SHAKESPEARE'S

A

MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM.

Treatment of its Supernatural Elements.

Compared to the Tempest.

THESIS for the degree of A.B.

College of Literature and Arts.

ISABELLE NOBLE.

U.of I. '96.
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INTRODUCTION.

The earliest known reference to A Midsummer-Night's Dream is in the Palladis Tamia of Francis Meres, published in 1598. The best critics, Hudson, Halliwell, Phillips, Fleay and others, think it was written as early as 1594. Possibly in (Act II Sc.I. L. 88-117) there is an allusion to the bad weather of that summer. It is supposed by some that the play was written in honor of some nobleman's wedding, Southampton's who was married in 1598, or Essex, married in 1590. However, neither of these is possible, for, as Dowden says, one of these dates is too early and the other too late, furthermore, Southampton married against the wishes of the Queen, who, it appeared, did not know of it at first, because she treated it as though it had been secret.

Another reason for doubting that this play was written in honor of Southampton's marriage, is it would have been a great want of tact on Shakespeare's part, to produce and present a piece in which love is made a subject for laughter, especially as Southampton was such a friend of his. Neither could it have been written in honor of Essex, for his marriage was kept a secret until it was too late for the Queen to refuse to sanction it.
A Midsummer-Night's Dream was, no doubt, acted before Queen Elizabeth (Act I.Sc.I,L.74-8.) the praise of single blessedness, for which Shakespeare elsewhere seems to have a very low opinion, being probably meant for her ears, and Oberon's vision, (ActIII,Sc.I,L.146-168) is a splendid homage to her.

The Fairy Vestal enthroned by the West, is undoubtedly Elizabeth. The play was first printed in 1600, and in the same year another edition appeared. It was reprinted in the first folio, where it is divided into acts, but not scenes.

It is probable that Shakespeare obtained a part of the plot of the play, A Midsummer-Night's Dream, from North's Plutarch or from Chaucer's Knight's Tale. But there is little resemblance between the tale and the plot except that Theseus and Hippolyta are characters in both. From Chaucer also may have come the elf queen though not her name - Titania.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, he probably took from Ovid's Metamorphoses (Golding's Translation.) Oberon, the fairy king, had just appeared in Green's play, The Scottish History of James IV., while Puck, under his name of Robin Goodfellow, was a roguish spirit, well known in English fairy lore.
Theseus is Shakespeare's early ideal of a heroic warrior. His love is a happy victory, his marriage a triumph. In such strong contrast with him are the young lovers that they appear tame and weak and give us the idea that they were intended for minor characters, as they actually were.

The fairies are admirably drawn. Puck, the jester of fairy land is a mischievous fellow, full of fun and enjoying it above all else. Bottom is one of the most amusing characters Shakespeare ever drew.

#E. Dowden's Shakespeare Primer.
To a modern reader, the plot of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* seems to deal chiefly with the fairies, who are so delightful and the clowns, who are so amusing; but this is not altogether true for the real center of the plot is the love-story of the four Athenians. "But when we have once come to the dream-land we have reached the fantastic extravagances of the main plot; once there, the extravagances are kept plausible by the superhuman agencies which direct them; and these superhuman agencies are kept plausible by the intermingling and contrasts of the fairies with the clowns." 

"The plot of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is far superior to that of *Love's Labor Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, but inferior to that of his later plays. The play is a dream, yet a dream filled with realities. It is just such a dream as we might wish to have. Strong passion and deep characterization would be out of place in such a play. It has room for nothing but love and beauty." The scene is laid in Athens. Two pair of lovers with whom "The course of true love runs not smooth", to escape the hand of paternal authority, wander off

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by moonlight to the woods, where the fairy King Oberon and his Queen Titania dwell. To this spot also, comes "A crew of patched, rude mechanicals, that work for bread upon Athenian Stalls", to rehearse a comedy which they are getting up, to celebrate the wedding of their Sovereign. A jealous dispute arises between the fairy King and Queen. "Because that she, as her attendant, hath A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king; And jealous Oberon would have the child Knight of his train, to trace the forest wild. But she, perforce, withholds the loved boy, Crowns him with flowers and makes him all her joy."

The king determines to secure the boy, and to attain his purpose, has recourse to sorcery and dispatches Puck to procure an herb the juice of which when applied to Titania's eyes during sleep, will compel her upon awaking, to love the first object she sees, "be it lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, or monkey or ape," and then Oberon will take the page. In the meanwhile Puck has caught Bottom, the Stage Manager of the occasion and put an ass's head on him. When, then, he returns to his companions they are filled with fear and run away.

