



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Lost Days in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Author(s): Anne Paolucci

Source: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 317-326

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2869081>

Accessed: 07-06-2019 03:41 UTC

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

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



JSTOR

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

The Lost Days in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ANNE PAOLUCCI

IT MAY SEEM PRESUMPTUOUS TO REOPEN a question for which such critics as Hunter, Fleay,¹ Clapp, Furnivall, Halliwell, Wright,² and Kittredge have not found a satisfactory answer.

"Four days will quickly steep themselves in night," says Hippolyta in the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I. i. 7 ff.); "Four nights will quickly dream away the time." The trouble here, as Kittredge briefly defines it, is that "the four days and four nights," which are by Hippolyta's count to precede the wedding day, "are not fully spanned" in the text of the play as we have it.³ The dramatic action ought to cover five days; actually, only three are accounted for. Critics have ascribed this apparent time discrepancy, in a play compounded of magical discrepancies, to carelessness on Shakespeare's part (forgivable, to be sure), to his working hastily to meet a deadline (possibly for a court performance or a noble wedding), or to his revising the play at some later date (when he did not catch the inconsistencies in the chronology of the action). In the view of one critic, indeed, the key time reference in the opening lines of the play was simply an "after-thought."⁴

In the absence of incontrovertible proof, one is almost tempted to concede it all—*nolo contendere*—not because the arguments are convincing, but because the alternative of being cornered into defending the retort that Genius Can Do No Wrong is bound to be frustrating.⁵ Unfortunately, however, the problem persists, forcing itself upon us with every new reading of the play. Could Shakespeare really have included so many references to time without some sort of dramatic design? Genius may be subject to error and carelessness, but would it make such a point of it? Whatever grudging concession one may make to chameleon logic, instinct shies away from the suggestion that Shake-

¹ H. H. Furness, ed. *A New Variorum Edition . . . A Midsummer Nights Dreame* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1895), pp. 6–7, n. 13.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 297–98.

³ George Lyman Kittredge, ed., *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Boston: Ginn, 1939), pp. ix–x.

⁴ *Variorum*, p. 7, n. 13.

⁵ Aristotle refers to such contrary alternatives as "blaisosis," literally, "knock-knees," an argument whose "legs" or "terms" diverge like the extended hindlegs of a frog. In this type of logical "criss-crossing," each of the two opposites has both a good and a bad consequence, opposite respectively to each other. See *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, ed. Lane Cooper (New York: D. Appleton, 1932), p. 166.

ANNE PAOLUCCI, University Research Professor at St. John's University, New York, has published on Shakespeare, Hegel, Dante, ancient tragedy, modern drama, and the Renaissance. Her most recent books are on Edward Albee and Luigi Pirandello; her collected short stories and poems are soon to be published by Griffin Books. Founder and editor of the *Review of National Literatures*, she serves as executive director of the Council on National Literatures.

speare failed, in a work very likely scheduled for court performance, to catch such "inconsistencies."

Surely a dramatic purpose suggests itself in the obvious fact that the "frame" scenes of the play contain specific time references which enable us to date events, whereas the magic wood scenes abound in night images which create confusion and suggest one long uninterrupted dream.⁶ Time as measured by the movement of the sun disappears in the enchanted wood. But may we not hope to find some clue within that magic night that will help translate dream into reality, moonlight into sun-time?

I

Night is the kingdom of the fairies. They live and work and travel by night, or (more accurately) *in* night—stuck there, to use the language of astronomy, as the planets are stuck in their respective spheres in the Ptolemaic configurations of the heavens.⁷ The world of the fairies is the nighttime of the universe, the condition of *absolute* darkness as it moves around the globe opposite the sun.

The human beings caught up in such a condition naturally find themselves disoriented. Confusion prevails as they try to adjust to their strange surroundings. The lovers shift allegiances abruptly. Bottom is "translated" into something rare and wonderful, which not only cannot be expressed properly after the fact, but cannot even be grasped adequately at the time. The entire machinery of apprehension seems to have been thrown out of gear.

