


A Midsummer Night's Dream: **Shakespeare's Aristophanic Comedy** **Earl Showerman**

"So far as native talent goes, there is no Greek dramatist that stands anywhere near Shakespeare, though Aristophanes suggests him."¹

☞ John Jay Chapman, *Greek Genius and Other Essays* (1915)

wentieth century literary criticism rarely examined the possibility that Shakespeare was influenced by 5th-century (BCE) Greek dramas. The works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes had been neither translated nor published in England in Shakespeare's lifetime,² hence the dearth of scholarship addressing the possible influence of Attic theater on the Elizabethan stage. In *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (1903), Robert Kilburn Root expressed the opinion on Shakespeare's "lesse Greek" that presaged a century of scholarly neglect,³ most recently echoed by A.D. Nuttal in "Action at a distance: Shakespeare and the Greeks":

That Shakespeare was cut off from Greek poetry and drama is probably a bleak truth that we should accept. A case can be made — and has been made — for Shakespeare's having some knowledge of certain Greek plays, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Euripides' *Orestes*, *Alcestis*, and *Hecuba*, by way of available Latin versions, but this, surely, is an area in which the faint occasional echoes mean less than the circumambient silence. When we consider how hungrily Shakespeare feeds upon Ovid, learning from him, or extending him at every turn, it becomes more evident that he cannot in any serious sense have found his way to Euripides.⁴

Nevertheless, a few scholars have examined Greek tragedy and tragicomedy for their influence on a number of Shakespeare's plays. Renowned Greek scholar Gilbert Murray⁵ and Shakespeare scholars Jan Kott⁶ and Louise Schleiner⁷ have argued convincingly that Aeschylus's *Oresteia* influenced *Hamlet*.⁸ More recently, Jonathan Bate,⁹ Sarah Dewar-Watson¹⁰ and Claire McEachern¹¹ have all acknowledged that Euripides's tragicomedy *Alcestis* is a direct source for the final scenes of both *The Winter's Tale* and *Much Ado about Nothing*.¹² George Stevens, J.A.K. Thompson, J. Churton Collins and Emrys Jones have argued that *Titus Andronicus* was indebted to Euripides's *Hecuba* and Sophocles's *Ajax*, while A.D. Nuttall himself has presented evidence of Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* being remarkably similar to *Timon of Athens*.¹³ Inga Stina-Ewbank¹⁴ has recently proposed that Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* influenced *Macbeth*, and others have identified a variety of Greek dramatic elements in this dark tragedy.¹⁵

While commentaries on the influence of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides on Shakespeare are extant, the role of Aristophanes and Old Comedy in the development of Elizabethan theater has remained unacknowledged by virtually all scholars. In *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (1955), Muriel Bradbrook summarizes the collective influences on Shakespearean comedy without reference to Aristophanes or to Old Comedy:

Needless to say, opinion has not been wanting that Shakespeare modeled himself on the Comedia dell'Arte, and that his work was precisely of this kind. He was confronted with the alternatives of Italian tradition, with all its prestige and its ready models, or the shapeless native popular play, in which material designed for narrative was struggling to accommodate itself to dramatic form. Each type had its own set of incidents and characters. For the first there was the Plautine tradition of mistakings and farce; for the second, a series of marvelous and inconsequent adventures, probably involving magic. The characters of the first kind were those descended from the Masks of ancient comedy, but modified by rhetorical 'Characters', and by medieval practice of character-drawing in debate and homily, sermon and moral play.¹⁶

In his chapter on "Classical Influence in Comedy" (1911), Tucker Brooke expressed the general opinion that has since prevailed regarding the singular importance of Roman comedy: "Greek drama was at the time much too little known to exert influence upon the popular or even in any appreciable measure upon the purely academic theatre."¹⁷ In *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (1974), Leo Salingar devotes forty pages to describing and interpreting the comedies of Aristophanes and the themes of Greek Old Comedy, but ultimately echoes Brooke and Bradbrook by never suggesting that they were direct sources: "Athenian Old Comedy had been a political celebration, Roman comedy, a festive entertainment. The achievement of the Italians in the early sixteenth century was to reintroduce the methods as well as the spirit of Roman comedy to modern Europe...."¹⁸

In the most recent study of this subject, *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* (2013), Oxford University Senior Research Fellow Colin Burrow includes extended chapters on Virgil, Ovid, Roman Comedy, Seneca and Plutarch, but makes not one reference to Aristophanes's or Old Comedy, and dismisses the notion that Shakespeare owed any direct debt to the dramatic literature of 5th-century Athens:

Shakespeare almost certainly never read Sophocles or Euripides (let alone the much more difficult Aeschylus) in Greek, and yet he managed to write tragedies which invite comparison with those authors. He did so despite the limitations of his classical knowledge, and perhaps in part because of them. He read Plutarch in North's translation rather than reading Sophocles in Greek. This means that he read a direct clear statement about the relationship between divine promptings and human actions rather than plays in which complex thoughts about the interrelationship between human and divine agency were buried implicitly within a drama. Having 'less Greek' could therefore have enabled him to appear to understand more about Greek tragedy, and its complex mingling of voluntary actions and divine promptings, than he would have done if he had actually been able to work his way through Aeschylus and Euripides in the first place.¹⁹

Countering the arguments of Root, Nutall and Burrow, J. Churton Collins identified a number of 16th-century Latin translations of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides that were published in Paris, Bale, Venice, and Frankfurt. Collins noted that many of these rare editions had "elucidatory notes, while the Latin of the literal versions is remarkably simple and lucid, it is in itself improbable, almost to the point of being incredible, that Shakespeare should not have had the curiosity to turn to them."²⁰ Although Collins mentions the existence of Latin editions of Aristophanes, he concluded that "beyond a few coincidences, which seem purely accidental, I find no trace in Shakespeare of any acquaintance with Aristophanes."²¹ In the way of explaining his rejection of Aristophanes's influence, Collins notes that no translation could make understandable what is so "essentially indigenous," "local and peculiar," with an "exquisite lyric vein" intelligible only to "professed scholars."

Here, I will examine the evidence that Shakespeare's Athenian comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, displays numerous elements of Greek Old Comedy, and that Aristophanes's masterpiece, *The Birds*, was a direct source. Both of these festive comedies feature protagonists who are refugees from Athenian laws and present humans metamorphosed into grotesque animal forms, "translated" Bottom and Aristophanes's heroes who sprout wings by eating a magical plant, and both conclude with consecrated marriages, followed by approval-seeking epilogues.

The Birds and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are self-consciously literate, political comedies, with copious literary allusions and topical references. In *The Birds*, Aristophanes portrays Hercules as a gluttonous bully, while Shakespeare's ravenous "Bully Bottom" proclaims he could "play er'cles rarely" and bombasts out a parody

of the prologue to John Studley's English translation of Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus*. Aristophanes often provided entertainment by parody of tragedy. According to F.H. Sandbach: "The simplest form of parody was the introduction of vocabulary drawn from tragedy, which used much language that was not in ordinary Attic speech. Put in the mouth of a down-to-earth character, this was comically inappropriate...."²² In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, C.L. Barber makes a parallel observation:

There is a great deal of incidental amusement in the parody and burlesque with which *Pyramus and Thisbe* is loaded. It burlesques the substance of the death scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in a style which combines ineptitudes from Golding's translation of Ovid with locutions from the crudest doggerel drama.²³

Finally, the identification of Queen Elizabeth and the French Duke of Alençon with Shakespeare's Titania and Bottom underlies the presence of an allegorical subplot in Shakespeare's *Dream* that is emblematic of traditional Aristophanic political satire.