Bottom, finding himself alone, begins to sing. This wakes Titania, and she is so captivated by his song, his "amiable cheeks" and "fair large ears" that she forgets her changeling boy and begs the "gentle mortal" to stay beside her and orders her servants to attend him. The king having obtained the boy and pitying her, relieves her from her enchantment, and Bottom from his metamorphosis.
The play ends with the return of the wandering lovers, cured of their troubles, the celebration of their nuptials together with those of the duke and his bride, and to crown all, the exhibition of "the tedious brief play" of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe, by Bottom and Company.

SUPERNATURAL ELEMENT.

In A Midsummer-Night's Dream as in The Tempest the supernatural element is strongly marked; and these two plays are the only ones in which the fairy world is used to any great extent. In these two plays Shakespeare has most successfully carried nature beyond herself. Hudson says, "Shakespeare observes the distinction between the supernatural and the antinatural so closely that we are not apt to see that there is anything but nature around us and can hardly tell whether the real be imaginary or the imaginary the real."

The Tempest represents life in an ideal form, while A Midsummer-Night's Dream is only a dream, in which everything gives way to fancy. The characters of A Midsummer-Night's Dream are in direct contrast to those of The Tempest, for they have been drawn without depth or gravity and there could be room for nothing but love and beauty.

At the close of the sixteenth century there was a universal belief in fairies. In 1560, a certain Alison Pearson was convicted of holding intercourse with the Queen of Elf-land, she confessed to haunting with the Queen of Elfland and, for this, was burned to death. It was believed by many that children were stolen by the fairies before christening, but afterward they were afraid to
steal them. The reason for the fairies stealing children was that they were under a dreadful obligation to sacrifice to the devil, every seventh year, one person out of every ten.

Shakespeare's little people are as different in character, if we can say they have character, as any human person. He developed his playful creation into a beautiful and regulated world which became the source of a complete fairy literature. Lyly, Drayton and others took full possession of the fairy world, influenced by Shakespeare. No such fairy poetry had existed anywhere in English Literature before his time. The little people, to whom a cowslip is tall, for whom the third part of a minute is a long time, have a perfection which is charming. Their actions are limited to night, not only in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* but also in *The Tempest*.

The fairies had the power of vanishing at will and of assuming various forms, "airy and swift, like the moon, they encircle the earth, they avoid the sunlight and seek the darkness. They send and bring dreams to mortals; they tempt human beings and the effect of their mistakes makes no impression on their minds; they feel no sympathy for the lovers but delight in their mistakes. They lead a luxurious, merry life; the secrets of nature and the power of flowers and herbs are confined to them. They harmonize with nightingales and butterflies; they hate all that is ugly, as spiders, hedgehogs, and bats; dancing, playing and singing were their chief amusements."

Fairies were thought to be fond of dress; they generally wore green vests, but those of the Moors, who were hard workers, dressed in heath-brown. They were said to be great lovers of
cleanliness and to reward good servants by dropping money in their shoes at night, and, on the other hand, were reported to punish sluttens by pinching them black and blue.

Wendell says, "Shakespeare's fairies will always be the lasting little people of the English ages", and some contemporaries of ours fancy they can trace in them, "lingering race-memories of dwarfish aborigines of Europe." When our ancestors drove them back towards the north, some may have remained in caves and burrows, coming out only at night to plague whoever misused them. It was the belief of Shakespeare's time that the fairies were the same as the classic nymphs, the attendants of Diana.

The fairies had many and various names, but the most common was Puck. This was at one time applied to the whole race of fairies, and not to any individual spirit. Puck, or Poake, is an old word for devil. In Worcestershire we read how the peasantry are occasionally "poake-ladden" that is, misled by mischievous spirits called Poake. There is a story of a witch that had the devil's mark about her, who had a giant for her son; his name was Lob-lye-by-the-fire and we know that Lob was a popular name for the fairies also, for Puck is called - "Thou Lob of spirits.

In Shakespeare's time it was believed that the fairies lived in the interior of conical green hills, on the slopes of which they danced by moonlight in the fairy rings in old pastures. Plu-guet, in his "Contes Populaires de Bayeux" says that the fairy rings, called by the peasants of Normandy "Cercles des fies", are thought to be the work of fairies and some ignorant people believe it to be an omen of prosperity to live in a house where
fairy rings have been.

