A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Anamorphism and Theseus’ Dream

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1. Anamorphic doubling

Anamorphism, a visual device well known and much used by Renaissance painters, is a perspectival technique designed to present one image if viewed from directly in front of the painting and another if viewed from an angle. The most famous instance is Holbein’s The Ambassadors. Looked at straight-on, the painting displays the familiar figures of the two Frenchmen and, in the foreground between them, an indistinguishable image, a kind of elongated pale blur that might be a flying saucer with holes in it but that, if the puzzled viewer moves to the right and glances back and down, turns out to be a skull lying at the ambassadors’ feet.¹ The eye sockets of the skull are large and distended, and their vacant gaze seems to focus nowhere and everywhere, taking in the ambassadors but also the side-angled viewer of the painting and, beyond, all who think they see without being seen. The uncanniness of the painting comes not just from the unexpected appearance of death in it—Et in Arcadia ego—but from the association of death with being-seen-seeing. In the very moment of power, while taking possession of the painting visually, the viewer is, as it were, seen and nullified. The effect is like that sought by the director Carl Dreyer for his film Vampyr: “Imagine that we are sitting in an ordinary room. Suddenly we are told that there is a corpse behind the door. In an instant the room we are sitting in is completely altered: everything in it has taken on another look; the light, the atmosphere have changed, though they are physically the same. ...”² As with the painting, the room takes on “another look,” acquiring a gaze as well as a different appearance, both of which are in excess of the sheer physical facts, which remain precisely as they were. Nothing changes, and everything changes.

In A Midsummer Night’s Dream Shakespeare does something similar to what Holbein does by creating a linear version of anamorphism, converting the painting into a play that the audience sees from three different per-

¹ In his Anamorphic Art (trans. W. J. Strachan [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977]; originally Anamorphoses ou magic artificielle des effets merveilleux [Paris: Olivier Perrin Editeur, 1969]), Jurgis Baltrusaitis says that one must stand “very close, looking down on it from the right” to see the skull properly (p. 91). Having seen the painting only in relatively small reproductions, I’m obliged to take his word for it. Everyone I know has gotten cross-eyed trying to see the skull, and one suffered paper cuts on the nose for the sake of perspectival science. For the less daring, Baltrusaitis has a photograph showing how the skull appears in proper focus (p. 103): it lies on its right cheekbone, eye sockets to the left, jaw to the right, looking in fact very much like the viewer.

spectatives. We don't have to change seats during a performance to find the proper anamorphic angle; Shakespeare does our moving for us by making the "seen"—that is, the scene—change, in effect presenting us with a painting in three panels. First he gives us a straight-on look at Athens, then shifts our perspective by obliging us to consider the forest, then brings Athens back in the third panel and says, "Look again." The anamorphic effect arises from the fact that the forest world, though not exactly a grinning skull lying at the base of Theseus' palace, is a kind of crazed mirror of the Athenian world.

Because Shakespeare is adapting a graphic technique to a linear form, the anamorphic acquires a parenthetical quality. Since the affairs in Athens can't be entirely resolved until the day of the wedding, what happens in the forest is a kind of embedding or, more precisely, a recursive function. The play puts Athens on "hold" while a more urgent "call" is taken concerning marital insurrections in fairyland and dislocations in nature. The two calls are more than merely modally related. If the Athenian problem can't be addressed until the fairyland problem is solved, it's not just because the latter is more urgent but because the two are causally connected; fairyland is a phase in the Athenian plot.

What, then, does fairyland cause in Athens? Most obviously, it brings about the corrective realignments among the lovers that prepare for the multiple-marriage finale. However, Puck's and Oberon's machinations only make the lovers at the end of Act 4 willing to marry. That they can marry is a result of Theseus' surprising dismissal of the law. "Surprising" because in Act 1 the law was said, by Theseus himself, to be irrevocable. "Fit your fancies to your father's will," he told Hermia, "Or else the law of Athens yields you up—/ Which by no means we may extenuate" (1.1.118–20). But at the end of Act 4, when Egeus invokes that same law, Theseus doffs it aside with a cryptic "Egeus, I will overbear your will" (4.1.178). Why so great a change? Who knows—we've neither seen nor heard of Theseus since his exit in the opening scene.

Or have we?

Perhaps we have—but from an anamorphic angle.

That is, one way to explain Theseus' cavalier dismissal of the law is by registering the full effect of Shakespeare's device of doubling the roles of Theseus and Hippolyta with those of Oberon and Titania. I say "Shakespeare's" because this practice, which has become almost automatic in the late twentieth century, issues from the playwright as much as it does from inventive directors like Peter Brook or Robin Phillips.5 The effect of

5 Shakespeare may or may not have seen Holbein's painting, but as Ned Lukacher points out ("Anamorphic Stuff: Shakespeare, Catharsis, Lacan," South Atlantic Quarterly, 88 [1989], 865–98), it is very likely that he saw the anamorphic painting of Edward VI by a Holbein follower, one William Scrots, whose very name invites anamorphic glances. Citing Baltrusaitis, Lukacher writes, "Scrots's portrait hung in Whitehall Palace during the 1590s when Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, played there; this portrait was to be viewed through a viewing hole drilled through a screen off to the side of the painting" (p. 873).


The four parts are so amenable to doubling that they seem designed for that purpose. The only difficulty is the need for a couple of quick costume changes when one pair exits just before
this doubling is that the actors who play the paired parts become visual puns. Listen to Oberon and Titania upbraiding one another about their love for Hippolyyta and Theseus in 2.1, then cock your head to one side and, despite differences in costume, you see the bodily presence of Theseus and Hippolyyta themselves. Or, rather, of the actors who play them. But since we have already assigned the names Theseus and Hippolyyta to these actorly bodies, when they appear as Oberon and Titania they can’t help evoking ghostly images of their Athenian counterparts. All the more so because just when we are asking ourselves “Isn’t that Theseus, and isn’t that Hippolyyta?” we are also asking ourselves “Isn’t this the same subversion of hierarchical and patriarchal order that we just saw so ruthlessly dealt with in Athens?” For in Athens we heard that Theseus has won Hippolyyta’s love “doing [her] injuries,” and we saw Egeus, Demetrius, and the law combine in an effort to win Hermia’s love doing her injuries, and now we see Oberon trying to win Titania’s love doing her injuries. It’s all Athens in another key or mode.

To make the parallel with anamorphism more exact, let me take another angled glance at the opening scene and observe that Oberon and Titania are invisibly present there in the persons of Theseus and Hippolyyta. Not that Theseus and Hippolyyta are blurred the way Holbein’s skull is in The Ambassadors; we see the duke and his betrothed as clearly as we do the French ambassadors. Yet something is there that we can’t see or fully make sense of—Oberon and Titania.

Naturally, this seems a perverse claim: how can we expect to see Oberon and Titania when they have yet to make an entrance as characters? Ah, but the anamorphic is perverse by nature—that is to say, by artifice: how can we expect to see Holbein’s skull when we have yet to move to a position from which it’s visible? Nevertheless, when we first encounter The Ambassadors straight-on, the skull is there, in the white paint that came from Holbein’s brush; and while we watch the opening scene of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the fairy king and queen are there too, in the stuff Shakespeare painted his plays with, the bodies of actors.

2. DREAM VISIONS IN FAIRYLAND

Let me trace out the anamorphic effect of this curious doubling, with the aim of seeing how it affects Theseus’ dismissal of the law in Act 4. Most immediately, if Oberon and Titania are present in the opening scene in

the other enters—at 4.1.101 and at 5.1.365. But changing time for the latter occasion is supplied by Puck’s speech about dread spirits and frolicsome ones (ll. 366–86), and for the former occasion it can be managed if the stage direction “Wind horn” were taken as authorizing several windings and perhaps a few musical discords and sweet thunderings from Theseus’ hounds before the duke and his train put in an appearance. If the parts were doubled in Shakespeare’s time, the practice was subsequently abandoned (at least there is no mention of it for two centuries), only to be recovered in recent years.

