or mean stupidity as well as humility and patient suffering. Although the play transforms Bottom into an ass to emphasize his literal-minded foolishness, it also reinforces the connection between donkeys and laborers and, however ironically, presents the ass as an object of love and desire. I put the play's scenes of Bottom translated into an ass-man hybrid alongside representations of the ass in medieval religious theater, focusing on dramatizations of Christ's entry into Jerusalem on an ass. In particular, I look at the York Cycle's complex treatment of Christ's entry as a test of civic unity and an affirmation of authority analogous to a Roman triumph; the ambiguous symbolism of the ass allows it to serve as both a symbol of poverty and a sign of status and privilege. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play as much about the triumph as the marriage of Theseus, set in the days following his return with his defeated enemy turned bride, Hippolyta. The performance by the rude mechanicals (just as medieval drama was theater by artisans) prompts questions about the social hierarchy, with Bottom as an ass at the center. Rather than attempting to identify allusions or trace genealogies, I argue that Shakespeare's play, like earlier religious drama, uses the figure of the ass to prompt a complex consideration of the paradoxes of privilege and the prerogatives of the working class.

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Romola Nuttall (King's College London)

'The governess of floods': *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Elizabeth I and courtly vs. commercial power

This paper explores *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* references to Elizabeth I to reconfigure royal power, via the dispensation of patronage, as both courtly and commercial. The courtly and the commercial are typically conceived as mutually exclusive, one deriving from patrilineal heritage, the other, from the pursuit of wealth. Elizabeth's patronage represented a unique form of cultural capital – a non-financial, abstract outcome of patronage – but it also took the form of financial payments, which brings it conceptually closer to the monetary rewards of commercial exchange. I argue that we can achieve a more complete picture than

has been drawn heretofore of early modern monarchic power if we consider Elizabeth's engagement in commercial ventures, like the formation of the East India Company, alongside her participation in non-financial, but no less lucrative, negotiations for royal favour performed at court and beyond. By investigating connections which *Dream* presents, between theatrical, social and political patronage systems – all of which are based on the exchange of money and/or influence, and some kind of service rendered to the agent(s) in the position of a patron – this paper queries both the idea of *Dream* as a play written for an aristocratic wedding and the long-established binary between courtly and commercial drama.

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### Who Wrote “Pyramus and Thisbe”?

Kirk Quinsland  
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The answer to the title's question, as I've learned when discussing this paper with others, is generally a slightly puzzled, in the way of asking why-is-this-even-a-question, “Wasn't it Peter Quince?” In this paper, through looking at a far-less settled critical history (from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) of the question, I am suggesting that there is nothing in the play that indicates that there's nothing in *Midsummer* that suggests that Peter Quince wrote the original script; all we know is that he makes modifications to an existing play-text for which he never claims writing credit. Instead, it seems to have been given to the Mechanicals by someone else, presumably the State itself, along with the “the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our interlude” (2.1.4-5).

The question might seem an obscure bit of old historicism, but in light of recent work by Jordan Windholz on bachelorhood and celibacy as forms of queer community formation, the authorship of the text becomes far more consequential. If it is in fact originally a state-produced script, the final version of “Pyramus and Thisbe” represents a surprising (and unwitting) collaboration between a heteronormative state and a queer community of bachelor/journeymen/outsideers. The resulting performance presents a queer challenge to the legitimacy of the state's concerns about reproduction, marriage, and class.

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Seminar: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – New Perspectives

Provisional title: “Shakespeare's Apology for Poetry: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the labor of art”

Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan's New Oxford Shakespeare dates *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to sometime between 1595 and 1597, with a preference for a later date of 1596 or 1597. Though virtually all scholars note the play's resemblance to *Romeo and Juliet*, especially in its Act 5 burlesque of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, what strikes me is how much more

self-reflexive *MND* is, despite the tragedy's inclusion of choral commentary on the action – a feature that, I will argue, derives from Shakespeare's critical engagement with Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*, first printed in 1595. Written sometime around 1580, Sidney's *Apology* famously denigrated the English stage's unfortunate admixture of kings and clowns, its refusal to respect the boundaries of a poetic decorum aligned with class status. *MND*, of course, refuses to maintain the boundaries between king and clown, tragedy and comedy – its “rude mechanicals” final performance evidence of a plebeian (in)ability to deliver a tragic experience that would move its aristocratic spectators in conventional ways.