While numerous scholars have noted that the story of the four young lovers is a variation on the basic plot of classical New Comedy in which a daughter is forbidden to marry her beloved by the will of her father, and then finds a means to overcome his resistance, Shakespeare was writing far more than an imitation of New Comedy. His mastery of mimesis, adapting character names, incidents, ideas, plots and images from a wide variety of literary sources is never more evident than in *Dream*. Although no primary source has ever been identified for the central plot, many sources have been noted from Greek, Roman, Biblical, Medieval and Renaissance works, making this comedy one of Shakespeare's most source-rich works. The significance of this technique is underlined by R.A. Foakes in the introduction to his 1984 Cambridge University Press edition in which he notes that the "tragical mirth" of *Pyramus and Thisbe* as a "conscious burlesque":

The detection of these has its own fascination and is useful insofar as they illustrate the workings of Shakespeare's imagination, but the most notable feature of the play is the dramatist's inventiveness, brilliantly fusing scattered elements from legend, folklore and earlier books and plays into a whole that remains as fresh and original now as when it was composed. The range of reference underlying it deserves attention also, however, because it helps to explain something of the archetypal force of the comedy, showing the dramatist's instinct for seizing on whatever might articulate and enrich the web of meanings and relationships developed in it.²⁴

Shakespeare's inventiveness echoes similar critical commentaries on Aristophanes's *The Birds*, the longest and arguably the most lyrical of Aristophanes's eleven comedies. Editors Whitney Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., note that "its general merits are such that the relatively small amount of bawdiness in it has led

many to designate it as the finest, or at least the most delightful, of Aristophanes's compositions."²⁵ Notably, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is similarly considered the least bawdy of Shakespeare's comedies.²⁶ In *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero*, Cedric H. Whitman writes:

The Birds is, as a rule, regarded as the most mysterious of the comedies... the poet's masterpiece.... *The Birds* plays with language in a way far beyond any of the other comedies, and the sense of reality undergoes considerable change by consequence.... [O]ne vast finely woven texture of word plays, creates the absurd and wonderful metaphor of Utopia....²⁷

The editor of the Notable Names Database has similarly emphasized the extraordinary quality of Aristophanes's lyric inventiveness: "His truest and finest faculty is revealed by those wonderful bits of lyric writing in which he soars above everything that can move laughter to tears, and makes the clear air thrill with the notes of a song as free, as musical, and as wild as that of the nightingale invoked by his own chorus in *The Birds*.... Nothing else in Greek poetry has quite this wild sweetness of the woods. Of modern poets Shakespeare alone, perhaps, has it in combination with a like richness and fertility of fancy."²⁸

K. J. Dover has identified two other elements "of great importance" to Aristophanic Old Comedy that suggest Shakespeare's technique in characterizing comic heroes:

[T]he fulfillment of a grandiose ambition by a character with whom the average member of the audience can identify himself, and the fulfillment by supernatural means which overturn many of those sequences of cause and effect with which we are familiar in ordinary life. The gods are treated and portrayed not as the august beings worshipped in hymns and processions to temples, but as Pucks....²⁹

In "Aristophanes's *Birds*: The Fantasy Politics of Eros," William Arrowsmith describes Pisthetairos, the metamorphosed Athenian hero who sprouts wings after eating a magic plant and contrives to claim the scepter of Zeus and marry the god's daughter, Basilia, in terms that suggest Shakespeare's farcical hero, Bottom: "Dionysiac," "lustiness," "enterprise," "ingenuity," "restless, inquisitive innovative intelligence," "*insatiability*."³⁰ Bottom is a character very much like Pisthetairos. William Hazlitt claimed that Bottom was prepared to undertake most anything: "He is for playing the tyrant, the lover, the lady, the lion.... [H]e is not only chief actor but stage manager... who rules the roost among his fellows, and is no less at home in his new character of an ass." Similarly, Dover Wilson has observed that Bottom is "the very embodiment and idealization of that self-esteem" and that he is "ready-witted, unbounded in his self-confidence, and with a conceit nursed into absolute proportion by the admiring deference of his brother clowns."³¹ More recently Colin McGinn

made this observation on Bottom in his book, *Shakespeare's Philosophy*:

He is *theatrical* through and through, sliding effortlessly from one role to the next. He is a weaver by trade and also a weaver by vocation – of tales, of imaginative constructions. His imagination sometime runs away with him, taxing his linguistic abilities (which are comically off kilter). He is a master of transformation, always on the alert for what he can become, ready to accept any role that is offered to him. He is, in an important sense, a self-created being.³²

Festive Drama as Renaissance Epithalamium

The dramatic presentations of 5th-century Athens, the tragedies, comedies and dithyramb competitions, were celebratory and festive, featuring music and dance, and meant for performance during religious holidays. The seasonal celebrations of the Greater City Dionysia took place in March, and the Lenaea Festivals in December. The theater of Dionysius in Athens was, technically, a sacred temple, and the performance of dramatic works a display of religious piety. In "Dithyramb and Paean in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (1974), Neil Issacs and Jack Reese comment that Shakespeare's comedy similarly seems to be "patterned on a Dionysian celebration."³³ In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959), C.L. Barber also noted that several Shakespeare comedies appear to be saturnalian cultural equivalents of the comedies of Aristophanes:

Once Shakespeare finds his own distinctive style, he is more Aristophanic than any other great English comic dramatist, despite the fact that the accepted educated models and theories when he started to write were Terrentian and Plautine. The Old Comedy cast of his work results from his participation in native saturnalian traditions of the popular theatre and popular holidays."³⁴

Barber emphasized the singular importance of *Dream* in recognizing Shakespeare's art as a festive dramatist, combining elements from the rites of May and Midsummer Night:

In ... *Love's Labour's Lost*, instead of dramatizing a borrowed plot, he built his slight story around an aristocratic entertainment. In doing so he worked out the holiday sequence of release and clarification which comes into its own in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This more serious play, his first comic masterpiece, has a crucial place in his development. To make a dramatic epithalamium, he expressed with full imaginative resonance the experience of the traditional summer holidays. He thus found his way back to a native festival tradition remarkably similar to that behind Aristophanes at the start of the literary tradition of comedy.³⁵

A number of Shakespeare scholars have suggested that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was commissioned to celebrate a wedding among the nobility. Harold Bloom has argued that Shakespeare composed this comedy "probably on a commission for a noble marriage, where it was played,"³⁶ and Kenneth Burke has similarly suggested it was written "as a kind of masque, to celebrate a wedding among persons of nobility, the 'Dream' simply exports the aesthetic and cultural values of the court to a series of fanciful scenes in the woods..."³⁷

In "On the Chronology and Performance Venue of *A Midsummer Night's Dreame*,"³⁸ Roger Stritmatter reviewed earlier scholarship on the premise that the play was written as a dramatic, festive epithalamium, and examines arguments related to dating it and to possible topical references to events at Elizabeth's court. He notes that over a century ago, H.H. Furness endorsed this theory and suggested one of three wedding ceremonies as possible venues for its performance: Earl of Essex and Frances Sidney (1590), Earl of Derby and Elizabeth Vere (1595), and Earl of Southampton and Elizabeth Vernon (1598). Stritmatter also cites E.K. Chambers's comment that "the hymeneal character of the theme has led to the reasonable conjecture that the play was given at a noble wedding." Chambers identified the marriage of Sir Thomas Heneage and Mary Browne Wriothsesley, the dowager Countess of Southampton, in May 1594 as another possible occasion for *Dream*. Stritmatter further notes that Shakespeare editor A.L. Rowse and Southampton biographer Charlotte Stopes concur with Chambers, and concludes that *Dream* was most likely written as a dramatic epithalamium for the Heneage-Browne union in 1594.³⁹

Appropriate to the occasion of a wedding, there are references to Cupid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an association which evokes comparison to *The Birds*. In *Dream*, there are six separate allusions to Cupid, and several more to Venus, as well as one to Apollo's love-shaft-induced pursuit of Daphne.⁴⁰ Similarly, in *The Birds*, Eros, the equivalent Greek god of love, is recognized for his archetypal significance as progenitor of the race of birds as sung in the opening passage of a choric song:

Firstly, black-winged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Erebus, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Eros with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in deep Tartarus with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light. That the Immortals did not exist until Eros had brought together all the ingredients of the world, and from their marriage Heaven, Ocean, Earth and the imperishable race of blessed gods sprang into being.⁴¹

In "Aristophanes's *Birds*: the Fantasy Politics of Eros," William Arrowsmith emphasizes the importance of this theme:

No other play of Aristophanes, not even *Lysistrata*, is so pervaded, so saturated by the language of desire. *Eros, erastes, epithumia, pothos* – over and over again the note of desire is struck, given constant visual dimension and the stress that only great poetry can confer. Thus, at the very center of the play, in the great first parabasis, radiating forwards and backwards over the whole work, is the cosmogonic presiding presence of primeval Eros – “the golden, the gleaming, the whirlwind Love on shining wings” – ancestor of the Birds, oldest of the gods, the very principle embodied by Cloudcuckooland. And this same Love is present too at the culmination of the play – the “holy marriage” or *heiros gamos*.... “Sing Hymen, Hymenaios O,” cries the chorus, in celebration of the nuptials of the new lord of heaven, whose bridal chariot is driven by “shimmering Love on gleaming wings”....⁴²

How fitting that Aristophanes's comedy ends in a choric tribute to Eros and an invitation to the wedding chamber by Pisthetairos, who now rules the Olympians and has married the incomparable Basilica, whom he robbed from Zeus: “Let all the winged tribes of our fellow citizens follow the bridal couple to the palace of Zeus and the nuptial couch!”⁴³ Shakespeare's hero, Theseus, extends the identical invitation in the final scene of *Dream*: “Sweet friends, to bed. A fortnight hold we this solemnity, in nightly revels and new jollity” (5.1.368-370).