We are aware, in a sense, of having been thrust into the sphere of the moon; hence the human attempt to grasp and describe the experience must necessarily prove inadequate. More than once, we are reminded of Dante's ecstatic vision at the top of Heaven, a vision, which, like its counterpart at the bottom of Hell, is recorded as the poetic stammering of a double transcendence. So long as the fairies remain on the scene, so long as the lovers (and Bottom) remain within the sphere of the moon, confusion will continue.

For the fairies, night has neither beginning nor end; they are at home in it, and in fact they must take care to avoid the day. But for the human beings, whose normal environment is the daytime, the unnaturally long night produces a condition bordering on shock. Bottom's reaction to his vision is a neat symbol of the general distortion suffered by human consciousness in this strange setting: "Man is but an ass if he set about to expound this dream. . . . The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was" (IV. i. 210–18).⁸ For everyone who finds himself thrust into the magic

⁶ See G. Wilson Knight, *The Shakespearean Tempest*, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1953), pp. 151–68; Donald A. Stauffer, *Shakespeare's World of Images* (New York: Norton, 1949), p. 52; Wolfgang Clemen, ed., *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (New York: New American Library, 1963), pp. xxx–xxxiii; Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Iterative Imagery* (London: H. Milford, 1931), pp. 7–11; Frank Kermode, "The Mature Comedies," *Early Shakespeare* (London: E. Arnold, 1961), pp. 214–15.

⁷ Night ought to be conceived here as a *point* opposite the point of the sun and moving in the same direction, in the tracks of the sun. See Dante, *Divina Commedia (Inferno, XXXIV, 112–15; Paradiso, I, 43–45; and especially Purgatorio, II, 1–6 ("... la notte, che opposita a lui cerchia")*.

⁸ All references to the play are from George Lyman Kittredge, ed., *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Boston: Ginn, 1936). For the deeper implications of Bottom's dream, see Kermode, pp. 218–19. W. Moelwyn Merchant suggests serious Pauline echoes in this "shrewdly garbled" speech and a resolution of the apparent confusion (" 'A Midsummer Night's Dream': A visual Re-Creation," *Early Shakespeare*, p. 185). Cf. Halliwell in *Variorum*, p. 195, n. 230.

sphere of the fairies, the experience is “a most rare vision.” Familiar things are seen, as it were, through the wrong end of a telescope. Small objects undergo a kind of enlargement; human reality suffers impressionistic distortion; the abstract, the far-fetched, the most distant things assume immediacy; the smallest, most insignificant details loom large and important; the evidence of the senses, like reason itself, no longer can be trusted. Events become part of a kaleidoscopic picture in which past, future, and present come together in the twinkling of an eye, as in the narratives of Titania and Oberon (II. i. 64–137) and in Puck’s boast that he can “put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes” (II. i. 175–76).

The experience is a haunting, surrealistic illusion of reality: everything looks vaguely or even sharply familiar, but the total impression is strangely disturbing. Human life and human emotions are there but are worked over into a kind of “epiphany” that forces us to reconsider the commonplace, the cliché: the meaning of love, psychological motivation, the entire rational frame of human reference.⁹ New meaning is superimposed on common experience. Even natural, physical phenomena are subjected to a new logic that displaces the usual rational explanations of things. Floods and heavy rains have been brought on by the dissension between the rulers of the fairy world; mischief is caused by Robin Goodfellow’s playful interference in household chores; people fall in and out of love because of Oberon’s gracious intervention; the “best bride bed” is blessed by Titania and Oberon.

So long as the fairies are in harmony among themselves, things run smoothly in the world; but the minute they quarrel, both the physical and psychological courses of human life are disturbed. For the fairies are related to the human universe as celestial movers, their sphere of influence being the sphere of the moon (astronomically, floods and tides; astrologically and mythologically, the emotions of the human heart and all disturbances connected with these emotions). The human beings who stumble into the midst of the fairies are, in every sense of the word, outside their proper element. The situation is analogous to that of Dante in the *Paradiso*; there, light is added upon light, but only through Beatrice’s patient help is it translated into intuition or new sight. In the world of the fairies, however, the lovers are disoriented by the *absence* of the sun (their normal guide), exhausted by the unrelieved *darkness*; they fall into “error” and fail to “see” beyond the literal reality of the long, drawn-out dream.