As Graham Bradshaw observes, “doubling [the roles of Theseus and Oberon] makes excellent dramatic, psychological and symbolic sense, because they are the respective representatives of reason and of those life mysteries which reason cannot encompass or control.” Doubling “underlines the irony that these seemingly opposed realms are properly interdependent and need to be integrated, brought into harmony with each other” (Shakespeare’s Scepticism [London: Harvester Press, 1987], p. 69). However, see Roger Warren’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Text and Performance (London: The Macmillian Press, 1983) for objections (pp. 60, 64), as well as for excellent analyses of the productions not only by Brook and Phillips but by Peter Hall and Elijah Moshinsky as well.
shadowy shape, that is, in actorly shape—"The best in this kind are but shadows" (5.1.210)—then we get a glimpse of a different, more troubled other-side to the seemingly cheerful obverse shown us by Theseus and Hippolyta in this scene. But nothing can be discerned until we have a change of scenes and costumes, and a quarreling exchange in which Oberon is accused of loving Hippolyta and Titania of loving Theseus (2.1.63–80).

Elliot Krieger supplies a perceptive gloss on this:

The suggestion of an erotic connection between the rulers of the fairy world and the rulers of Athens transforms the fairies into spiritual manifestations of the sexual drives of Theseus and Hippolyta: Titania represents in the realm of spirit Theseus's physical desire, held in abeyance during the four-day interval before the wedding, for Hippolyta; Oberon represents Hippolyta's desire for Theseus. The destructive jealousy with which Oberon and Titania confront each other replaces, then, the injury, the actual martial opposition between their two races, with which Theseus "woo'd" Hippolyta.6

If we factor in the implications of theatrical doubling, these erotic connections between fairyland and Athens suggest a rather sharp discord within the pre-marital harmonies of Theseus and Hippolyta in Act 1. If Oberon's difficulties reflect Theseus' state of mind, then the somewhat Chaucerian Theseus of the opening scene, duke of bright corners and exemplar of order and government, he whose rough courtship has brought the Amazonian queen so properly to heel that he can refer to it with urbane self-assurance7—

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling
(1.1.16–19)

—this same duke may nevertheless be hearing in some corner of his mind unnerving fore-hints of Horace Walpole's remark about comedies ending in marriage because after that the tragedy begins. After all, winning love by

6 A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), p. 56. Krieger also believes that the discord between Oberon and Titania, which reflects the conflict between Theseus and Hippolyta, implies that the wars between the Athenians and the Amazonians have disrupted all nature. But this is to translate the Athens-fairyland metaphor into literal identity, leading Krieger to add that it "indicates Shakespeare's understanding of the strategies used by the ruling class to justify its power and its retention of centralized authority through hypothetical analogy with the forces of nature" (p. 56). Grounding one's authority on "nature" is a strategy no doubt employed by all ruling classes (not to mention parents, labor-union leaders, and English professors), and certainly Shakespeare understood as much. However, Theseus' anxieties seem less those of a ruler desperate to legitimate his political authority, which no one has challenged, than those of an about-to-be husband concerned about his sexual dominance. Of course sexual dominance can be an important element in domestic politics, and the politician who cannot rule in his own bedroom may not be able to rule elsewhere, as Antony discovered during the sea battle near Actium (Antony and Cleopatra, 3.10).

7 Among the benighted critics who have been taken in by this surface view of Theseus, I'm afraid I must number myself: "As most critics have emphasized, Theseus has a normative role in the play, at least as far as love is concerned; and his marriage to Hippolyta, the preparations for which structurally enclose the trials of the young lovers, operates as the social ideal against which other relationships are measured" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Illusion of Drama," Modern Language Quarterly, 26 [1965], 566–72, esp. p. 510).
doing injuries is not the most auspicious form of courtship in the best of cases, and it would seem particularly questionable when one’s beloved is an Amazon. Consider, for example, some Amazonian precedents.

In his account of the life of Theseus, Plutarch says that at one point in the continuing conflict between the Greeks and the Amazons, the latter invaded Athens and very nearly conquered it.8 Had this invasion succeeded, dreadful consequences would surely have ensued. If not killed outright, the Athenian stalwarts might well have suffered the fate of the men captured by Spenser’s Radigund, the evil Amazon who obliged her male captives to wear feminine attire and spend their days at women’s work.9 Perhaps Theseus would have been reduced to spinning flax and tow like the wretched Artegall, until some sojourning female warrior like Britomart freed him and set the earth back on its axis again.

Fortunately, Theseus was spared such humiliations. Still, he may have other anxieties about his duchess-to-be. After all, the Elizabethan view of Amazons was somewhat anamorphic. From one perspective they appeared as noble, valiant, beautiful, and chaste as their goddess, Diana.10 From another they were cunning, cruel, tyrannous—possessed, Spenser wrote, of a “wandering fancie [that] after lust did raunge” (5.5.26). Thus Artegall says he fights Radigund because of “the faith that I / To Maydenhead and noble knighthood owe” (5.4.34); and when Britomart kills Radigund, chastity and marriage triumph over lust and “licentious libertie” (5.5.25). Given the unnatural disobedience and sensuality to which some of these Amazons were prone, Theseus can hardly rest easy despite having conquered Hippolyta and persuaded her to marriage. Who knows whether she will replace his crown with a set of horns, or his throne and scepter with a joint stool and distaff?

Not that Hippolyta says anything to suggest as much. Her first speech seems perfectly accepting of the coming “solemnities.” But it’s hard to know how she responds to the unpleasantness with Hermia. As a woman, especially an Amazonian woman, she can hardly regard with indifference this show of masculine force. As a bride-to-be for whom marriage is the gate to Athenian citizenship, can she simply hold Theseus’ arm and smile as he decrees death or virginity for women who reserve some right of choice in marital matters? Does she see in Hermia’s resistance a rebuke to her own submissiveness? Or is she submissive? Is Theseus’ “Come, my Hippolyta. What cheer, my love?” (1.1.122) merely routine solicitude, or has he sensed something amiss with Hippolyta, and if so, what—outrage, dismay, fear, shame? But Hippolyta keeps her counsel, and so remains an enigma to us as well as to Theseus.11

11 That is, Hippolyta remains an enigma to the interpreter of the script. But of course directors and actors must decide how she is to be played—somewhere along the spectrum from loving and obedient (the traditional presentation) to fiercely resistant (as in a 1967 Greenwich Village production by John Hancock in which she was “brought back in captivity, robbed in
What cheer, then, for the anxious duke? What cheer especially four nights later when he is scheduled for another engagement with this man-woman whose sexual desire is a mystery? Who knows the extent of her requirements? Perhaps she will demand more than he has to give—or, worse, as a devotee of Diana disdain all he has to offer—or, worse yet, insist on assuming an “Amazon-on-top” position! What does a warrior-monarch do in such a case besides casting uneasy glances at his betrothed and murmuring “What cheer, my love?”

Well, as W. Thomas MacCary suggests, perhaps he dreams about his plight, or rather has a nightmare about it.12 In his nightmare he finds himself transformed into a fairy king married to a fairy queen even more uncontrollable than he fears his Amazonian queen may turn out to be. This stubborn imperious creature, refusing to honor either his masculinity or his royalty by yielding a changeling boy, instead makes “[the child] all her joy,” forswears his own bed and company, and spends her time dancing in the wood with her elves. Not much cheer here for Oberon. Nor for Theseus, whose ducal body fits within the fairy king’s robes far too snugly for comfort—especially when Hippolyta’s body is so visible in Titania’s.13

In fact, since Hippolyta’s body is every bit as visible in Titania’s as Theseus’ is in Oberon’s, is she not dreaming too? After all, it’s she of whom Theseus asks “What cheer, my love?” And certainly she has as much reason as he to be troubled about their forthcoming marriage, especially after observing how things are done in Athens. Hence what happens to Titania is as much Hippolyta’s nightmare-dream as it is Theseus’; and as a result affairs in fairyland must be interpreted from two perspectives. Let me try to simplify this by dividing the experience of Hippolyta-Titania into two phases, before and after she is charmed by Oberon. The first phase focuses on the dispute over the changeling child.