Bird Allusions

The possibility that Shakespeare alluded directly to Aristophanes's *The Birds* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has only recently been proposed by Marianne Kimura in “Midsummer night's dream+sun” (2013). Kimura insightfully notes that Bottom's bird-inspired song in Act III, which serves to awaken Titania from her sleep, is remarkably similar in context and content to a song by Epos, the hoopoe bird, in Aristophanes' comedy, pointing to the “strong likelihood that the famous Greek comedy is one significant source for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.”⁴⁴ Bottom's song is prompted by Peter Quince, who, horrified by the ass-headed monster before him, blurts out in his desperate retreat, “Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.”

Bottom. I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could; but I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here, and I shall sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid.

The woosel cock so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill,
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill –

Titania. What angel wakes me from my flow'ry bed?

Bottom. The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,

The plain-song cuckoo grey,
Whose notes full many a man doth mark,
And dares not answer nay –

For indeed, who would set his wit to so foolish a bird? Who would give a bird the lie, though he cry “cuckoo” never so?

(3.1.117-136)

Titania, under the influence of Oberon’s love potion, proclaims to be “much enamoured of thy note” and “enthralled to thy shape,” and calls on her fairies, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed, to attend on Bottom, to “fetch jewels from the deep” and to sing while he “on pressed flowers doth sleep.” She even promises to purge his “mortal grossness” so that he may “like an airy spirit go.”

Comparing this passage to Epops’s song, which similarly awakens the nightingale Procne in *The Birds*, convinced Kimura that Aristophanes’s comedy influenced Shakespeare’s *Dream*. Epops, who was once the Thracian King Tereus, but was transformed into a hoopoe, sings a song that is longer than Bottom’s, but also has two parts and results in an awakening that eventually draws in a flock of different birds to form the chorus. Epops’s song initiates the dramatic action that leads to the founding of the kingdom of the birds, “Nephelococcygia,” variously translated as “Cuckoonebulopolus” or “Cloudcukooland.”

Epops. Chase off drowsy sleep, dear companion. Let the sacred hymn gush from thy divine throat in melodious strains; roll forth in soft cadence and refreshing melodies to bewail the fate of Itys, which has been the cause of so many tears to us both. Your pure notes rise through the thick leaves of the yew-tree right up to the throne of Zeus, where Phoebus listens to you, Phoebus with his golden hair. And his ivory lyre responds to your plaintive accents; he gathers the choir of the gods and from their immortal lips pours forth a sacred chant of blessed voices.

Epopopoi popoi popopopoi popoi, here, here, quick, quick, quick, my comrades in the air; all you who pillage the fertile lands of the husbandmen, the numberless tribes who gather and devour the barley seeds, the swift dying race that sings so sweetly. And you whose gentle twitter resounds through the fields with little cry of *tiotiotiotiotiotiotio*; and you who hop from the branches of the ivy in the gardens; the mountain birds, who feed on the wild olive-berries or the arbutus, hurry to come at my call, *triototrioto, totobrix*; you also, who snap up the sharp-stinging gnats in the marshy vales, and you who dwell in the fine plain of Marathon, all damp with dew, and you the francolin with speckled wings; you too, the halcyons, who flit over the swelling waves of the sea, come thither to hear the tidings; let all the tribes of long-necked birds assemble here; know that a clever old man has come to us, bringing an entirely new idea and proposing great reforms. Let all come

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to the debate here, here, here, here. *Torotorotorotorotix, kikkabau, kikkabau, torotorotorolilix.*⁴⁵

Kimura suggests that “The second stanza of Epops’ song, with its invocation of many different kinds of birds, a powerful summons which works immediately (many birds instantly arrive in the Greek comedy), is adapted, yet its power is preserved by Shakespeare (in that Titania awakens).”⁴⁶ Bottom has already referred to himself in connection with specific birds when he insists that as a lion he would not “fright the ladies,” but “will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you and twere any nightingale” (1.2.81-84). His double reference to the “cuckoo” bird at the end of his song and discourse may now be understood as another indication of Shakespeare’s familiarity with Aristophanes’s play, where the cuckoo is acknowledged to have a special role, besides now serving as the avian namesake for the birds’ capital:

The cuckoo was king of Egypt and the whole of Phoenicia. When he called out “cuckoo”, all the Phoenicians hurried to the fields to reap their wheat and their barley.⁴⁷

One is tempted to suggest that if Shakespeare is parodying Aristophanes’s bird song, then the “nay” at the end of Bottom’s recitation would have been pronounced like an ass’s “neigh.” The ass makes a distinctive neigh that carries long distances, giving credence to the saying “Not within an ass’s roar.”

Shakespeare mentions many different species of birds in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, including the dove, nightingale, crow, owl, philomel, raven, ousel (blackbird), throstle (song thrush), wren, finch, sparrow, lark, cuckoo, goose, chough and screech owl. All but two of these species are also mentioned in Aristophanes’s comedy. Notably, neither eagles nor other fierce birds of prey mentioned in Aristophanes’s *Birds* are alluded to in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. An additional association between the lovers and birds is again suggested in Act IV of *Dream* when Theseus greets Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius with, “Good morrow, friends. St. Valentine is past/Begin these woodbirds but to couple now?” (4.1.139-140).

The songs that awaken Titania and Procne initiate the arrival of a chorus of winged servants in both comedies. A fairy chorus in *Dream*, “Philomele, with melody,/Sing in our sweet lullaby,/Lulla, lulla, lullaby, lulla, lulla, lullaby” (3.2.13-15), also has a direct connection to *The Birds*. The hoopoe bird, Epops, who advocates for the Athenians and sings the song that awakens Procne, was once human, according to the myth. Tereus was King of Thrace and married to Procne, but his abduction and rape of Procne’s sister, Philomela, and the savage revenge murder of his son by the sisters results in their all being transformed into birds. Philomela or Procne (depending on the source) becomes a nightingale. The myth is narrated in great detail in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* Book VI.

Aristophanic Political Satire

In the introduction to his 1961 translation of *The Birds*, William Arrowsmith describes this comedy as “Aristophanes’s finest. Splendidly lyrical, shot through with Utopian satire and touched by the sadness of the human condition, its ironic gaiety and power of invention never flag.” He further notes that with great ingenuity and little cogency the comedy has been interpreted as a detailed allegory of the Sicilian expedition. The play has been viewed both as “Aristophanes’ passionate appeal for the reform and renewal of the Athenian public life,” and, alternatively as “a fantastic, escapist extravaganza created as a revealing antidote to the prevalent folly of Athenian political life.”⁴⁸ That Aristophanes was adept at poking fun at contemporary political leaders, poets, philosophers and other figures was common knowledge. According to K.J. Dover:

Of all the men we know from historical sources to have achieved political prominence at Athens during the period 445-385, there was not one who is not attacked or ridiculed in the extant plays of Aristophanes or in the extant citations from the numerous lost plays of the period. Often the attack is on a grand scale: *Knights* is a prolonged and vicious attack on Kleon, Hyperbolus was ridiculed by several poets in a series of comedies.... Pericles, who died two years before Aristophanes’ first play, was similarly attacked during his lifetime, and Aristophanes’ own allusions to him and the part he played in bringing the (Peloponnesian) war about are uncomplimentary in the extreme.⁴⁹

The business of Old Comedy often involved outrageous slanders, for to speak fair of a politician, philosopher, or military leader would have been to violate the satiric spirit and poetic license afforded by Athenian democracy during the Golden Age. New Comedy, as represented by the works of Menander, Plautus and Terence, had none of the political allegorical imprint of Aristophanes. Old Comedy was both topical and mythopoetic, highly inventive and exhibiting an extreme freedom of speech. Leo Salingar’s description of this style is instructive regarding the style of cartoonish caricature of well-known personalities and gods, with talking animals and personified abstractions:

And it regularly employed burlesque for the elements of the scenario, weaving current allusions into parodies of epic, tragedy, myth, fable, religious ritual or state procedure. Because a comedy in Athens was topical and mythical together, neither satire, nor burlesque could operate alone. No comedy of Aristophanes is simply a myth of fable turned to ridicule; still less

is any of them a reconstruction, even in caricature, of current events.⁵⁰

A Midsummer Night's Dream can be shown to include a topical, satiric, political allegory, which clearly establishes that Shakespeare was familiar with the conventions of Greek Old Comedy. The theory that Bottom and the other "rude mechanicals" represent a parody has attracted scholarly interest for over a century. As early as 1877, J. Macmillan Brown observed that "Bottom and his scratch company have long been recognized as a personal satire." However, it was only in *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays: A Study in the Early Court Revels and the Personalities of the Times* (1931) that Eva Turner Clark identified a fully-developed satiric allegorical context. She presented literary and historical evidence that the love affair between Titania and Bottom was a satiric mirror on the courtship of Queen Elizabeth by the young French Duke of Alençon (and Anjou), Hercule Francois de Valois (1555-1584), the youngest son of Henry II of France and Catherine de' Medici.