In the “unnatural” setting of the magic wood, light and day—like familiar logic and emotional certainty—have temporarily been destroyed. Night, as the means for emotional redirection and insight through confusion, is raised in their place. The sun—symbol of reason and clarity—is replaced by the notoriously “inconstant” moon. And yet, when all is said and done, the experience of that long night will have served to illuminate reality much more effectively than the light of reason ever could. In the middle scenes of the play, the moon takes over as the symbol of the paradox which is the heart of the argument.

II

Having reviewed in this way the day-night motif of the play, perhaps we may more readily accept the notion that time itself never really comes to a

⁹ The juxtaposition between a human frame of reference and the world of the fairies is suggested by Mario Apollonio, *Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1947), p. 119.

standstill. Shakespeare, far from “slipping” in his calculations, has in fact underscored the passage of time in a number of ways. The fairies themselves, for example, are painfully conscious of time’s swift movement. Their reappearance at the very close of the play should remind us that between the lovers’ awakening and the end of the wedding festivities, the fairies have, in fact, traced the usual full daily cycle: a whole day has passed and they have brought night back again with them.

The enveloping action—the action Theseus dominates—can be traced accurately enough in time. We learn in the opening scene that the royal marriage is to take place in four days. The reference to the new moon is actually part of an eleven-line statement which enables us to date the outermost limits of the action:

The. Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
Another moon; but, O, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
Like to a stepdame or a dowager,
Long withering out a young man’s revenue.
Hip. Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

(I. i. 1–11)

This passage sets forth the time-span to be covered in the course of the play; but even more important, it alerts us to *awareness* of time and to the psychological effects we can expect in characters subject to such awareness.

On the morning set for the royal wedding, Theseus reminds us that it is the first day of May: “No doubt they [the lovers] rose up early to observe / The rite of May” (IV. i. 135–36). The four days referred to in the opening scene have obviously elapsed. For Theseus and Hippolyta, whom we have not seen since the opening of the play, there is all the difference between the old moon and the new moon. The enveloping action thus provides two end-points of time between which the intervening events are to be traced and enables us to date the opening scene as taking place on 27 April.¹⁰ Having established the outer limits of the action, we can now go back to the opening scene and fill in the time sequence as it develops.

III

Left alone after Theseus’ ultimatum, Lysander and Hermia make plans to elope. “If thou lovest me,” urges Lysander, “steal forth thy father’s house tomorrow night” (I. i. 163–64). Hermia agrees: “In that same place thou hast appointed me / Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee” (II. 177–78). When Helen comes on the scene, Lysander confides their plans to her: “To-morrow

¹⁰ I fail to understand how anyone can take Quince’s “Yes [the moon] doth shine that night” or the use of the lantern to mean that the moon actually was bright on the night of the entertainment. The use of the lantern might have appealed to the amateur actors in and for itself, of course; but the exchanges of the spectators point clearly to the need for light, since the new moon cannot provide much illumination. I rather think the amateur players welcomed the use of the lantern as an additional realistic touch. (See Kurz’s argument in *Variorum*, p. 262.)

THE LOST DAYS IN *Dream*

night. . . . / Through Athens gates have we devis'd to steal" (ll. 209–13). Helen quickly devises a plan of her own:

I will go tell [Demetrius] of fair Hermia's flight.
Then to the wood will he to-morrow night
Pursue her. . . .

(ll. 246–68)

Shakespeare mentions the time planned for the elopement four times and provides us, indirectly, with the precise date: the flight planned on 27 April (as a result of Theseus' ultimatum to Hermia) will be realized on 28 April—that is, the night of 28–29 April.

The time planned for the elopement of the lovers and for Helen's counter-move to frustrate them is apparently also the time planned for the rehearsal of the artisans. Having distributed the various parts for the play they will present at the wedding of the King, Peter Quince informs the company that they will meet "to-morrow night . . . a mile without the town, by moonlight" (I. ii. 103–5). Shakespeare seems to have brought these events together in the *planning* to enable us to pinpoint the time of subsequent events, when references to time disappear.