Shakespeare describes the characteristics of the fairy tribe fully. They are noticeable for their beauty and youth. In Cymbeline (Act III, Sc. 6) Belarius says of Imogen—

"But that it eats our victuals,
I should think
Here were a fairy."

and then,

"By Jupiter, an angel! or if not,
An earthly paragon! Behold devineness
No older than a boy."

In Romeo and Juliet, Queen Mab is described;

"In shape no bigger than an agate stone
on the fourth finger of an alderman."

And again, Queen Titania, when in love with Bottom, directs her elves to "Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes." Also, in The Tempest, Ariel sings, "Where the bee sucks, there suck I."

In a cowslip bell I lie.

Along with their other talents Shakespeare's fairies are musicians. In A Midsummer-Night's Dream (Act II, Sc. 3) Titania says to her attendants, "Cone, now a round and a fairy song." His fairies do not like irreligious people for in The Merry Wives of Windsor (Act 5, Sc. 5) they are said to chastise unchaste persons who do not say their prayers. It was thought about fairies, as also about ghosts, that if one talked to them he must surely die. Shakespeare's fairies resemble mortals in that they are capable of jealousy; of this fact Oberon and Titania are examples. In The Merry Wives of Windsor (Act 5, Sc. 5
we see that they love virtue and abhor sin.

"Pie on sinful fantasy!
Pie on lust and luxury!"

Drake says, "The moral and benevolent character of these children of fancy is in a great degree the creation of Shakespeare. The chief occupation of the fairies is like that of a great number of mortals – dancing after midnight. But we also have another class of fairies – not the society belles. for, not all, not even all fairies, are made for such a life – there is the working class, some had to put their Queen to sleep, some had to seek dew-drops and put them in every cowslip's bell and some had to hunt honey for the Queen to eat.

Puck and Ariel Compared.

Puck and Ariel are the leaders of the fairies. Puck is not at all like the Ariel of The Tempest, who is a sympathetic little body and, although he loves freedom and fun, yet he does not like to carry these too far. Puck, on the other hand, is a real mad-cap, full of mischief, laughs at people's troubles and thinks, "What fools these mortals be!" Ariel is a sweet and gentle creature; Puck is neither, but delights to tease; he relates how he was in the habit of taking all kinds of outlandish forms; and in "The Tempest, Shakespeare has given us a graphic account of Ariel's eccentricities – of his appearing in his natural shape and then dividing into flames and behaving in such a strange manner as to cause Ferdinand to leap into the sea, crying, "Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

"Ariel like Puck, moves with the quickness of thought; sent on
an errand." He drinks the air before him, and returns or ere the pulse beats twice. " Puck says, when Oberon sends him to " fetch" an herb, " I'li put a girdle round about the earth In forty minutes." Ariel, unlike Puck, has sympathy for human distress; he is full of gratitude and affection towards his master and seems to serve him purely for duty and not for pay. Although he has to work, still he is a very merry person and thinks it no sin to have a little fun, if it hurts nobody - as we see in his,

"Where the bee sucks, there suck I,  
In a cowslip's bell I lie; 
There I couch when owls do cry.  
On the bat's back I do fly,  
After summer,merrily,  
Merrily merrily shall I live now.  
Under the blossoms that hang on the bow."

He is so human, that we cannot imagine his making sport of human infirmity, or of plaguing men like that " shrewd and knavish spirit" "Robin Goodfellow. 

Caliban Compared With Ariel.

Caliban is another wonderful supernatural being of The Tempest. All the fine elements of the play were given to Ariel; Caliban is his opposite; his is an ugly person and he has an ugly soul; His proper language seems to curse and his laugh is railery. Hudson says, " He is such a being as we might suppose the connecting link between man and brute to be; he can use with tolerable skill the proper means, but cannot conceive the proper ends of human existence; he has the faculties corresponding to the material, but not to the moral world; he can observe, compare, re-
member, and classify facts, but has no emotion or perception of truth or right or beauty or goodness." Yet this uncouth being, part man, part demon, Prospero has educated as a poet, but it is such "cursed" poetry that it makes one feel as if human speech were given to a baboon: as Wendell says, "His poetry exemplifies at once the triumph of art over nature and the triumph of nature over art."

Then there are Oberon and Titania, as real and as dignified a couple as one could wish to see. As Theseus and Hippolyta stand for dignity and true courtliness among mortals, so also, do Oberon and his Queen among fairies. In Romeo and Juliet we have Queen Mab as a contrast to Queen Titania, of whom we will always think as a sweet, kind, and gentle creature. Queen Mab, on the other hand, provokes a smile, for she is gay, merry and, like Puck, full of tricks.