Historians have identified a number of allegorical literary, dramatic, and artistic responses provoked by the marital negotiations between the Queen and the Duke. In *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (1995), Susan Doran observes that in the masques, plays and other entertainments performed before her from 1561 to 1578, the virginity of Elizabeth was not idealized, but instead marriage was celebrated as a preferable state. Doran argues that beginning in 1578, "the iconography of chastity was imposed on her by writers, painters and their patrons during the matrimonial negotiations," and that for the next three years "opponents of the match cultivated the image of the Virgin Queen as a means of sabotaging the marriage."⁵¹ Commenting on the spectacular two-day triumph, *The Four Foster Children of Desire*, penned by Sir Phillip Sidney and staged over Whitsun in 1581 for the French ambassadors, Doran claims that the event was staged to convey the political message that the English court stood united in its opposition to the French match:

Overall, the allegory portrayed the queen both as an unobtainable object of desire in the chivalric tradition and a neo-Platonic celestial being; the clear message was that her chastity was part of her special mystique and that her marriage to the French prince was therefore out of the question.⁵²

Other dramatic works have been identified by scholars as commenting on this controversial court romance. A century ago Tucker Brooke argued that John Lyly's *Sapho and Phao* was a flattering allusion to the "matrimonial fiasco" between Elizabeth and the Duke, which dragged on for almost a decade before ending in February 1582, a month before the play was presented at court. In the introduction to his edition of *Sapho and Phao* (1991), David Bevington reviewed historical criticism on allegorical interpretations of Lyly's comedy, noting that the playwright "plainly intended his dramatic portrait of Sappho as a compliment to Queen

Elizabeth before whom the play was performed at court.”⁵³ While not endorsing the argument that Sappho and Phao stand for Elizabeth and Alençon, Bevington nonetheless summarizes the supporting evidence put forward by Warwick Bond and other scholars, including Felix Schelling, Albert Feuillerat, Brooke and Elizabeth May Albright.

The most complete review of the literature proposing allegorical representation of the courtship between the Queen and the Duke is developed in Marion Taylor’s 250-page study, *Bottom, Thou Art Translated: Political Allegory in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Related Literature* (1973). Taylor, who does not cite Eva Turner Clark but echoes many of her original textual points, provides a detailed recounting of the allegorical literature, including the works of Edmund Spenser, Phillip Sidney and John Lyly, as they reflect on the protracted affair between Elizabeth and Alençon, “the most important political issue of Elizabeth’s reign — the burning question of succession to the throne.”⁵⁴ To this day, Clark, Taylor and Stritmatter are the only authors to have given this compelling narrative the consideration it deserves. The great irony is that virtually all modern editors have failed to recognize the highly amusing, highly political Elizabethan satirical soap opera that is embedded in this masterful comedy.

Instead, an alternative allegorical interpretation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has become quite popular. In *Shakespeare and Elizabeth: The Meeting of Two Myths* (2009), Helen Hackett notes that, “The clearest reference to Queen Elizabeth in Shakespeare’s works is arguably Oberon’s vision in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, already described in 1895 as the subject of more voluminous speculation than any other twenty-five lines in all of Shakespeare.”⁵⁵

Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts
But I might see Cupid’s fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat’ry moon,
And the imperial vot’ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy free.

(2.1.156-164)

In 1709 Nicholas Rowe identified the “fair vestal throned by the west” as Queen Elizabeth, and, in 1797 James Pluntre proposed that Cupid’s attack upon the vestal was based on the 1575 Princely Pleasures at Kenilworth, sponsored by the Earl of Leicester. In *Will in the World* (2005), Stephen Greenblatt goes even farther in speculating that:

Shakespeare’s sense of the transforming power of theatrical illusions may be traced back to what he heard about or saw for himself in 1575 at Kenilworth,

his sense of the coarse reality that lies beneath the illusions may very well go back to the same festive moment. Virtually the whole last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is given over to a hilarious parody of such amateur theatrical entertainments, which are ridiculed for their plodding ineptitude, their naiveté, their failure to sustain a convincing illusion.⁵⁶

Helen Hackett, however, expresses skepticism regarding the associations and conclusions that scholars have theorized for over a century regarding the implicit connection between Kenilworth and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, noting that the topical reading of Oberon's vision by Greenblatt and other new historicists suggests these critics have "been dazzled by Elizabeth's glamour, and by the desire to assert the power of drama by associating it with the Crown":

The possible connection between Oberon's vision and Elizabeth at Kenilworth has been one of the most enduring and important elements of the double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth. Its history illustrates how that myth has crossed boundaries between academic scholarship, fiction and popular culture, as many different kinds of readers and writers, the custodians and customers in the heritage industry, have taken a shared pleasure and satisfaction in the idea that Shakespeare's first inspiration came from the magnificent, spectacular figure of Elizabeth and the pageants in her honor.⁵⁷

In "Bottom and Titania" (1993), John A. Allen states that "Queen Elizabeth, as the emblem of sovereignty, is the political equivalent of Titania, emblem of nature's sway over living things. Both queens confer the blessing of continuity in their respective realms..."⁵⁸ However, in *Shakespeare and Ovid* (1993), Jonathan Bate clearly states that an association between Titania and Queen Elizabeth is untenable. While Edmund Spenser's Gloriana, the fairy queen, is associated with the chaste Elizabeth, and though Titania is referred to frequently as the fairy queen, to Bate the consequence of such an identification is alarming as Shakespeare's fairy queen fawns on the changeling boy, is chastised for her love of Theseus, and is victimized by Oberon's love-in-idleness liquor:

Shakespeare cannot afford to license the interpretation of this as an image of the Queen in a perverse encounter which upsets both the natural and the social order; if such an interpretation were at all prominent, the Master of the Revels would not have licensed the play. By identifying the queen with the imperial votaress, Shakespeare denies the transgressive identification of her with Titania.⁵⁹

Taking the opposite view, Clark writes that Queen Elizabeth, as the emblem of chastity, was often called the moon goddess and patron of virgins, Diana. In the 1580s, "the Queen and her Maids of Honor had been repeatedly referred to by the

poets of the time as nymphs and fairies. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (III, 173), gave to Diana the name Titania.”⁶⁰ Clark proceeds to widen the matrix of allusions that binds Elizabeth to Titania, who treats Bottom like royalty: “Be kind and courteous to this gentleman,/Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;/Feed him with apricots and dewberries,/With purple grapes, green figs and mulberries;/The honey bags steal from the bumble bees” (3.2.164-168). Finally, Titania instructs the fairies as the scene ends:

Come wait upon him; lead him to my bower.
The moon methinks looks with a wat’ry eye;
And when she weeps, weeps every little flower,
Lamenting some enforced chastity.
Tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently. *Exuent*
(3.2.197-201)

Clark argues that this passage refers specifically to the night of November 21, 1581, when Elizabeth’s maids of honor kept her awake all night with crying in protest over the Queen’s announced engagement to the Duke. To confirm this interpretation, Clark quotes an English translation of William Camden’s Latin edition of *The True and Royal History of the Famous Empresse Elizabeth*: “The Queen’s women with whom she was familiar, wailed, and by laying terrors before her, did so vex her mind with anguish, that she spent the night in doubtful care without sleep, amongst her women which did nothing but weep.”⁶¹

Clark’s analysis also reveals numerous textual clues that suggest Bottom is a satiric portrait of the Duke of Alençon, the last and youngest of Elizabeth’s suitors. Alençon was widely referred to as “Monsieur” while he was in England actively courting Queen Elizabeth between 1578 and 1581. Elizabeth wrote a remarkably ambivalent poem dedicated to him at the end of their affair in 1582:

On Monsieur’s Departure

I grieve and dare not show my discontent:
I love, and yet am forced to seem in hate;
I do, yet dare not say I ever meant;
I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate.
 I am, and not; I freeze and yet I burn.
 Since from myself another self I turned.