3."I DO BUT BEG A LITTLE CHANGELING BOY"

Why does Oberon beg a little changeling boy? To serve, he says, as his squire. But Oberon needs a squire the way Portia needs a ring when she demands hers back from Bassanio at the end of The Merchant of Venice. That is, Oberon’s desire for the boy is an example of what Lacan calls demand: “Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for.... [It] annuls (aufhebt) the particularity of everything that can be granted by transmuting it into a proof of love....”14 Oberon’s demand

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leopard skins, was caged and guarded” [Allan Lewis, "A Midsummer Night’s Dream—Fairy Fantasy or Erotic Nightmare?” Educational Theatre Journal, 21 (1969), 251–58, esp. p. 251].


13 An identification of Theseus and Hippolyta with Oberon and Titania is of course not dependent on doubling the parts, though much is lost, I think, if that is not done. But the identification is made when Titania reproves Oberon about “the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskin’d mistress and your warrior love,” and he accuses her of loving Theseus and leading him from woman to woman (2.1.70–80). For Theseus to marry Oberon’s beloved, with Oberon’s approval, is tantamount to his being Oberon. And if Theseus is Oberon, then he is Titania’s husband, and she a fairy version of Hippolyta.

“annuls . . . the particularity” of the boy by transforming him into a symbol of what Oberon really desires, the gift of Titania’s love and obedience. From an Hegelian-Sartrian point of view, it appears that the boy is a subject reduced to an object (a slave) in a contest for marital dominance—even, some have argued, a sexual object, not for Titania but for Oberon. However, if Shakespeare intended the boy as a Ganymede figure for a pederastic Oberon or meant him to have any importance in his own person, surely he would have put him onstage. By not doing so, he does to him theatrically what Oberon and Titania do to him rhetorically—transform him into a signifier in a system of communication. For Titania also wants him less for himself than as a token of love. She tells Oberon exactly why she will not surrender the boy:

Set your heart at rest.
The fairy land buys not the child of me.
His mother was a vot’ress of my order,
And, in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip’d by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands,
Marking th’ embarked traders on the flood,
When we have laugh’d to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait,
Following—her womb then rich with my young squire—
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifles, and return again,
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him.

(2.1.125–37)

15 “That the Indian boy is an Eros figure,” MacCary argues, “cannot be doubted, and by my definition that means he represents an archaic self-image. Thus the male facing marriage nostalgically returns to an earlier, easier pattern of desire” (p. 147). On this view, that is, the Indian boy represents the classical eromenos, or boy-beloved, of the older male erastor, and Oberon—Theseus is regressing to a more narcissistic and manageable kind of desire, easier than negotiating with a fairy queen. It’s not clear whether MacCary means what he seems to say—what Jan Kott said in Shakespeare Our Contemporary (trans. Boleslaw Taborski [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964], p. 214) and what John P. Cutts implies in The Shattered Glass: A Dramatic Pattern in Shakespeare’s Early Plays ([Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1968], pp. 49–55)—that Oberon reverts to pederasty. However, it’s hard to see how this, or any solution involving a love for the boy, helps the Theseus who, in MacCary’s otherwise persuasive argument, is experiencing this therapeutic dream. There is no Ganymede in Theseus’ palace; and if the duke must resort to a simpler mode of love, it would more likely be to the series of nomadic heterosexual encounters cited by Oberon than to something homoerotic. It seems to me that the boy merely plays a symbolic role in the context for power. See also Shirley Nelson Garner, who argues for an Indian boy in whom both Titania and Oberon are erotically interested (“A Midsummer Night’s Dream: ‘Jack shall have Jill; / Nought shall go ill,’ ” Women’s Studies, 9 [1981], 47–63, esp. pp. 49–50).

16 If Oberon and Titania treat the changeling child as a signifier, they do no more than other parents do with their children, converting them into objects of symbolic exchange even before they are born. In “The Indian Boy’s Dream Wherein Every Mother’s Son Rehearses His Part: Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” Shakespeare Studies, 20 (1988), 15–32, Allen Dunn regards the Bottom-Titania episode as the Indian boy’s dream, a dream designed to defend himself against an oedipal expulsion from Titania’s maternal bower by having Bottom expelled instead, while his “ultimate defense is his [own] absence” (p. 22). Eliciting a dream from a
Titania describes a fellowship with her votaress Indian queen as idyllic as that enjoyed by Hermia and Helena or, more to the Theseus-as-Oberon point, by Hippolyta in her Amazonian past—a feminine world rich with all the mysteries of fertility, conception, pregnancy, and birth that women can treat with easy familiarity but that can be conveyed to Oberon only through imperfect analogies to masculine trade and moneymaking. The analogies work both ways: the sails of the merchantmen imitate pregnancy by conceiving and growing big-bellied with the wanton wind, and the pregnant votaress, seeing this, imitates the ships by sailing upon the land “as from a voyage, rich with merchandise.” But although a profitable rhetorical trade is conducted here between women’s and men’s “business,” there is no question which has priority in terms of nature and grace. Pregnancy is primary and ideal; it can only be imitated by merchantmen, who are then imitated in turn, with light mockery, by the Indian queen.

This is a picture that Oberon, who sees no sign of himself or even of the Indian king in it, can hardly be expected to admire. His response is curt: “How long within this wood intend you stay?” For her part, Titania takes obvious but melancholy pleasure in the recollection. For the skull in the corner is the child in the womb. Male of course, it kills the mother and brings an end to Titania’s idyll, just as the arrival of men has curtailed the idylls of the other women in the play. And now, for Titania, here is another man, a fairy-man, demanding of her as stepmother another kind of birth and death, that she yield up the boy and let the past die.

Thus the fairyland dispute, like that in Athens in the opening scene, is a displaced version of the oedipal crisis. The Athenian version of the crisis took a Father-Lover-Daughter configuration, with Egeus’ paternal “No” delivered to Hermia with respect to marriage. In fairyland we have the classic Father-Mother-Child triangle, except that the child is a changeling and the parents are step-parents. Because the child is absent from the scene here, the theatrical focus falls on the “mother’s” reaction to the paternal “No” that would separate the child from her. Titania, not the child, suffers symbolic castration; she has to surrender not only a desire for the phallus of masculine privilege but also her symbolic association with her beloved votaress. Like Hermia and Helena, she longs for a paradisal feminine past prior to or outside of marriage; and so her desire, like theirs, is founded on

character who never appears onstage is no mean feat and may risk being called “The Critic’s Dream,” as may my own argument for regarding regal quarrels in fairyland as “Theseus’ and Hippolyta’s” Nightmare.” Nevertheless, Dunn’s essay is an insightful exploration of oedipal crises in the play.

17 In a deservedly well-known article on the play—“Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture” in Representing the English Renaissance, Stephen Greenblatt, ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 31–64—Louis Adrian Montrose shrewdly regards Titania’s speech about motherhood as a counterpoint to Theseus’ earlier speech about fatherhood (1.1.46–52), in which Theseus overcompensates for the “natural fact that men do indeed come from women . . . [and] for the cultural facts that consanguineal and affinal ties between men are established through mothers, wives, and daughters” (p. 42).

18 The delightful scene described by Titania reveals what Helena’s account of her and Hermia’s childhood also reveals, the presence of difference within an idealized recollection of oneness. In Titania’s case feminine friendship does not paper over hierarchic distinctions. What she chooses to remember is an occasion when the Indian mother playfully went about the beach “to fetch me trifles.” No question who is fairy queen and who is votaress here.
loss, made even more irremediable in her case by death. To part with the changeling is to acknowledge this loss and the futility of trying to perpetuate an imagined completeness associated with pregnancy by playing stepmother to the boy. Life with Oberon will not compensate Titania for the loss of these illusions; but on the assumption that fairyland has turned Protestant during the Reformation, she will find her likeliest compromise in companionate marital love.¹⁹

From Oberon's standpoint, acquiring the changeling child erases the point of contentious difference between him and Titania by dissolving her ties to an idealized female past. Similarly, Hippolyta's marriage to Theseus will represent a castration of her Amazonian attempt to possess the phallus. Ceasing to live a life of masculine privilege, she will submit to her role as Athenian wife (though just how submissive she will be is the point at issue). Thus Titania's giving up a male child seems the dream equivalent to Hippolyta's giving up a masculine life.

