



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Fairies of A Midsummer Night's Dream

Author(s): Standish Henning

Source: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Autumn, 1969, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 484-486

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2868566>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Shakespeare Quarterly*

JSTOR

Faire workmanship, quoth she, of that faire hand,
 All-mooving organ, sweet spheare-tuning kay,
 The Messenger of *Joves* sleep-charming wand. . . .
 (2759-2761)

These lines are, of course, close to Cleopatra's remark about the dead Antony:

. . . his voice was propertied
 As all the tuned spheres. . . .
 (V. ii. 83-84)

All of these resemblances are to be seen not as signs that Shakespeare was inspired by Drayton's poem, but, rather, as illustrations of independent use of similar themes and *topoi*. The large number of parallels, however, does suggest that Drayton's work might be of value when we consider the morality of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Those who maintain that Antony and Cleopatra are to be seen as negative exemplars often stress the condemnatory tone in most pre-Shakespearian accounts of the couple.⁸ But, as we have observed, at least one Elizabethan, William Harbert, evidently saw a likeness between the lovers presented in *Mortimeriados* and those Shakespeare was to write about. Whether or not others saw this particular resemblance, Drayton's epic offered a contemporary precedent, if one were desired, for extremely eulogistic treatment of historical characters known to have participated in a morally questionable love affair.⁹ Indeed, we may apply to *Mortimeriados* Wimsatt's remark about *Antony and Cleopatra*: "The poetic values are strictly dependent—if not upon the immorality as such—yet upon the immoral acts."¹⁰

Queens College, Flushing

⁸ See, e.g., Franklin M. Dickey, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (San Marino, Calif., 1957), pp. 144-202.

⁹ Cf. Nearing's remarks on the Elizabethan literature of "exoneration"—pp. 36-41, 50-51, and 82.

¹⁰ *The Verbal Icon*, p. 97.

The Fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

STANDISH HENNING

The size of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has engaged the attention of many students, and it is a commonplace of criticism to credit Shakespeare with first diminishing them for poetry from the dwarfish size they had enjoyed in most of the preceding literature to the size required of one who must "hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear".¹ But one book, probably a source of the play, does in fact mention the diminutive size of fairies, though they are not so called. Early in Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), there is a chapter (I, 4) called "What miraculous actions are imputed to witches

¹ See, e.g., Kathleen Lynch, "The Folds of Folklore", *Shakespeare Survey* 17 (1964), p. 169, and *The Anatomy of Puck* (London, 1959), p. 45; Frank Sidgwick, *The Sources and Analogues of "A Midsummer-Night's Dream"* (New York, 1908), p. 65. Nevill Coghill sees Shrimp in Munday's *John a Kent* (1589-1590) as a model for Puck in *Shakespeare's Professional Skills* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 50.

by witchmongers, papists, and poets”, a chapter which combines in a striking fashion several elements used in the description of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Scot, speaking of certain “hurtful witches”, says of their extremely small size, “They can go in and out at awger holes, & saile in an egge shell, a cockle or muscle shell, through and vnder the tempestuous seas” (C5^r). They can also “raise haile, tempests, and hurtfull weather; as lightening, thunder &c” (C5), reminding us of the damaging weather produced by the marital discord of Titania and Oberon. Like Puck with his misapplied love juice, these same witches can make themselves invisible and “alter mens minds to inordinate loue or hate” (C5^r) or again like him but with less sinister effect, “also bring to passe, that chearne as long as you list, your butter will not come; especiallye, if . . . the maids haue eaten vp the creame . . .” (C5), the last clause being Scot’s wry “scientific” explanation of the same failure. Now no doubt the powers ascribed to these witches were commonplace in folklore, especially the maleficent treatment of the cream, but more important is the fact that these powers are all gathered together in one place in conjunction with a description of exceedingly tiny “witches”, capable no doubt of stealing honey bags from the humble bee.