My care is like my shadow in the sun –
Follows me flying, flies when I pursue it.
Stands, and lies by me, doth what I have done;
His too familiar care doth make me rue it.
 No means I find to rid him from my breast,

Till by the end of things it be suppressed.

Some gentler passion slide into my mind,
For I am soft and made of melting snow;
Or be more cruel, Love, and be so kind.
Let me or float or sink, be high or low;
Or let me love with some more sweet content,
Or die, and so forget what love e'er meant.

Clark draws specific attention to the fact that Bottom, speaking to the fairies in Act IV, addresses each one as "Mounseieur," repeating the word no less than eight times in sixteen lines of prose (4.1.8-24).

Clark also notes that after his transformation, Bottom refuses "to stir from this place," which may allude to the fact that Alençon was known to have delayed leaving England without Elizabeth's consent to marriage, and that Bottom's repeated demands for a "honey bag" (4.1.13, 15-16) may be allusions to the "moneybags" Elizabeth gave her French suitor; during the years of the marital negotiations she delivered to him over £300,000 for his military campaigns. Historian Stephen Budiansky, in *Her Majesty's Spymaster* (2005), relates that "It cost the Queen £60,000 in promised loans to get him to go and embark upon his own promised expedition to the Low Countries."⁶²

Martin Hume, in *Courtships of Queen Elizabeth: A History of Various Negotiations for her Marriage* (1896), cites documents of the 1581 marital negotiations in which Alençon's ambassador demanded "his coronation immediately after the marriage, secondly the association of him with the Queen in the government, and thirdly the granting to him of a life pension of 60,000 pounds per annum."⁶³ Marion Taylor identifies a parody of this general promise of an annuity referenced satirically in Francis Flute's pathetic remembrance of Bottom:

O sweet bully Bottom! Thus hath he lost sixpence a day during his life;
he could not have 'scaped sixpence a day: an the duke had not given him
sixpence a day for playing Pyramus, I'll be hanged; he would have deserved
it: sixpence a day in Pyramus or nothing.

(5.2.19-24)

A telling allusion to Hercules in Shakespeare's comedy greatly amplifies the associations between Alençon and Bottom. The weaver's claim that he could play Hercules is a direct marker as Alençon's birth name was "Hercule," and he was only rechristened "Francois Hercule" after the death of his older brother, King Francis II. According to Taylor, Alençon was actually of small stature, scarred by smallpox and "so thoroughly un-Herculean" that "he and his family must have found his name to be a continual embarrassment because of its utter ridiculousness."⁶⁴

Bottom: Yet my chief humor is to play the tyrant. I could play Eracles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split.

“The raging rocks
And shivering shocks
Shall break the locks
Of prison gates,
And Phibus’ car
Shall shine from far
And make and mar
The foolish Fates.”

This was lofty. Now name the rest of the players. – This is Eracles vein, a tyrant’s vein. A lover is more condoling.
(1.2.28-41)

Scholars have long recognized this passage as a parody of Hercules’s prologue in John Studley’s 1571 translation of Seneca’s *Hercules Oetaeus*. “Hercles,” as Studley referred to the hero, recounts his own exploits in bad verse with excessive use of alliteration.⁶⁵ This bit of bombastic doggerel is also arguably a satiric mirror of Apollo’s prologue in Euripides’s *Alcestis*, where the god relates how he “tricked the Fates” and gives prophecy that Hercules will arrive in time to wrestle Queen Alcestis from Death. Thus Shakespeare not only mocks Bottom, but Seneca, Studley, Euripides and, quite probably, the Duke of Alençon in one short speech.

Taylor further notes that Bottom’s line about “your French-crown-colored beard, your perfect yellow” and Quince’s reply, “Some of your French crowns have no hair at all, and then you play barefaced” (1.2.93-98), is likely to represent another direct allusion to the French Duke, who was rumored to have gone bald by syphilis:

First it is a pun about French money that could also refer to a French crowned head or royalty such as Alençon, heir to the throne. Second, it is a pun about a head gone bald from the French pox.... Third, it is about a French crowned head-to-be who was outwitted by Elizabeth, who left him “barefaced”. The joke fits Alençon in all three counts....⁶⁶

The matter of Alençon’s facial hair is also likely alluded to in Francis Flute’s objection to being cast as Thisbe, “Nay, faith; let me not play a woman; I have a beard coming” (1.2.47-48). In *The Virgin Queen Elizabeth I, Genius of the Golden Age* (1991), Christopher Hibbert reports this on the Duke’s appearance:

As for his ugliness, this has been much exaggerated, so Fenelon assured the Council. It would certainly not present an insuperable problem even to one “with such a delicate eye as she.” Besides, the Duke would soon grow a beard and that would help to hide such defects as there were.⁶⁷

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Peter Quince's reassurance that "Pyramus is a sweet-fac'd man, a proper man as one shall see on a summer's day" (1.2.86-87) now gains an ironic poignancy.

In 1579, Alençon sent Jean de Simier to negotiate terms of the marriage treaty with 12,000 crowns' worth of jewels. According to Martin Hume, Simier "was a consummate courtier steeped in the dissolute gallantry of the French court" who "artfully made violent love to the Queen under shelter of his master's name."⁶⁸ Elizabeth dubbed Simier her "ape," and the couple soon established an intimacy that scandalized the court. Elizabeth reportedly became more beautiful and happy than she been for over a decade. Simier's influence over Elizabeth so offended Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, and Christopher Hatton that they conspired unsuccessfully to have him assassinated on several occasions.

Christopher Hibbert describes Dudley's concerns regarding the Queen's intoxication with the ambassador in highly suggestive language that adds fodder to the allegorical context of Shakespeare's comedy:

Leicester maintained that Simier's hold over the Queen, his convincing her of the ill-favored and dissolute Duke of [Alençon's] worthiness to be considered a suitable husband, was due less to his skills as an advocate than to the drink he gave her and the "unlawful arts" he practiced upon her. She was clearly fascinated by him. She called him her "Monkey"; and there were reports that she had burst into his bedroom very early one morning, and told him to talk to her "with only his jerkin on."⁶⁹

The "liquor" that Oberon fashions from the "little western flower" is very likely to represent an allusion to Simier's love potion. While Simier was known as Elizabeth's "ape," Alençon himself was called "the imp of the crown of France" in John Stubbs's *Gaping Gulf* slander. Further, the Duke's older brother, Henry III, is known to have referred to him as *le petit magot*, "the little monkey." The relevance to Oberon's description of aphrodisiacal effect of his "love-in-idleness" eye drops is noteworthy:

I'll watch Titania when she is asleep,
And drop the liquor of it in her eyes.
The next thing then she waking looks upon,
Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On *meddling monkey*, or on *busy ape*,
She shall pursue it with the soul of love.

(2.1.177-182, emphasis added)

Marion Taylor has also convincingly identified several members of Alençon's entourage with Bottom's company of "rude mechanicals." Stage manager Peter Quince, she suggests, was named for Alençon's ambassador de Quince, who led the French delegation during the marital treaty negotiations in 1579, and accompanied Alençon on at least one of his visits to England. Francis Flute would naturally

represent another stand-in for “Francois Hercule.” Taylor cleverly notes that Snout the Tinker may be a phonetic equivalent of Alençon’s secretary, Du Bex; *bec* in French means “beak” or “snout.” Taylor argued that “many people in London and at court, and indeed the Queen herself both spoke and wrote French fluently, many of them would catch at once the joke that Snout the Tinker was a satire of another one of Alençon’s envoys who was also in London for some time, the Frenchman Du Bex, the Duke’s personal secretary.”⁷⁰

Although neither Clark nor Taylor suggested that Robin Starveling is named for another courtier, it is not improbable, given the other associations already established, that her “Sweet Robin,” the Earl of Leicester, who more than anyone in England opposed the Alençon match, is represented by Robin Starveling. He is cast as Thisbe’s mother in Act 1 and plays Moonshine in the farcical masque. Both of these roles reflect Dudley’s lifelong intimate attachment to Elizabeth, signified by the moon, his opposition to the Duke’s mission, and his accompanying Alençon to the Low Countries in 1582 and the latter’s investment as the Duke of Brabant. By the same token, the fairy Moth (pronounced *mote*) is likely to have been named for another of Alençon’s ambassadors, le Mothe de Fenelon (also pronounced *mote*).

Taylor includes one last detail to support her theory based on the evidence of which member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men portrayed Bottom in the original production. T.W. Baldwin argued that it was Will Kemp. Like Alençon, Kemp was a rather small man. Significantly, both were noted for their dancing in contemporary records.