But this is to stress merely one aspect of Theseus' anxieties about his Amazonian bride. Such sacrifices guarantee the duke an obedient wife, under which heading chastity presumably falls too. But if we key on Titania's speech about the pregnant votaress, the stress falls not just on obedience but also on motherhood. Amazons, after all, were hardly model mothers. According to Elizabethan authorities, "Not only did the Amazons refuse to suckle their sons but—according to their enemies—they often slew them at birth. At best they banished them to the fathers for rearing. Or—a third account, preferred by violent antifeminists—these outrageous mothers dislocated the boys' joints and then enslaved the cripples at spinning."²⁰

This is a far cry from the attitude expressed by Titania in recounting the scene on the beach. Immortal herself (accented by her line "But she, being mortal, of that boy did die"), she does what immortals inexplicably do from time to time, envy humans. It comes as something of a surprise that Titania, the beautiful queen of fairyland, can want for anything; but of course immortals have always found themselves wanting—why else would Apollo chase Daphne so, or Aphrodite dote on Endymion, or Zeus descend swanlike upon Leda? What Titania lacks and yearns for here is not sex but pregnancy. She gazes on the Indian queen as Helena gazes on Hermia in the opening scene, desiring "to be to [her] translated" (1.1.191). Indeed she depicts her votaress in full sail with such imaginative sympathy that she

¹⁹ Actually some Protestants, especially Puritans, regarded fairies as an invention of the Catholic Middle Ages, "devised by Popish priests to cover up their knavery" (Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971], p. 610). But this was unfair, as Thomas points out, because fairies antedated the Church and because the medieval Church had been hostile to such beliefs, not anxious to have competing deities and spirits. The existence of fairies was much debated, and among believers an effort was sometimes made to distinguish good fairies from bad ones; but most theologians, Protestant and Catholic, thought them all devilish. For a survey of the various opinions, see K. M. Briggs, The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 163–83.

²⁰ Celeste Turner Wright, "The Amazons in Elizabethan Literature," Studies in Philology, 37 (1940), 433–56, esp. p. 453. For these claims, Wright cites Thevet's New Founde World (translated into English in 1568), Butler's Feminine Monarchie (1609), Gainsford's Glory of England (1618), Heywood's 2 Iron Age (1632), Purchas's Pilgrimes (1615), Raleigh's Discovery of Guiana (1596), and Barckley's Felicite of Man (1598), among others.
seems to make the experience her own—and surely she (and by means of her, Hippolyta) must imitate this voyaging onstage as she tells of it, herself the voaress and Oberon perform the fairy queen to whom the trifles are given—but not the boy.

Thus Hippolyta-as-Titania experiences a moment when the phallus is not male but female.21 Her story about her voaress proceeds as if she had been present during the opening scene and heard Theseus’ patriarchal account of conception (1.1.47–51)—as of course in the form of Hippolyta she had. As though in retaliation, her story is as devoid of husbands as his was of wives, though hers gives at least a rhetorical nod in the direction of men. Delightful as all this is, it has a certain pathos too, inasmuch as Titania’s desire focuses on that specific feature of humans that marks their greatest lack. Creatures that give birth must die, as the fate of the Indian queen makes clear. With her death, the phallus of femininity is lost to Titania, replaced by the boy whom she can only “step-mother.” Real motherhood is barred to her by death—the death of the Indian queen but also, more fundamentally, the death an immortal would have to become subject to, and by definition cannot, to enter a world in which children are created, not stolen.

Thus in her role as Titania, Hippolyta experiences a past quite different from her own, one in which she longs for and imitates not male behavior but femininity and motherhood. For Titania, motherhood was never possible, and even her imaginative association with it through the Indian queen is lost; how irretrievably is evidenced by her inability to express it except in the rhetoric of masculine trade. When she begins her speech by saying “The fairy land buys not the child of me,” she has already conceded the game by thinking of the boy not as a heartfelt be-all and end-all but as a commodity to be bartered for.22 After all, as Puck said, “She never had so sweet a changeling” (2.1.23), which implies that the Indian boy is merely another item in a series and risks raising questions like “How many changelings had Queen Titania?” Whatever the answer, stepmotherhood is apparently as close as fairy queens can get to biological motherhood.

Lacan’s notion of the phallus (Écrits, pp. 281–91) is difficult to set forth clearly. First, it is “neither a fantasy, nor an object, nor an organ (whether penis or clitoris), but a signifier—indeed the signifier of all signifiers” (John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, Lacan and Language [New York: International Univ. Press, 1982], p. 335). What this master signifier signifies is something like “being the object of desire,” possessing the power to compel recognition, desire, love, respect. For the child, male or female, the original phallus is the mother, whom the child both wants and wants to be wanted by. At the oedipal crisis the child must repress the desire for the mother and for the mother’s desire by transferring the phallus to the Name-of-the-Father, thus enabling his or her admission to the symbolic. From this time on the phallus is associated with the power and privilege of patriarchy, not because it should be but simply because in patriarchal cultures it is.

Lacan’s apparent transcendence of biology in making the phallus a signifier rather than the penis is compromised by his very choice of the phallus to serve as this signifier and by his associating the “rise” (Aufhebung) and “fall” (repression) of symbolized desire with tumescence and detumescence (Écrits, p. 288). At one point he says the question is whether one physically “has” the phallus (men) or symbolically “is” the phallus, with or without having it (women or men).

22 “The changeling,” as David Marshall notes in an unusually perceptive essay, “comes to represent all of the characters in the play who are traded or fought over as property. It also shows us that the other characters are changelings in the sense that the play’s plot revolves around their exchanges: their substitutions and their interchangeability” (“Exchanging Visions: Reading A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” ELH, 49 [1982], 543–75, esp. p. 568).
Not so, however, for Amazonian queens like Hippolyta, once the moon has beheld the night of her and Theseus' solemnities. But will an Amazonian queen even want to be a mother? Presumably she will, once she has passed through the dream of fairyland in the shape of Titania. For on this view Titania's loss and the desire it occasions represent the unconscious loss and desire of the Amazonian queen as well. They represent, that is, precisely what Hippolyta has had to repress in order to be an Amazon and what must be readmitted to consciousness, therefore, if she is to become, as she is soon to become, not merely the wife of Theseus but also the mother of Hippolytus.

4. "MY MISTRESS WITH A MONSTER IS IN LOVE"

The second phase of Hippolyta's nightlife role as Titania is stage-managed by Theseus-Oberon, who gets his will by magical means. If his own imperial gaze has proved ineffectual, he will capture Titania's gaze and refocus it with an aimlessness that would have gratified Cupid:

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.  
(2.1.179–82)

According to Jan Kott, this prepares the way not merely for an arousal of "animal love" in Titania but for its consummation in her bower.23 In this vein David Ormerod reminds us that Pasiphaë was just such a lascivious matron and suggests that the encounter of Titania and the onocentaurian Bottom in a labyrinthine wood carries overtones of monstrous doings beneath the palace at Knossos;24 and Homer Swander attributes to Titania a "savage, knowingly destructive lust" that is consummated with Bottom in an offstage fairyland bower beyond the woods.25

Swander's argument situates the supposed ravishment of Bottom decorously offstage, primarily because that is the only place it could occur. His argument makes much of the fact that Titania's bower is not the same as the