Bottom, the weaver, is an old fellow who thinks himself a fine play-actor. There is no performance, nor any part of a performance for which he thinks he is not well fitted; the parts of the lover, the tyrant, the lady, and the lion, he could do all equally well in his own mind. If he plays the lion, "Let the audience look to their eyes; he will condole in some measure." Yet his chief humor is for a tyrant; however, he thinke he can do the lion well also. and will "Aggravate his voice so that he will roar you as gentle as any suckling dove; he will roar you and 'twere any nightingale." It is amusing to see the effect of the transformation of Bottom's character for it is not till after that, that his genius comes out. "The Consciousness of his new shape awakens all the manhood within him. Like many another,
ing but little to be a man so long as he knows he seems one. he
tries his utmost to be a man as soon as he knows he seems an ass."

Bottom's companions, Quince, the carpenter, and Snug the
joiner, Flute, the bellows-mender, Snout, the tinker, and Starveling
the tailor, are very different and nothing can be more laughable
than the contrast between them and the troops of fairies. In
Bottom's and Titania's love making the two extremes have met, the
grotesque and the beautiful. Titania's passion inspired in her
a finer issue of soul, and at the same time encourages Bottom in-
to a fuller expression of stomach. Bottom is a grotesque, ugly,
and conceited ass, while Titania, with whom he must be contrasted,
is a beautiful, loving, and sweet tempered elf.

Hudson says, "The union of Bottom and Titania is too ludi-
crous for laughter, and too absurd for censure, and we may almost
say, it makes us weep smiles or smile tears of delight; while its
beauty and drollness utterly silence criticism." It is comical,
and still not so comical as it might be, for Titania's influence
is so beautiful that the comic element has to be mingled with the
beautiful. Bottom's character is absurd; compare his "sweet
voice" with that of Titania's if you can. He says that he could
take a lady's part in the play. How absurd he must have looked
by the side of Titania who was the lady Queen of fairy-land.

In thinking of A Midsummer-Night's Dream we are apt, first
of all, to think of the pranks of Robin Goodfellow and of Bot-
tom's transformation into an ass, for here we have the two ex-
tremes, that of daintiness and exquisite delicacy contrasted

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strongly with thick-wittedness and clumsiness. Bottom knows his gifts are more than equal to his opportunities, and as for his being the lover of the Queen of fairy-land he could have as easily have been a lover to the Queen of England and yet, he thought his "new honours becoming."

A Midsummer-Night's Dream is undoubtedly a great work, its language is exceptionally uniform and its poetry, the sweetest poetry. Perhaps no play of Shakespeare's has fewer blemishes or impresses one as being greater in its perfection. The play is a dream, an ideal dream. It is a true work of art and although one of his first works it foreshadows forth his fame of later years. The characters harmonize perfectly with their surroundings and might easily, as Hudson says, be arranged in a chromatic scale gradually shading from the overgrown, conceited Bottom and the rude mechanicals, the proud Theseus, on down, till we reach the delightful, tiny, Titania and her fairy train.

E. A. Poe says, "When I am asked for a definition of poetry, I think of Titania and Oberon of The Midsummer-Night's Dream." How original the whole play is and who but Shakespeare would ever have thought of bringing four such different histories together — that of Theseus and Hippolyta, of the four Athenian lovers: the actors and the fairies; yet no one would doubt for one moment that these histories do not harmonize; the wedding of Theseus, the quarrel of Oberon and Titania, the flight of the two pair of lovers and the theatrical performance of Bottom and Company, are so happily interwoven that they seem necessary to one another for the formation of the whole. " This is the first play of Shakespeare which exhibits the imagination in all its fervid and cre-
ative power. It will always, in point of fancy, be considered as equal to any subsequent drama of the poet."

After having read the play one has before his imagination the whole performance in its entirety; and although objections have been advanced on the score that it cannot be played, for, according to our imagination, fairies are beings smaller than the smallest of the human race, and, in their presentation on the stage it is impossible to present them as our fancy portrays them; and it jars upon us to see a being taking the part of a fairy who is a giant in comparison, yet, for all this, it is a delightful and charming play to read and one in which the mind of an imaginative person can have full play; it is the most beautiful conception that ever visited the mind of a poet.

# Drake.
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