Martin Hume states that Elizabeth managed the affair with her “frog” with great aplomb, playing upon this hopes, fears and ambitions “with the dexterity of a juggler.” In the end, after the failure of “The French Fury” to capture Antwerp in 1583, “Alençon, in despair of obtaining sufficient help from Elizabeth ... retired to France, leaving his forces under Marshall Biron. Lovelorn epistles and frantic protestations continued to be passed between him and Elizabeth; but it was acknowledged now that his cause was hopeless, and he fell henceforth entirely under the influence of his mother.”⁷¹

The death of Francois de Valois, Duke of Anjou and Alençon, removed from the scene the last serious suitor to the Queen’s hand in marriage; and his passing bell rang down the curtain upon the longest and most eventful comedy in the history of England.⁷²

In *Her Majesty’s Spymaster*, Stephen Budiansky echoes Hume’s judgment by writing that in the end “their courtship became simply a farce, a bit of political theatre that dragged on three scenes too long, a joke even to the Queen, as she admitted in moments of privacy and candor.”⁷³

As noted, it is ironic and unfortunate that this 16th-century political soap opera, so well documented by historians, has escaped the attention of most literary scholars as an allegorical subtext in Shakespeare’s Athenian comedy. As Roger Stritmatter contextualizes it:

If topical evidence suggests a final composition date of composition in the 1590's, the evidence also reveals an author whose chronological frame of reference stretches back to 1581 or earlier, and whose topical preoccupations included a closely-veiled comic commentary on one of the most explosive issues of the reign: the intersection of the private life and courtships of Elizabeth I and matters of public policy and authority. So often do the Queen, her courtship, and the matter of the succession appear in the critical literature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that it is difficult to avoid concluding that the play constitutes, on one level, a sly commentary on the sexual politics of the Elizabethan era.⁷⁴

Discussion

Harold Bloom called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the author's "first undoubted masterwork, without flaw... of overwhelming originality and power," and observed that the image of the "fair vestal throned by the west" is a vision that constitutes Shakespeare's largest and most direct tribute to his monarch during her lifetime. If Titania and Bottom are truly understood as parodies of Elizabeth and "Monsieur," then Shakespeare appears to have taken unprecedented poetic license in boldly satirizing such a potentially sensitive subject. In all the history of drama, only Aristophanes and the poets of Old Comedy were afforded such liberty in subverting authority through political farce.

The acknowledged sources of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* include a maze of classical, medieval and Renaissance texts: Ovid, Chaucer, Seneca, Plutarch, Apuleius, Lyly, Spenser, Marlowe, *Huon of Bordeaux*, Munday's *John A Kent and John A Cumber*, Robert Greene's *The Scottish History of James IV*, Reginald Scott's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, St. Paul's Epistle to the *Corinthians*, Cooper's *Thesaurus*, *A Handful of Pleasant Delites*, *Of the Silkwormes and their Flies*, and Preston's *Cambises*.⁷⁵ Regarding Shakespeare's method of using so many sources, Kenneth Muir has observed that "A study of the tragical mirth of Quince's interlude leads one right to the heart of Shakespeare's craftsmanship and even throws light on the workings of the poetic imagination."⁷⁶

To this long list, Aristophanes's *The Birds* needs to be included as a likely source. Similar to Shakespeare's *Dream*, *The Birds* is a self-consciously literate comedy which makes direct reference to a pantheon of literary and political figures. These include playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Phrynicus, Cinesias and Callias; Aesop; philosophers Thales, Socrates, and his disciples, Prodicus of Ceos and Aeschines Socraticus; lyric poets Simonides, Archilocus and Pindar; and political figures Nicias, Cleisthenes, Theogenes, Timon and Solon. The metamorphosis of a human into a grotesque animal form occurs only in *The Birds* in all of Aristophanes's extant comedies and only in *Dream* among those attributed to Shakespeare. Given all these associations, why have scholars not included it in the discussion of the

myriad accepted sources for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

In his highly regarded study, *Shakespeare and the Classics* (1952), J.A.K. Thomson concludes that while the playwright's Latin was "formidable," "Greek was out of the question." Similarly, in *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (2003), Michelle and Charles Martindale echo Thomson's rejection of Greek drama as a potential source:

Any Greek language Shakespeare had would not have been sufficient to allow him to read the extremely taxing poetry of the fifth century BC. Renaissance culture remained primarily Latin-based....Moreover, despite all efforts, no one has succeeded in producing one single piece of evidence from the plays to make any such debt certain, or even particularly likely.⁷⁷

More recently, Laurie Maguire has challenged the notion of Shakespeare's "lesse Greek": "It is a truth universally acknowledged that Shakespeare's acquaintance with Greek myth and drama was mediated by Roman redactions: Seneca, Ovid, Virgil. Yet critics (with embarrassment, with apology, with a submerged sense of inconvenience) repeatedly note Hellenic dramatic influence in Shakespeare, an influence they are obliged to classify as an affinity."⁷⁸

Kenneth Burke has insightfully noted that in the development of Greek drama, technology would have been rudimentary, that "many visual aspects of a performance must have been quite crude. Consider, for example, the tragedies which involve the appearance of a god in a machine, the *deus ex machina*. Doubtless the very awkwardness made it good fun to have such a figure in Aristophanic comedy, somewhat as with the farcical performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*...."⁷⁹ Burke's observation raises further doubt on the wisdom of ignoring the legitimate question of Shakespeare's debt to Greek Old Comedy. This is a topic worthy of serious philological examination, especially as it pertains to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The failure to consider Greek Old Comedy in Shakespeare criticism stems from the awareness that the works of Aristophanes had not been translated into English before or during the period Shakespeare is likely to have written his plays. Except for productions of two comedies earlier in the century, Aristophanes's plays had never been performed in England. As Katherine Lever attests in "Greek Comedy on the Sixteenth century English Stage":

The *Plutus* and the *Peace* of Aristophanes were performed at Cambridge in 1536 and 1546 respectively, the only known performances of Greek comedy in England during the sixteenth century. What impression, if any, these performances made on the audiences, we do not know, for no record has survived of their opinion.⁸⁰

The *Peace* was the last Greek comedy performed at Cambridge. Plautus, Terence and Seneca displaced Aristophanes, replacing these politically controversial dramas with productions of farces, romances and tragedies.⁸¹

Independent scholar Myron Stagman has nonetheless proposed that Shakespeare was directly influenced by all the 5th-century Greek playwrights, including Aristophanes. In *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret* (2011), Stagman argues that there are many unmediated textual correspondences between 5th-century Greek dramas and the plays of Shakespeare, and that Shakespeare's artistic achievement was unique precisely because of his mastery of the Attic drama. His book lists many potential textual connections between Shakespeare and the Greeks, and he speculates that the poet's education must have included readings from Homer, Lucian, Pindar and the Athenian playwrights. Problematically, most of these works existed only in Greek editions or Latin translations published on the Continent. In *The Burlesque Comedies of Aristophanes* (2000), Stagman writes:

In all literature, no one has acquired as much well-earned notoriety for humorous obscenity as Aristophanes. Shakespeare is his rival and, I contend, deliberate disciple.⁸²

As to Shakespeare's use of bawdry, Eric Partridge includes a glossary of over 200 pages of obscene terms in *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947), and more recently Pauline Kiernan's *Filthy Shakespeare* (2006) offers up over seventy examples of sexual allusions. Female sexuality, Kiernan contends, is most often expressed as linguistic transgression through oblique commentaries, with the chief rhetorical figure being the pun, what Dr. Johnson called "Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra."

On the prolific use of obscene language in Attic comedy, Jeffrey Henderson, author of the *Maculate Muse*, offers a remarkably similar commentary:

The plays of Aristophanes burst with jokes and buffoonery of all kinds: in the service of satire, abuse, parody, irony, and surrealist absurdity are countless plays on words, comic distortions of proper names, ludicrous and extravagant compounds, constant shifting between different proprieties of diction, verbal surprises, equivocations, deceptions. Although the physical action must have been fast-paced and colorful, it is primarily in his verbal pyrotechnics that the genius of Aristophanes ... resides.⁸³

Henderson points out how Aristophanes used obscenity as a vehicle for ridicule, satire, and comic representation which "could not be equaled by any other weapon in the poet's arsenal" and derived its license from the democratic openness of Periclean Athens.⁸⁴

Regarding Aristophanes as a source for Shakespeare, Myron Stagman and Marianne Kimura are unique, even among the minority of scholars who have previously argued for Shakespeare's familiarity with Greek tragedy and tragicomedy. The classical model for Elizabethan comedy was, after all, New Comedy.