23 pp. 220–21 (cited in n. 15, above).
24 "A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Monster in the Labyrinth," SKStud, 11 (1978), 39–52. On the other hand, M. E. Lamb, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 21 (1979), 478–91, also sees allusions to Pasiphaë and the bull without feeling that Titania's passion is consummated. See also Deborah Baker Wyrick, "The Ass Motif in The Comedy of Errors and A Midsummer Night's Dream," Shakespeare Quarterly, 33 (1982), 431–48, for a learned response to Kott's stress on the priapic connotations of the ass. As Wyrick says, "Thus, even as a sexual cipher the ass is unstable; under his shaggy skin lurks a remarkable ability to shift symbolic significance. The licentious ass, the 'foolish ass,' and the 'admirable ass' inhabit one hide" (p. 438). I should add that Theseus shapes his dream in accord with the principle of Artemidoros Dalldianus (second century A.D.), who in his Onstrokritika revealed the significance of dreaming of an ass: "Asses, if they carry a burden, obey their driver, are strong and walk quietly, bode good for marriage and partnership, for they indicate that the wife or partner will not be wasteful but obedient and compatible" (Naphtali Lewis, The Interpretation of Dreams and Portents [Toronto and Sarasota: Samuel Stevens, Hakket and Company, 1976], p. 70). Thus a great virtue of watching A Midsummer Night's Dream, our theatrical dream about an ass in fairyland, is that we can return home to a "wife or partner [who] will not be wasteful but obedient and compatible."
flower-canopied bank “where the wild thyme blows” and where, according to Oberon, “sleeps Titania sometime of the night” (2.1.249, 253). If it were the same, Swander says, then “it is especially easy and attractive to believe that no sexual act occurs between the Queen and the Ass.” Since he believes such an act should occur, he argues that her bower is really in fairyland, which is distant from the wood, and that it’s there where Bottom is taken and there where he is ravished.26

Peter Brook was not so delicate in his famous production of 1970. Roger Warren describes his staging of the pre-ravishment phase:

As [Titania] fell in love with Bottom, she lay on her back and curled her legs around his, clawing at his thighs, gasping and gabbling in sexual frenzy as she said:

And I do love thee. Therefore go with me.
I’ll give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep . . .
—whereupon Bottom jumped on top of her.27

Whereupon many critics jumped on top of Peter Brook, crying that what is really being raped here are Shakespeare’s text and theater. As for the theater, a Titania-jumping Bottom, or a Bottom-jumping Titania, is hardly what Shakespeare could have had in mind for his manor-house production, certainly not what the Office of the Revels would countenance for court performances, and not even what the Shoreditch Theatre in the licentious liberty of Holywell could display. All of Shakespeare’s (and any other Elizabethan playwright’s) bed-tricks occurred invisibly, offstage.

As for the text, any bedding of Bottom would have to be hidden not only from Elizabethan audiences but from Oberon as well. That the fairy king, twice said to be “jealous” of Titania (2.1.24, 81), should be willing to gain a squire at the expense of acquiring horns, especially when his rival is an ass, strains credulity. Of course the conjuring Oberon could not have known Titania would dote on an ass; what he had in mind was “ounce, or cat, or bear, / Pard, or boar with bristled hair” (2.2.30–31). The creatures he cites are all noted for their ferocity and hence would be the most likely to repel, not invite, sexual overtures. Hence his charm calls for Titania not to enjoy her new-found love, whatever he or it may be, but to “love and languish for his sake” (1. 29) or, as he said earlier, to “pursue it with the soul of love” (2.1.182). On learning that Titania “wak’d and straightway lov’d an ass,” Oberon says, “This falls out better than I could devise” (3.2.34–35), thereby revealing, Brook says, the “hidden play”: “It’s the idea, which has been so easily passed over for centuries, of a man taking the wife whom he loves

26 p. 92 ff. This all depends, however, on a Titania whom Swander regards as full of “wildly lust-driven desires” (p. 96)—desires made evident through stylistic devices so subtly meaningful as to boggle the imagination. For instance, of her lines “Out of this wood do not desire to go. / Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” (3.1.146–47), he says, “Her sudden violent lust is all available in the arrangement of the ‘t-d-g’ consonants, the basically monosyllabic diction, the opening trochee, the firm metrical regularity thereafter, and the caesura defined by the identical hard consonant (‘d’) on both sides” (p. 97). Even so, Swander’s otherwise careful and interesting argument makes the best case yet for a ravishment of Bottom that does not require a wild disregard of the text.

27 pp. 57–58 (cited in n. 5, above).
totally and having her fucked by the crudest sex machine he can find.”

That such an idea was passed over for centuries comes as no great surprise, since Oberon, not a man but a fairy king, does not choose a “sex machine” or anything else, as John Russell Brown points out. What is surprising is that Oberon would opt to be present at the time—as the stage direction at the opening of 4.1 implies: “Enter Queen of Fairies, and Clown, and Fairies; and the King, behind them”—and that afterwards, looking upon the now-sleeping couple, he could merely observe wryly to Puck, “See’st thou this sweet sight?” (l. 45). Either we critics and directors mistaketh quite, or fairy kings regard such matters very differently from other Shakespearean husbands, most of whom express some anxiety about their wives’ fidelity and none of whom assumes that the best way to teach a wife obedience is to encourage her to make a cuckold of him.

A third deterrent to this ravishing interpretation is Bottom himself, to whom I’ll return momentarily. Let me note first that part of the difficulty lies in Shakespeare’s having composed something of an anamorphic picture of Titania’s bower. Take, for instance, Titania’s words as she gathers Bottom and herself for . . . for whatever she is gathering them for:

> 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.  
> (3.1.192–96)

A straight-on look at the phrase “enforced chastity” yields an image of chastity forced or violated, in which case the watery-eyed moon must be Diana, goddess of virginity, who quite properly weeps on such unhappy occasions. Indeed her watery eye, reflected in the eyes of every little flower, disperses a panoptic sex-censuring gaze throughout nature—hardly the kind of gaze or the kind of goddess Titania would want to invoke if she had carnal designs on Bottom. Nor can one imagine a lunar Diana and myriad flowerets dripping with grief at the thought of Bottom yielding up whatever chastity he has to yield up; the speech would make better sense if a salacious Bottom were hauling Titania off to his hay-stall, not she leading him dumbly to her bower. Still, if we opt for a Titania so bent on ravishing Bottom that she can dismiss the moon’s weepy protests, then her “Tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently” would apparently be equivalent to “Enough said, let’s get down to business.”

So the straight-on meaning of “enforced chastity” is chastity forced. Looked at askance, however, it means just the opposite, chastity compelled, the kind Hermia would exemplify if she were to get herself to a nunnery, perhaps


30 In keeping with his argument that Titania’s bower is in an offstage fairyland, Homer Swander takes this stage direction, with its “and the King behind them,” to imply that Oberon may have followed the errant couple to the bower, spied upon them in flagrante delicto, and now, as they return for a few post-coital delights, trails behind in dejected jealousy (p. 105). If, on the other hand, Titania’s bower is the onstage “bank where the wild thyme blows,” then the mismatched pair is entering her bower in this scene (4.1), and the ravishment, if there is to be one, must deal with the awkward presence of both Oberon and the audience.
the kind she does briefly exemplify when out of deference to "human modesty" she obliges Lysander to sleep apart from her. This reading would invoke a different kind of moon altogether, one who grows teary-eyed when chastity is preserved: certainly not the prudish Diana but rather the more amorous Luna or Selene, who fell in love with Endymion long ago and who still inspires the lunacy of country lads and lasses in woodland bowerers on the eve of May and at Midsummer Night. By this token the weepy flowerets are not "Dian's buds" but "Cupid's flowers" (4.1.72), who should have little cause to weep if a deflowering is forthcoming. Later on, when Oberon exhibits the sleeping Titania and Bottom to Puck, these flowers, now "flouriets," are weeping anew. For as Oberon reports,

\[
\text{... that same dew, which sometime on the buds}
\text{Was wont to swell like round and orient pearls,}
\text{Stood now within the pretty flowerets' eyes}
\text{Like tears that did their own disgrace bewail.}
\text{(ll. 52–55)}
\]

What flowerets are these, and what is their disgrace? Surely they must be Dian's buds bewailing the disgrace of having been transformed into Cupid's flowers during the bower episode—bewailing, that is, the humiliation of Titania, brought about not necessarily by the loss of her married chastity but simply by her degrading but un consummated desire for Bottom.