With the opening of Act II, we find ourselves in the magic wood of the fairies. We learn through Robin Goodfellow—"that merry wanderer of the night"—that Oberon "doth keep his revels here to-night" (II. i. 18). What night? We suspect (although we cannot be absolutely sure yet) that it is the night referred to earlier, the night of 28–29 April. Our suspicion is reinforced with the arrival of Demetrius and Helen—the girl obviously pursuing the man she loves, Demetrius obviously pursuing Hermia, who, with Lysander, is already in the wood. The rehearsal of the artisans at the beginning of Act III further strengthens the initial impression. It is reasonable to suppose, in other words, that the events of Act II—right up to the appearance of the artisans for their rehearsal at the beginning of Act III—take place, as previously scheduled, on the night of 28–29 April. It is at this point that the reader is apt to lose his bearings in dating events. Not until the reappearance of Theseus in Act IV does time fall back into the familiar pattern.

IV

But the familiar pattern cannot possibly be called on to help us in the magic wood, where everything is distorted and human beings find themselves completely disoriented. We should have been very much surprised, in fact, had the original time scheme been retained in the middle scenes of the play. With the entrance into the wood, we have moved not into "another" night but into a "floating" night, an unnaturally "long and tedious night" which cannot be measured in the usual way. Within this new *dimension*, Shakespeare—far from losing sight of his earlier dramatic precision—has in fact provided us with a set of highly original clues, perfectly suited to the new setting, by means of which we can bridge the apparent time gap right up to the morning of 1 May.

The most revealing of these clues have to do with the *intervals of rest* within the magic wood, and, more particularly, with reminders of *sleep*. The first interval comes between the two events already dated for us: the elopement of the lovers and the rehearsal of the artisans. Titania is already asleep when Lysander and Hermia, exhausted by their flight, stumble on the scene and

almost immediately fall asleep. We know for certain that this is the first night in the magic wood—the night of 28–29 April—by the appearance, on schedule, of the artisans at the beginning of the next scene, where Titania awakens, sees Bottom, and claims him for her own.

The second interval of sleep comes in Act III, scene ii, where Demetrius—still pursuing Hermia—lies down to rest and falls asleep. The third interval marks the end of the wild chase and the proper regrouping of the lovers. Robin Goodfellow brings the four young people together at this point (although in the confusion of the “overcast” night they do not actually see one another); utterly exhausted by this time, the four at once fall into a profound sleep. These last two intervals are the ones to be dated and, as a result, distinguished from the first interval, which we may assume to occur on the night of 28–29 April.

The confusion which characterizes the third interval is especially significant in helping us to date the action. In the play’s opening scene, the dispute concerning Hermia’s suitors, Theseus had set a deadline, by which time Hermia was either to give in to her father’s wish that she marry Demetrius or else suffer the punishment of death:

Take time to pause; and by the next new moon—
The sealing day betwixt my love and me
For everlasting bond of fellowship—
Upon that day either prepare to die
For disobedience to your father’s will,
Or else to wed Demetrius. . . .

(I. i. 83–88)

The time of the new moon—as we have learned in the opening scene—is 1 May (or, rather, the night of 1–2 May).

At least two other passages emphasize the point. At the rehearsal for their play (III. i), the artisans discuss the problem of providing the moonlight for which the text calls. Bottom in his usual enthusiasm cries: “A calendar, a calendar! Look in the almanac. Find out moonshine, find out moonshine!” And Quince reassures him, “Yes, it doth shine that night” (II. 53–55). But Hippolyta has already told us in the opening scene that it will be a *new* moon, a “silver bow / New-bent in heaven.” And at the time of the actual performance, Moonshine takes pains to explain—in answer to Theseus’ “he is no crescent, and his horns are invisible within the circumference”—that “this lanthorn doth the horned moon present” (V. i. 24–28). Shakespeare plays on the idea of the new moon for several more lines:

Hip. I am awery of this moon. Would that he would change!
The. It appears, by his small light of discretion, that he is in the wane; but yet, in courtesy, in all reason, we must stay the time.

(II. 255–59)¹¹

Now, if the night of the wedding is the night of the new moon, the night before it must be a night of *no* moon, an “overcast” night, a night in which confusion is very likely to arise because of total darkness.¹² The lantern jokes

¹¹ Theseus’ comment points up the connection between the artisans’ play and the events of the “long and tedious night”—the one, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the larger experience, where the lovers themselves were forced to “stay the time.”