Stagman proposes that Aristophanes's works influenced a number of Shakespeare's dramas, including *Othello*⁸⁵ and *Timon of Athens*,⁸⁶ and that Falstaff in

1 *Henry IV* bears a remarkable resemblance to Aristophanes's parodies of Cleonymus, an Athenian politician and general during the 420s who is referred to no less than sixteen times in seven different comedies by Aristophanes. Cleonymus is repeatedly presented as a glutton and liar, "the butt of Athens for his bulk and his appetite." Importantly, he is satirically ridiculed by Aristophanes for his "better part of valor" cowardice in having cast away his shield at Delium in 424 BC.⁸⁷

One thinks about the Elizabethan playwright's propensity toward the use of bawdry, accents, the depiction of eccentricity, and the epilogue which intimately addresses the audience. The use of choruses, prologues, and epilogues came to Shakespeare, directly or indirectly, from Greek Drama.... Aristophanes wrote a special kind of epilogue, and Shakespeare commonly wrote that special type.⁸⁸

Seven of Aristophanes's eleven extant plays end with choric epilogues. Similar to Shakespeare's, they "often address the audience intimately and express the hope or assurance that the play was well received."⁸⁹ Aristophanes's epilogues frequently even made a plea that the playwright be awarded first prize in the competition. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck makes a similar appeal in the closing lines of the comedy, calling for applause rather than the snake-like hiss of offense taken:

And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unlearned luck
Now to scape the serpents tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck's a liar call.
So good night until you all.
Give me your hands if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.
(5.1.431-438)

In summary, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a mimetic masterwork of borrowed plots, literary allusions, parody, and mocking satire on the politics of the Elizabethan court and a romantic French Duke. Like Aristophanes's masterpiece, *The Birds*, *Dream* incorporates a dense matrix of bird allusions and songs, animal metamorphosis, paeans to Cupid /Eros, and concludes with marriage and an epilogue, the canonical trademarks of Greek Old Comedy. The evidence that Shakespeare's creative imagination was influenced by 5th-century Greek dramas is substantial, but has been unrecognized by most 20th-century Shakespeare critics, who turned away from philological investigation of rare Greek texts.

Oxfordian Coda

The lacuna in Shakespeare studies presented—a century-long reticence to address fully the question of Greek dramatic sources—may be indirectly related to the Shakespeare authorship question. Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, now the primary alternative candidate, had an outstanding education and would have had access to the Greek texts of Attic tragedies and comedies in his youth through his tutor, Cambridge University Greek orator and Vice-Chancellor Sir Thomas Smith.⁹⁰ Smith was provably familiar with the conventions and texts of the classical theater as he helped produce first the *Plutus* (1536) and then the *Peace* (1546) of Aristophanes at Cambridge University.⁹¹

As for access to translators and continental editions of Greek texts, for nearly a decade Oxford lived at Cecil House, where he was in close contact with England's leading translators, including his maternal uncle, Arthur Golding (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 1567), George Gascoigne (Euripides's *Phoenissiae*, 1572), and Arthur Hall (the first ten books of Homer's *Iliad*, 1581). Smith and Cecil possessed Greek editions of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Plato in their libraries. Further, Mildred Cecil, the Earl of Oxford's mother-in-law, was also an accomplished Greek translator. John Strype (quoting Roger Ascham) said, "Mildred Cecil spoke and understood Greek as easily as she spoke English."⁹² In Caroline Bowden's recent article, "The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley," the inventory of her Greek editions makes clear that Edward de Vere would have had ready access to the plays of Attic tragedians.

The call for greater study of Greek sources made by the few scholars who have seriously investigated the question runs counter to the arbitrary limits accepted by most modern Shakespeare critics, who refuse to consider Greek dramatists as possible sources because of Shakespeare's supposed lack of education and limited access to continental editions. The authorship claim of the Earl of Oxford, who throughout his life was surrounded by scholars versed in the Greek canon, may itself operate to limit the intellectual vigor of Shakespeare studies simply because Oxford is a far superior candidate than the Stratford man, at least as to their respective ability to create plays based on 5th-century Greek tragedies and comedies. The recent colloquium at the University of York, "Greek Texts and the Early Modern Stage," may be a healthy sign that the times are changing.⁹³

Evidence that the Earl of Oxford had a personal relationship with the Duke of Alençon and was privy to the details of the marital negotiations is uncontested. Oxford would certainly have met Alençon at the coronation of Henry III in 1575, and he famously refused to dance for the French delegation headed by Ambassador de Quincy in 1578. Further, Richard Malim has noted that Oxford appeared in a drama before the French ambassadors engaged in the discussions of the Alençon match:

We have a record of the production of *Murderous Michael* on Shrove Tuesday (March 3) 1579, when Sussex's Company put on the play "Device by earls oxford and Surrey, Lord Thomas Howard, and Lord Windsor before the

French Ambassador and Simier [Alençon's representative in the French marriage negotiations]. A Morris masque prepared but not danced."⁹⁴

How appropriate that Bottom's last malapropism is an appeal to the Duke of Athens, "Will it please you to see the epilogue, or hear a Bergomask dance between two of our company?" (5.1.352-354), to which Theseus replies, "No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse. Never excuse; for when the players are all dead, there needs none to be blamed" (5.1.355-357).

Finally, Mark Anderson has documented that Oxford's cousin, Lord Henry Howard, urged him to flee to France under Alençon's protection when Ann Vavasour was late in her pregnancy in 1580.⁹⁵ That Oxford would soon be imprisoned in the Tower of London and banished from court during the most heated marital negotiations, which deeply troubled virtually all members of the English court, may have given him sufficient motive to satirize the farcical romance between the Queen and Alençon a decade after the death of the French Duke. Whether *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was first performed at the wedding of the Earl of Derby to Oxford's eldest daughter, Elizabeth Vere, from whom he was estranged for the first five years of her life, is not at issue here, although the idea of this superb comedy as a dramatic epithalamium and apology has great appeal. Imagining Oxford, whose heraldic emblem was the blue boar, as the author magnifies the symbolic significance of Oberon's incantation before he places the love drops in Titania's eyes:

What thou seest when thou doth wake
Do it for thy true-love take;
Love and languish for his sake.
Be it ounce, or cat, or bear,
Pard or boar with bristled hair.
In thy eye that shall appear
When thou wak'st, it is thy dear.
(2.2.27-33)

Suffice it to conclude that *Dream* is a highly inventive, Aristophanic political allegory that defies the assumptions of traditional interpretation and attribution.

Endnotes

- ¹ John Jay Chapman, *Greek Genius and Other Essays* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Company 1915), 138.
- ² In "Translating Europe into Your England" from *Shakespeare and European Politics* (2008), Dominique Goy-Blanquet writes that George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersch's *Jocasta*, a translation of Euripides' *Phoenissae*, was "the only Greek play available in England under the reign of Elizabeth," 289.
- ³ Robert Kilburn Root, *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (New York: Gordion Press, Inc. 1965-1903), 6. "It is at any rate certain that he nowhere alludes to any characters or episodes of Greek drama, that they extended no influence whatsoever on his conception of mythology."
- ⁴ A.D. Nuttall, "Action at a distance: Shakespeare and the Greeks," in *Shakespeare and the Classics*. ed. Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor (2004), 210.
- ⁵ Gilbert Murray, *Hamlet and Orestes: A Study in Traditional Types*, Proceedings of the British Academy, (June 1914) 1-24.
- ⁶ Jan Kott (trans. Boleslaw Taborski), "Hamlet and Orestes", *PMLA* 82:5 (1967), 303-313.
- ⁷ Louise Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare's Writing of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41:1 (1990).
- ⁸ Also see Earl Showerman, "Orestes to Hamlet: Myth to Masterpiece," *The Oxfordian VII* (2004).
- ⁹ Jonathan Bate, "Dying to Live in *Much Ado about Nothing*," In *Surprised by Scenes: Essays in Honor of Professor Yasunai Takahashi*, edited by Yasunari Takada, 69-85 (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Sarah Dewar-Watson, "The *Alcestis* and the Statue scene in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 60 (2009), 73-80.
- ¹¹ Claire McEachern, ed. *Much Ado about Nothing* (London: The Arden Shakespeare,