Or is it? Given the plebeian status of Shakespeare and his fellows, it would be strange indeed for him to accede to Sidney's aristocratic poetics. As I will argue, in spite of his considerable indebtedness to Sidney's work, Shakespeare in fact rejects his poetics – what Jacques Rancière has called the representation regime – in favor of an aesthetics that anticipates a Kantian political aesthetics. Hence his juxtaposition of Theseus's infamous speech on poets, madmen, and lovers with Bottom's synesthetic mangling of verses from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* – an aesthetic theology, if you will. But Shakespearean aesthetics refuses one of the most basic abjections that would subsequently come to define modern aesthetics: the aesthetic elevation of creativity and genius at the expense of craft, which becomes associated with rule-bound application (Kant) and *technē* (Heidegger). For *MND* assigns aesthetic production to “rude mechanicals,” or producers whom the aristocratic-leaning Puck reduces to machinery, and grants to a weaver of textiles a transcendent vision redolent of the status-suppressive theology of a tent-making saint.

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“In the spicèd Indian air, by night”: Violation of Borders in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ABSTRACT: In “The Company of Wolves,” Angela Carter defines solstice as “the hinge of the year when things do not fit together as well as they should” (144). In this paper, I want to suggest that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare explores the hinge between parallel worlds, a form of doubling that inspires terror with sinister overtones. These worlds have thin boundaries and unexpected portals that permit the crossing from one side to the other, but the two sides can never be reconciled, and they pose a threat to self and society: they do not fit together as well as they should. Portals open into the unknown and to parallel realms of darkness and shadow. Shakespeare represents forces that disturb and destabilize the natural, empirical, logical boundaries of reality, and suggest coincidences of opposites and the mysteries in the dark corners of the human mind. The fairies are Romany-like travelers: they camp out on the outskirts of Athens, where, as Puck puts it “The king [Oberon] doth keep his revels here tonight” (2.1.18), and where Puck himself sets out to “mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm” (2.1.39). One instant they are treading “the farthest steep pf India” (2.1.69) and basking “in the spicèd Indian air, by night” (2.1.124); another they are toying with the minds, bodies, and dreams of the Athenians. And then they take flight, as Oberon

proposes to Titania: “Then, my queen, in silent sad / Trip we after night’s shade, / We the globe can compass soon/ Swifter than the wandering moon” (4.1.94-97). Unlike C. L. Barber and Northrop Frye, who suggested that the “green world” experience becomes restorative, I propose that the encounter between humans and fairies reveals that home borders on something wild; the recurring violation of borders destabilizes the very notion of home in the play.

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Emma Whipday (University of Newcastle)

**“Suddenly he was hoisted up into the air”:  
Fairies, Familiars, and the Demonic Antecedents of Puck**

What are Shakespeare’s fairies? How do they fit into the three worlds on the vertical axis of the Elizabethan stage – heaven, earth, and hell? Are they divine, demonic, or something else? Engaging with Deborah Willis’ suggestion that fairies are ‘part of the “third world”... an intermediate realm between heaven and hell’, this paper will examine how Shakespeare’s constructions of fairy lore are in conversation with early modern witchcraft narratives. I will focus on *A Most Wicked Work of a Wretched Witch* (1592), in which a farm labourer is dragged over hill and down dale on a Puckish journey that leads to hell. In so doing, I will explore how creative practice can illuminate commonalities between *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Elizabethan cheap print.

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