Most arguments for a sexual consummation rely less on the text than on mythic or fictional parallels (Pasiphaë and the bull, the sexual escapades of Apuleius) or simply on the director's capacity to divine a subtext. Yet there are a couple of instances in which Titania appears to speak of country matters. The first is in 3.1 when she tells her fairies to light tapers for Bottom "To have my love to bed and to arise" (l. 166). Anamorphically hidden within a simple statement about his getting up after sleeping is a phallic arousal on Bottom's part, indeed of Bottom's part. In the Brook production the line was chanted by the fairies as they led Bottom offstage, one of them thrusting an ithyphallic arm up between his legs.

The next instance occurs after their reappearance in 4.1, when Titania enfolds the drowsy Bottom in her arms and murmurs

\[
\text{So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle}
\text{Gently entwist; the female ivy so}
\text{Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.}
\text{Oh, how I love thee! How I dote on thee!}
\text{(ll. 41–44)}
\]

Woodbine and honeysuckle are innocent enough, but the enringed finger is a familiar Shakespearean metaphor for coition,31 most explicitly in *All's Well* when Bertram sets the conditions for Helena's becoming truly his wife (3.2.57–60). And the ivy enringing the elm is a variation on a vine-and-elm topos that Peter Demetz has charted from the first century B.C. to modern times (though, surprisingly, without mentioning *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Beginning with Catullus, the marriage of feminine grapevine and masculine elm signifies the fruitful union of husband and wife.32 By the

ANAMORPHISM AND THESEUS' DREAM

Renaissance the topos had become widespread, only now it was “combined and contrasted with the motif of the ivy, clinging to its tree in an amorous embrace of intense sexual connotations.” Shakespeare employs both topos and countertextos in A Comedy of Errors when the faithful Adriana encounters a man who looks exactly like her husband and, embracing him, says, “Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine,” adding that “If aught possess thee from me, it is dross, / Usurping ivy, brier, or idle moss” (2.2.173, 176–77). Adriana is unaware that in fastening on a man who is not her husband she is herself the “usurping ivy.” Similarly, as Titania clings to Bottom, her lines identify her as the invasive ivy enringing an elm that is not her husband. Of course if Adriana can play the usurping ivy role in broad daylight on the streets of Ephesus without betraying her married chastity, so can Titania in her bower.

This is not to deny that Titania is sensually taken with Bottom; she is. But the question is how far her sensuality goes, and indeed how far it can go. Surely a good part of Oberon’s punishment of Titania centers in the physical and metaphysical impossibility of a fairy queen to couple with an ass. Add to this the impossibility of exhibiting such a coupling in Shakespeare’s theater and, if we still opt for a sexual act, then it must be accomplished verbally, not actionally, in which case Titania’s onstage metaphors here serve as verbal substitutes for the unstageable. It seems to me that Titania’s sexually ambitious metaphors are evidence not of what she and Bottom did or are doing but of what at worst she thinks she would like them to be doing. Such metaphors, like those of treasure-laden merchant ships earlier, are the only way to express the mystery of desire as it goes about its strange business in the psyche of a fairy queen.

To expand on this a bit: insofar as desire presupposes lack, we must imagine that Bottom has something that Titania lacks. One glance at Bottom makes this seem absurd; and yet, as we saw earlier, Titania’s admiring portrayal of the Indian queen implies a desire on her part to be an Indian queen, big with an Indian prince. But what has Bottom got that Titania could possibly desire? Perhaps the most obvious thing a fairy queen lacks and Bottom abundantly possesses—“mortal grossness.” That is how she phrases it when she tells Bottom that she will “purge [his] mortal grossness so / That he shall like an airy spirit go” (3.1.154–55). Unfortunately for her, the last way in the world Bottom could “go” is like an airy spirit; not even Titania has such transformative powers. And yet she cherishes him most passionately, not in any airy form but in his utmost physicality. This follows logically enough from her speech to Oberon expressing her admiration for “lower” things—a woman, a human, pregnancy, mortality—even as she neglected her allegiance to “higher” things—a “man,” a royal husband, wifely obedience, immortality. It follows also from Oberon’s accusing her of loving the mortal Theseus. Thus Oberon engineers a punishment that caricatures her desire: she is obliged to descend to the level of brute matter, to the very Bottom itself, and be entranced by it. When she dotes on Bottom’s “shape” (3.1.134), his “amiable cheeks’ and “fair large ears” (4.1.2, 4), when she obliges her elves to cater

33 p. 526.
to each of his corporeal needs, and finally when she winds his drowsy bestial body in her arms, what else is she doing but desiring his mortal grossness?

And not simply his “grossness” but his “mortal grossness,” a significant addition. In a play in which death is often invoked but always shied away from or apparently transcended, except in Pyramus and Thisbe, Titania comes at it from the other side. Her “tragedy” is not like that of mortal lovers, whose grand but fatal passion is “short as any dream” because the jaws of devouring time do their business quickly (1.1.144). Unlike humans, Titania is not in flight from time and its henchman mortality; she flutters at their window like a moth at a lantern, trying to find her way into a world of sexuality, pregnancy, birth, and (the price of all the others) death, and being frustrated by her immortal ungrossness. Her love for Theseus, her wish to be the pregnant Indian queen, her stepmothering of the queen’s child, and now her passion for Bottom: all reflect a desire for mortality. In this light her surrender of the changeling child marks her reconciliation not merely to Oberon and patriarchy but also to her immutable destiny as an immortal. Titania’s “tragedy” is that she is ineligible for the role of tragic heroine; fairy queens can’t fall—not at least into time and death.

Yet in a sense she does fall, not into time or death and not even into bed with Bottom, whose more-than-mortal grossness is its own impediment to any sexual derring-do in Titania’s bower. As Edward Berry observes, “Of all the many incongruities in this episode, the subtlest, least expected, and most characteristically Shakespearean, is the bestial lover’s lack of interest in sex.”

Even Kott says, “Bottom appreciates being treated as a very important person, but is more interested in the frugal pleasure of eating than in the bodily charms of Titania.” Thus despite a major campaign in which she sends armies of elves to hop in his walks, gambol in his eyes, and fetch and feed and scratch as well, she can no more capture his loving glance than Oberon can hers. From the standpoint of Theseus’ therapeutic “dream,” this suggests that it’s not Hippolyta-Titania’s sexual desire alone that is being purged but the unseemly aggressiveness and desire to dominate men that, in his anxious imagination, might well attend it. Thus the presumptuously masculine Amazon becomes the presumptuous Queen Titania, who then becomes the aggressive lover of Bottom, so domineering as to disabuse us of the notion that tyranny is an exclusively masculine pursuit.65 If Oberon has imposed his will on her with flowers and charms, she imposes hers on Bottom no less irresistibly, first tethering his body—“Out of this wood do not desire to go. / Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” (3.1.146–47)—and later his unmelodious braying—“‘Tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently” (l. 196). In between, the love she displays is imbued with regal narcissism:

I am a spirit of no common rate.
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I love thee. Therefore, go with me.
(ll. 148–50)

56 J. Dennis Huston shrewdly observes that Titania’s tyrannic bent is part of a more pervasive pattern of tyranny in the play, beginning with Egeus and the law but also including the despotism of love itself (Shakespeare’s Comedies of Play [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981], pp. 105–7).
ANAMORPHISM AND THESEUS' DREAM

This “I-therefore-you” style of love seems almost as self-centered and inconsiderate in its imperiousness as Bottom is in his bestial oblivion. But Bottom’s oblivious outfaces Titania’s; when her loving “therefore” takes aim at him, it turns into a non sequitur of heroic proportions. Thus in the bluntest way Titania is lessoned about the limits of queenly command, and Amazonian queens are asked to take note.