- 2006).
- ¹² Also see Earl Showerman, “Shakespeare’s Many Much Ado’s: *Alcestis*, *Hercules* and *Love’s Labour’s Wonne*,” originally published in *Brief Chronicles* Vol. 1 (2009), 109-140. Reprinted in *Shakespeare Criticism* Vol. 141, Gale, Cengage Learning (2012).
- ¹³ A.D. Nuttall, *Timon of Athens* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989).
- ¹⁴ Inga Stina-Ewbank, “Striking too short at Greeks’: The Transmission of *Agamemnon* to the English Renaissance Stage,” in *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to 2004*, ed. Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin (Oxford University Press, 2005), 51.
- ¹⁵ See Earl Showerman, “Shakespeare’s Greater Greek: *Macbeth* and the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus,” *Brief Chronicles* Vol. 3 (2011), 37-70.
- ¹⁶ M.C. Bradbrook, *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 77-78.
- ¹⁷ Tucker Brooke, *The Tudor Drama: A History of English national drama to the Retirement of Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911), 148.
- ¹⁸ Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 175.
- ¹⁹ Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247.
- ²⁰ J. Churton Collins, *Studies in Shakespeare* (Westminster: Archibald, Constable & Co. Ltd., 1904), 41.
- ²¹ Collins, 41.
- ²² F.H. Sandbach, *The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), 47.
- ²³ C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: a Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 152.
- ²⁴ R.A. Foakes, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 4.
- ²⁵ Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill, Jr., *The Complete Greek Drama* (New York: Random House, 1938), 727. Citations of the English translation of Aristophanes’s *The Birds* are taken from this edition.
- ²⁶ Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* (New York: Routledge, 1947, 2001) 57. Partridge calls *Dream* “a pretty safe play,” and “the cleanest comedy.”
- ²⁷ Cedric H. Whitman, *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 172.
- ²⁸ <http://nndb.com/people/843/000087582/>
- ²⁹ K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1972), 30.
- ³⁰ William Arrowsmith, “Aristophanes’ Birds: The Fantasy Politics of Eros,” *Arion* New Series 1.1 (1973), 129.
- ³¹ Hazlitt and Wilson commentaries taken from *The Variorum Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dreame* ed. H.H. Furness (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1895), Appendix: 315-319.

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- 32 Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 34.
- 33 Neil Issacs and Jack Reese, "Dithyramb and Paean in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Review of English Studies* 55(4) (1974), 351.
- 34 Barber, 3.
- 35 Barber, 11.
- 36 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998),148.
- 37 Kenneth Burke, "Why *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?" in *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott Newstock (2007), 176-177.
- 38 Roger Stritmatter, "On the Chronology and Performance Venue of *A Midsummer Night's Dreame*," *The Oxfordian* IX (2006), 81-90.
- 39 Stritmatter, 85-86.
- 40 Cupid references in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (The Riverside Shakespeare, 1974): "I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest bow" (1.1.169), "And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind" (1.1.235), "Cupid, all armed" (2.1.157), "yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell" (2.1.165), ""Cupid is a knavish lad" (3.2.440), "Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower (4.1.73). Venus references: "As yonder Venus in her glimmering sphere" (3.2.61), "As the Venus of the sky" (3.2.107)
- 41 Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 762.
- 42 Arrowsmith, 130.
- 43 Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 797.
- 44 Marianne Kimura, "Midsummer Night's Dream+sun," *Tsukuba University Department of Area Studies Journal* 34 (3.2013), 87-114, Section 30.30.
- 45 Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 743-744.
- 46 Kimura, Section 33.33.
- 47 Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 755.
- 48 William Arrowsmith, trans. *The Birds* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 1.
- 49 K.J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 34.
- 50 Salinger, 95.
- 51 Susan Doran, *Monarchy & Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 217.
- 52 Doran, 181.
- 53 David Bevington, ed., *John Lyly: Sappho and Phao* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 165.
- 54 Marion Taylor, *Bottom, Thou Art Translated: Political Allegory in A Midsummer Night's Dream and Related Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi NV, 1973), 31.
- 55 Helen Hackett, *Shakespeare and Elizabeth: The Meeting of Two Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 114.
- 56 Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York, W,W. Norton & Co., 2005), 50.
- 57 Hackett, 120.
- 58 John A. Allen, "Bottom and Titania," *Shakespeare Quarterly*: 18-2 (1967), 116.
- 59 Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 141.

- ⁶⁰ Eva Turner Clark, *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1931, 1974), 614.
- ⁶¹ Clarke, 615-616.
- ⁶² Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 114.
- ⁶³ Martin Hume, *Courtships of Queen Elizabeth: A History of Various Negotiations for her Marriage* (London: Eveleigh, Nash & Grayson Limited, 1896, 1926), 205.
- ⁶⁴ Taylor, 140.
- ⁶⁵ Lorde of Ghostes whose fyrre flashe (that forth thy hand doth shake)
Doth cause the trembling Lodges twayne of Phoebus Carre to quake,
Raygne reachlesse nowe: in every place thy peace procurde I have
Aloofe where Nereus lockes up lande Empalde in winding Wave.
Thwack not about with thunder thumpes, the rebell kinges bee downe,
The ravening tyrauntes Scepterlesse, are pulled from their crowne:
(First Acte, Lines 1-6 in *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* edited by Thomas Newton, first published in 1581 and cited here from a modern edition, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1927)
- ⁶⁶ Taylor, 139.
- ⁶⁷ Christopher Hibbert, *The Virgin Queen Elizabeth I, Genius of the Golden Age* (Perseus Books, 1991), 191.
- ⁶⁸ Hume, *Courtships of Queen Elizabeth*, 199-200.
- ⁶⁹ Hibbert, 193.
- ⁷⁰ Taylor, 199.
- ⁷¹ Martin Hume, *The Great Lord Burghley, A Study in Elizabethan Statecraft* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 1898, 2004), 382.
- ⁷² Martin Hume, *Courtships of Queen Elizabeth*, 333.
- ⁷³ Budiansky, 113.
- ⁷⁴ Stritmatter, 88.
- ⁷⁵ Kenneth Muir, "Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method," *Shakespeare Quarterly*: 5 (2) 1954, 141-153.
- ⁷⁶ Muir, 153.
- ⁷⁷ Michelle and Charles Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2003), 41.
- ⁷⁸ Laurie Maguire, *Shakespeare's Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97.
- ⁷⁹ Burke, 172-173.
- ⁸⁰ Katherine Lever, "Greek Comedy on the Sixteenth century English Stage," *The Classical Journal* 42:3 (1946), 169.
- ⁸¹ Lever, 173.
- ⁸² Myron Stagman, *The Burlesque Comedies of Aristophanes* (City-State Press, 2000), 25.
- ⁸³ Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1.
- ⁸⁴ Henderson, 29.
- ⁸⁵ Myron Stagman, *Shakespeare's Greek Drama Secret* (Newcastle upon Tyne:

- Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 234.
- ⁸⁶ Stagman, 244.
- ⁸⁷ Stagman, 312.
- ⁸⁸ Stagman, 333.
- ⁸⁹ Stagman, 337.
- ⁹⁰ Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, "'Shakespeare's' Tutor: Sir Thomas Smith," *The Oxfordian III* (2000), 20.
- ⁹¹ Katherine Lever, "Greek Comedy on the Sixteenth century English Stage," *The Classical Journal* 42:3 (1946), 169.
- ⁹² Caroline Bowden, "The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley," *Library*, ser.7, 6 (2005), 6.
- ⁹³ In July 2014 the Center for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies at the University of York in England sponsored a day-long colloquium on "Greek Texts and the Early Modern Stage" to explore the considerable impact of the Greek canon on Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The colloquium description underlines the radical cultural shift this represents. "Greek provokes strong associations for a number of reasons: its controversial associations with Erasmus, Protestantism, and heresy; the specter of democratic governance; the rebirth of interest in Galenic medicine; the pervasive influence of Greek culture on Latin literature; and the identification of Greece with the origins of theatre." In the abstract of her paper, "Hamlet and the Ghost of Sophocles," Sarah Dewar-Watson claimed that the verbal echoes of Sophocles' *Antigone* in *Hamlet* suggests Shakespeare was familiar with the anthology of seven Greek plays, *Tragediae selectae Aeschyli, Sophoclis, Euripidis*, published in Paris in 1567, which included Latin translations of *Antigone, Hecuba, Alcestis* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*.
- ⁹⁴ Richard Malim, *The Earl of Oxford and the MAKING of "SHAKESPEARE"* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012), 87.
- ⁹⁵ Mark Anderson, *Shakespeare By Another Name: The Life of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, the Man Who Was Shakespeare* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 163. "But, my lord, what cause should make you lose this opportunity of benefiting both yourself and others, since you seem the likeliest man to wax great in Monsieur's favor if he come over?"