Scot’s book has long been recognized as a probable source for parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly for Bottom’s metamorphosis. Hence it is interesting to note that Ovid is among the poets blamed for affirming that witches have power over the weather as Titania and Oberon do. Opposite the sentence “they can raise and suppress lightening and thunder, raine and haile, clouds and winds, tempests and earthquakes” (C5^r) is the marginal note “*Ouid. lib. metamorphoseon 7*”, a reference to the book containing Medea’s incantation, part of which Shakespeare later borrowed for *The Tempest*. I quote Golding:

ye Elves of Hilles, of Brookes, of Woods alone,
Of standing lakes, and of the Night approche ye everychone.
Through helpe of whome (the crooked bankes much wondring at the thing)
I have compelled streames to run cleane backward to their spring.
By charmes I make the calme Seas rough, and make y^e rough Seas plaine
And cover all the Skie with Cloudes, and chase them thence againe.²

Shakespeare’s knowledge of Book Seven is detailed in T. W. Baldwin’s *William Shakspeare’s Small Latine & Lesse Greeke*, II, 436-440, where, concluding his survey, he says, “It is . . . clear that by or before the time of *Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakspeare had read with some attention to detail the story of Jason and Medea both in an original . . . and with Golding’s translation” (II, 440). And it is certainly possible that the marginal reference in Scot might have sent Shakespeare to refresh his memory of Ovid.

Not only does it seem likely that Shakespeare had Book I, chapter 4, of *The Discovery of Witchcraft* in mind as he planned the play, but also it is possible that the chapter offers a hint as to why he invented the tiny fairies. For why he decided to present an added if modest burden to his audience’s imagination is not immediately clear; having boy actors to play traditionally child-size fairies, why does he wanton with us by making them tiny? The purpose of Scot’s

² *Shakespeare’s Ovid*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (London, 1961), p. 142 (lines 265-270).

chapter is to mock witchmongers, papists, and poets who utter the wares of the imagination used by Shakespeare, though with a difference, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite the admirable purpose of *The Discovery*, the linking of these three categories is invidious comparison with a vengeance, little likely to find assent in a man who, like Shakespeare, was in the process of examining the workings of the imagination. Bullough, including four different chapters from *The Discovery* in his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, strikes the right note when he suggests that Scot's "solemn nonsense" about the man transformed into an ass "must have amused the poet, who laughingly answers Scot by showing transformations happening" (I, 373), and, it may be added, by presenting tiny fairies. But equally important is the more serious point made by modern criticism that despite Theseus' joining of another odd trio, the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, it is Hippolita's view of the story of the night which is affirmed. Shakespeare, along with Sidney and Marlowe, to name only two, was sure that what poets feign "More witnesseth than fancy's images And grows to something of great constancy."

University of Wisconsin

This Fell Sergeant, Death

REBECCA E. PITTS

Among students of Shakespeare one topic in particular has been much debated in recent years—the relationship (if any) between Shakespearian drama and the doctrines and attitudes of the Christian faith. In this continuing dialogue *Hamlet* ought to be a gold mine for the theologizers and the anti-theologizers as well. The play is richer and more explicit than most of the others in its direct references to Christian beliefs and in its dramatization of Christian problems and dilemmas; and in such a context it is not unreasonable to assume that Shakespeare has expressed more of his own religious position than he has elsewhere done. One is tempted to suppose, for example, that since Shakespeare has created a "Christian Prince", this fact in itself tells us something positive about the poet's personal attitude toward Christianity.

Shakespeare, however, has a way of standing free. As Roland M. Frye has recently shown in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*,¹ the poet never makes use of ethical or theological ideas except in ways that are *dramatically* appropriate and consistent; and we shall never be able to tease out of selected passages from the plays any information as to what he consciously believed about the ultimate fate of the soul or the ultimate nature of reality. On the other hand a poet betrays much of his inmost experience and many of his unconscious assumptions and forgotten sources, whenever, in the heat of inspiration, he creates a rich and vibrant figure of speech. It is the purpose of the following little essay to examine one such figure—Hamlet's dying words on death—in an attempt to see what light this metaphor may shed on Shakespeare's complex relation to Christian faith and Christian meanings.

Hamlet and Laertes have just pricked each other, mortally, with the same

¹ Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton, 1963).