In fairyland, kings demand, command, punish, and finally forgive. When Oberon displays for Puck the sleeping queen and her entwined beloved, Oberon says, “See’st thou this sweet sight?” and goes on to tell how, “meeting her of late behind the wood,” he upbraided Titania until she begged his patience and bestowed the changeling child upon him. “And, now I have the boy,” he says, “I will undo / This hateful imperfection of her eyes” (4.1.45–62). The quality of mercy is not entirely constrained in Oberon, but it’s by no means free and generous either, coming as it does only after he’s gotten his humiliating way. Still, Titania’s disgrace, reflected in the flouriets’ weeping eyes, moves him to pity; and if pity depends on taking the perspective of others, of feeling what wretches feel, then Oberon’s own vision has been modified for the better. His sarcastic “See’st thou this sweet sight?” summarizes his entire project to restore marital order by doctoring Titania’s eyes and standing coldly by to observe her humiliation. This is his version of the smiling sadism Hermia’s dream attributes to Lysander; and insofar as this is also Hippolyta’s “dream,” it represents her anxieties about a Theseus who won her love doing her injuries. But then, in a forecast of Prospero’s “The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance,” Oberon not merely sees Titania’s disgrace but feels it, and so breaks his charm.

Unpleasant as Oberon’s methods are, we can only judge them by Titania’s response; and from the moment of her awakening she is not only unembittered but quick both to love—“My Oberon!” (4.1.75)—and also to obey: when he asks for music, she immediately cries, “Music, ho! Music, such as charmeth sleep!” (I. 82). Moreover, when the fairies reappear at the end of the play to bless the marriages, the king and queen are in such perfect accord that her troupe of elves merges with his train as harmoniously as the song she instructs them to sing:

First, rehearse your song by rote,
To each word a warbling note.
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing, and bless this place.

[Song and dance]
(5.1.392–96)

Surely songs and dances of this sort will not only ward off moles, harelips, scars, and other “blots of Nature’s hand,” as Oberon assures us, but also persuade the angry moon to dry up contagious fogs, quiet the rambunctious winds, set the seasons in order, and restore fertility to beast and human. However, before such glorious restorations can be made, Theseus must dismiss the law—-and to see clearly and obliquely why he does this, we have to return to the opening scene and another instance of anamorphism.

5. ANAMORPHISM, REALISM, AND THE LAW

One thing the blatant trickery of the anamorphic teaches us is the more subtle trickery of the “natural.” For the realism produced by linear per-

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spective in our first straight-on view of Holbein's The Ambassadors is just as much the product of craft and art and the geometry of pictorial representation, including the precise placement of the viewer, as is the anamorphic unrealism of the skull. What is palpably apparent in, say, surrealism or cubism is kept hidden in realism: the skull of artifice, whose hollow-eyed glance says to the viewer what the skull says in Holbein's painting—"Caught you!" What has been caught and exposed is not our blithe sense of immortality but rather our blithe acceptance of the reality of what we thought we saw to begin with: all of the clearly recognizable objects in The Ambassadors apart from the anamorphic skull.

Because the skull is invisible in dedicated realistic works, we think we are not being watched. But there's the cunning of it. Knowing we'll come this way, realism sets a trap for our gaze as craftily as anamorphism does. Seeing us before we ever arrive on the scene, it takes our measure, cataloguing the regularity of our habits, what we want and expect to see—our tiresome predilection for recognizable hands and faces and bowls of fruit and French ambassadors—and, noting all of this, it lines us up just so, as if we were sitting for the painting instead of viewing it. There we stand, wide-eyed as a spotlighted deer. We never know what hits us—until anamorphism or some other perversely artificial device gives away the game.37

In the opening scene of A Midsummer Night's Dream, something is hidden also, and hidden in full view, just as the artifice of perspectival realism is. I don't mean the shadows of Oberon and Titania cast by the bodies of Theseus and Hippolyta, but rather the invisibly visible artifice of patriarchy embodied in the Law, in the Name of the Father. For the one thing everyone in this scene accepts, even Hermia and Lysander, is the authority of the law, which no one except Egeus seems to like but which everyone acknowledges as given and unalterable. This is what Pascal calls the "mystic basis of authority," the fact that authority is often honored simply because it exists, and continues to exist simply because it's honored. "Laws," he observes, "are obeyed not because they are just but because they are thought just: it's necessary that [justice] be regarded as authentic, eternal, and its beginnings hidden, unless we desire its imminent collapse."38 Yet although it's wise to keep "beginnings hidden," it's also tempting to seek legitimacy in origins, especially natural ones, as Theseus does when he chides Hermia for not honoring her quasi-divine genetic source:

37 In Towards Deep Subjectivity (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Roger Poole cites an interesting example of sculptural anamorphism:

Naum Gabo's "Spherical Theme" (1964) appears from directly in front of it to be a construction in one circular piece of metal. Only when one moves round it does it appear that there are two curved circles of metal bent and placed back to back. From a position at a ninety degree angle to one's first position, one can in fact look right through the two halves of what appeared at first to be a solid object. At forty-five degrees to one's original position, the ambiguity is perfectly established, as the rhythmic quality of the whole forbids a final decision as to whether or not the construction is in one piece.

(p. 113)

Within the realistic sphere the most obvious example is pornography, which places the viewer in the position of a voyeur, seeing without being seen. But insofar as the picture has been staged to catch the gaze of the viewer, it has "seen" him before he sees it.

ANAMORPHISM AND THESEUS’ DREAM

To you your father should be as a god—
One that composed your beauties, yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it.

(1.1.47–51)

But this appeal only confirms Pascal’s wisdom about keeping beginnings hidden; for it doesn’t take much of a sidelong glance to see who is missing from this act of genetic composition. If patriarchal authority rests on the act of conception, then mothers have as natural a right to be considered “gods” as fathers. What is glaringly absent from Theseus’ justification of patriarchy calls our attention to what is glaringly absent from the scene itself—mothers. Glaringly absent, that is, now that we notice. Before Theseus’ speech we might have vaguely sensed that something was missing from this scene, but the theatrically given—simply who is present onstage—is a kind of law in itself, so naturally persuasive that it takes an anamorphic glance, prompted unwittingly by Theseus, to reveal what ought to be there but isn’t.

As this speech indicates, Shakespeare supplies us with plenty of patriarchal fathers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and a decided absence of mothers, especially in the opening scene. That being the case, we ought to be taken aback somewhat to encounter also, or not to encounter, a missing father. Not, of course, that every father or mother or great-uncle who fails to appear in a play should be reported as missing. Nothing is missing unless its absence is somehow announced, the way the nonmaterializing battle of Gaultree Forest in *2 Henry IV* is, or as Hamlet’s long-delayed revenge is. Here, the absence of Theseus’ father becomes apparent to us in the opening scene, announced by the fact that his name is possessed by that acme of fatherhood, the man whose identity is totally absorbed by patriernity, Egeus.

That is, any Elizabethan familiar with the Theseus of mythology would know that his father’s name was Aegeus and could hardly help being momentarily puzzled when an older man appears onstage, cries “Happy be Theseus, our renowned Duke!” (1.1.20) and is called homophonically “Aegeus/Egeus” by the duke. For a moment or two the very notion of paternity and patriarchy is as blurred as the skull in Holbein’s painting. Has the royal father come before his son the duke to lodge a complaint? If so, then surely the speciality of rule hath been neglected, and degree, both familial and political, is given a fearful shake. An even fearfuller shake is given to our sense of time if we recall that Aegeus ought by all rights to be underground, or rather underwater, instead of in court. For the scholars in the audience would know that Theseus’ marriage to Hippolyta took place well after he killed the Cretan minotaur and, returning with Ariadne, forgetfully flew the black sail that caused his despairing father to fling himself into what became the Aegean Sea.

39 Theseus would have been better off simply to assert the authorizing agencies of nature and God, like the well-known preacher William Whately, author of *A Bride-Bush; or, a direction for married persons* (1619), who admonishes women: “If ever thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set down this with thyself: mine husband is my superior, my better; he hath authority and rule over me; nature hath given it to him . . . God hath given it to him” (quoted by Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* [New York: Harper and Row, 1977], pp. 55–56). For a good analysis of Theseus’ speech, see David Marshall (pp. 551–52 [cited in n. 22, above]).
Gradually, however, this blur takes recognizable shape. "King Aegeus" evaporates, leaving the despotic father of Hermia. Nevertheless, the association between the two has been made and is reinforced by the fact that in upholding the law Theseus bows to the will of a man who represents, quite literally, le nom du père. Perhaps there is a skull in this scene after all, casting a ghostly authoritarian gaze on Theseus. For the law Theseus cannot abrogate is "the ancient privilege of Athens" (1.41), a law he inherits from his father's reign, as he inherited it from his, and so on. The monarch Theseus is as ruled by patriarchy as his subjects.

Up to a point, anyhow. At the end of Act 4, when Egeus invokes the law again, with even better justification than before, Theseus cavalierly dismisses both father figure and patriarchal law without a hint of explanation. If the play is a kind of fort/da game writ large, the da that would normally represent a recovery of the lost mother becomes here a fort that does away with the commanding father. I mean "does away with" not entirely metaphorically. For Egeus' death is implicit in Theseus' overruling his demand for Lysander's death. The situation is very like that in Othello when Brabantio hales his would-be son-in-law before the Senate, demands his death, and is himself officially overruled (1.3). The consequences of this are not mentioned until late in the play when Gratiano addresses Desdemona's dead body: "Poor Desdemona! I am glad thy father's dead. / Thy match was mortal to him" (5.2.211–12). In A Midsummer Night's Dream Hermia's match is not mortal to Egeus but something evidently akin to it. When Theseus issues his judgment, Egeus turns abruptly silent, exits shortly thereafter, and disappears from the play. At the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe he is, or should be, as conspicuously absent as Hermia's mother was from the opening scene of the play.40

In freeing Hermia and Lysander from le nom du père, Theseus also frees himself, especially if we hear an echo of Aegeus in Egeus. The name of the father resides in the law itself, and to repudiate the law, if only in a particular instance, is to deny its total dominion and hence to expose the ghostly skull of its "natural" authority for what it is, a self-serving construction of patriarchal culture. To see this, however, Theseus must position himself differently, taking a sidelong Socratic glance at the law. That is just what the play has done for him by casting him in the role of Oberon during the middle of the play and obliging him, in his private version of a midsummer night's dream, to come to terms with his marital anxieties. Not only his marital anxieties, it would seem, but also his tendencies toward

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40 Egeus is absent from the last act in Quarto 1. In the Folio, however, he appears and is given the lines assigned in Q1 to Philostrate. As critics have recently noted, whether Egeus is present or absent here can have a crucial effect. See Barbara Hodgdon, "Gaining a Father: the Role of Egeus in the Quarto and the Folio," Review of English Studies, 37 (1986), 534–42; Philip C. McGuire, "Egeus and the Implications of Silence" in Shakespeare and the Sense of Performance: Essays in the Tradition of Performance Criticism in Honor of Bernard Beckerman, ed. Marvin and Ruth Thompson (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1989), pp. 105–15. His absence implies his refusal to acknowledge Hermia's wedding and his alienation from Athenian society, whereas his presence speaking Philostrate's lines implies his full acceptance of the marriage. His absence makes far better sense: in part because the radical reversal of attitude required by the Folio seems so implausible—for instance, an Egeus shedding "merry tears" (5.1.69) while watching a rehearsal of Pyramus and Thisbe taxes credulity—and in part because it parallels the earlier absence of the mother and, following logically upon the dismissal of the law, sweeps the stage clear of the harsher aspects of patriarchy.
phallocratic tyranny—the Theseus who won Hippolyta's love doing her injuries. For one solution to his anxieties about Hippolyta is precisely the solution Egeus resorts to when his authority is called in question: sheer force, death, sequestration. As Egeus, with the uneasy acquiescence of Theseus, seeks to humiliate Hermia by force of law, so Oberon humiliates Titania by force of love-in-idleness. When Titania capitulates, Oberon recants. If the parallels hold, perhaps we can assume that authoritarian excess has been purged not only from fairyland but also from Theseus and Athens. At any rate Theseus releases the awakened lovers from the power of the law in an act analogous to and, I suppose, consequent upon Oberon's release of them from the power of his spells.

Both acts of liberation depend on the earlier freeing of Titania from her entanglement with Bottom, which, along with the transfer of the changeling child, marks a restoration of hierarchy in royal marriages. Titania can now pass almost seamlessly into Theseus' world, translated into Hippolyta by means of her doubled role. Having resumed her proper status as obedient and loving wife, she is twice addressed by Oberon as "my queen" (4.1.84, 94) just before, after a quick change of costume, she reappears onstage as Hippolyta and is addressed by Theseus as "fair queen" (l. 108)—which, given the duke's skepticism in such matters, is as close as his tongue can get to "fairy queen."

This confirmation of the presence of Titania in the body of Hippolyta affirms the rightness of Theseus' marriage. For if we go back to Oberon's jealous accusations about Titania's love for Theseus—

Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigenia, whom he ravished?
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa?

(2.1.77–80)

—we can now see that Titania is cast in the role of desire itself, figured as a kind of sensual glimmering in the night that promises Theseus the ultimate in fulfillment just beyond Perigenia with Aegles, just beyond Aegles with Ariadne, just beyond. . . . Always just beyond; so it goes with desire. And there, just beyond all of these transient desires, flits Titania herself, beckoning. Why? If my argument about Titania's desire for mortality is plausible, then surely it's because Oberon's jealousy is justified. Titania does—or, by now, did—love Theseus, yearning across the gap separating immortal from mortal. As she wanted and imagined herself to be the pregnant Indian queen, so in furthering Theseus' love affairs, she wanted and imagined herself to be Perigenia and Aegles and Ariadne. But fairies being fairies, she could come no closer than imagining, following darkness like a dream. Nor, it seems, could Theseus himself. For this line of interpretation implies that the amorous hero was not really pursuing the mortal women he briefly loved and left but rather the enduring image of

41 Not, of course, that Theseus is wiping patriarchy off the cultural slate, only its most repressive features as represented by the tyranny of the law. After all, Athens and Elizabethan England were patriarchal, and although Shakespeare could movingly represent injustices brought about by and within the system, it is questionable whether he could entertain the idea of the kind of just social order that has only become politically imaginable in the late twentieth century.
Titania that took up residence in each of them before drifting out of reach like desire itself.

This would bespeak a tragic love if it weren't for the fact that Titania now stands beside Theseus in the shape of Hippolyta. Through the magic of an actor's body, Titania finally achieves the corporeality she sought, and with it Theseus. And Theseus achieves the elusive Titania he sought, in the body of his queen to be. Thus Theseus' marriage to Hippolyta receives a kind of teleological certification; it was she all the time he longed for. And, thanks to the tyrannies of Oberon, his anxieties about her Amazonian desires in bed, in council chamber, and in the royal nursery have been put to rest. With Oberon assuming the role of stepfather to the changeling child, patriarchal authority is restored in fairyland, and hence can be relaxed in Athens.

But of course Theseus knows nothing about all this. When he dismisses the Athenian law, he exhibits much the same kind of irrationality as the male lovers in the wood. As a result, his famous speech extolling the virtues of reason takes on the character of Lysander's flowery-eyed explanation of why he suddenly loves Helena: because "The will of man is by his reason sway'd" (2.2.115). Theseus will have nothing to do with "antic fables" or "fairy toys" (5.1.3), although as a mythic character he is an antique fable himself and as a player he is an antic onstage,42 indeed an antic twice over, having played a fairy king as well as an Athenian monarch. In this light, Hippolyta's musing comment—

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable...  
(ll. 25–27)

—grows more meaningful if she, like the awakened Hermia, is seeing things "with parted eye, / When every thing seems double" (4.1.188–89) and is perhaps hearing echoes of her own double, the awakened Titania, murmuring "My Oberon! What visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamor'd of..." (ll. 75–76). Ah, but neither fairy queen nor Amazonian bride can tell what she thought she was enamored of. What she is enamored of is Duke Theseus, and all the rest is a dream. Perhaps they can get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It could be called "Theseus' Dream."