¹² The connection between the artisans’ play and the larger action is an organic one. The lantern-moon symbolizes, in fact, a third level of consciousness; it “illuminates” the artisans’

THE LOST DAYS IN *Dream*

remind us that the appearance of the new moon coincides with the night of 1–2 May. The “overcast . . . night” which precedes it is a night without moon. The confusion of the exhausted lovers in the third interval of sleep may be considered, therefore, a poetic reminder of the total “eclipse” of the moon on the night preceding the royal festivities, the night of no moon. And it enables us to “date” the third period of sleep (from which the lovers will be awakened by the royal party on the morning of the wedding) as the night of 30 April–1 May. Having thus “dated” the first and third intervals of sleep, we may reasonably conclude that the remaining middle interval of the sequence corresponds to the night of 29–30 April.

Sleep is the major clue in distinguishing the passage of time within the magic night. But there is a second set of clues that reinforce the first: each of the sleep intervals coincides with the casting of one of the love spells. In the first interval, the love juice of the magic flower is administered to Lysander (and Titania); in the second, the magic potion is given to Demetrius; in the third, the magic potion restores Lysander to his former condition. Time is thus translated into a poetic dimension in which the three moments of “conversion” are clearly distinguished, the transition from “before” to “after” underscored in each case by means of sleep.

A third set of phenomena adds to the sensation that time as we know it has been foreshortened but not lost: Hermia’s prophetic dream, Bottom’s “bottomless dream,” and Titania’s “vision.” Day-night contrasts cannot guide us here, it is true, but some kind of sequence is discernible. There is, one must admit, some kind of order in the apparent confusion.

V

It is Theseus who marks the return to the normal diurnal cycle. His very appearance in IV. i is a reminder of sun-time. Several important images suggest the reawakening of life, the correction of “error” in the light of day and reason:

. . . the vaward of the day. . . .
(IV. i. 108)

. . . ears that sweep away the morning dew. . . .
(I. 124)

No doubt they rose up early to observe
The rite of May. . . .
(II. 135–36)

representation as a simple (distorted) projection of reality, in which the spectators (themselves, formerly, actors of a similar distorted experience) fail to recognize the parallel and indulge in comments and criticisms that remind us of their myopic response to their own experience in the magic wood. Louis Cazamian has noted the serious implications of the play of the artisans as a commentary on life. The “tragedy” of Pyramus and Thisbe, he writes, “éveille en notre divertissement les échos légers d’une secrète méditation sur la vie, sur les illusions qu’elle doit créer pour se maintenir, e les succès illusoire de cet effort même” (*L’Humour de Shakespeare* [Paris: Aubier, 1945], pp. 38–39). See also E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958), p. 87, where Chambers calls the play of the artisans a “burlesque presentment of the same theme which has occupied us throughout.” The play is a “burlesque” to the immediate spectators, but it is also a “burlesque” of the experience in the magic wood, since members of the audience—Demetrius especially—fail to grasp the humorous side of their behavior as lovers.

SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY

Is not this the day
That Hermia should give answer of her choice?
(II. 138–39)

Good morrow friends. Saint Valentine is past.
Begin these woodbirds but to couple now?
(II. 142–43)

. . . the morning now is something worn. . . .
(I. 185)¹³

The fairies have disappeared “in silence sad” following “night’s shade” (IV. i. 98–99).

When we meet them again, it is the night of the royal wedding: Titania and Oberon are back to bless the “best bride bed” (I. 410). They have until daybreak to accomplish their task, for they must flee from the crowing of the cock, the lark’s song, the pale streaks of dawn—“Aurora’s harbinger” (III. ii. 380)—and run “from the presence of the sun, / Following darkness like a dream” (V. i. 392–93). Here and elsewhere, we are reminded that the fairies live in perpetual night; it is their natural province. The lovers who stumble into their world are out of place, out of *time*, subject to inconstancy (for this is the sphere of the moon).

Shakespeare hammers on this contrast in many ways; one need only recall the dominant patterns of imagery—almost all of which, within this portion of the play, have to do with the moon. Theseus—the symbol of light, reason, and order—reminds us of the contrast on the morning of the wedding and, again, at the close of the wedding festivities: “Lovers to bed, ’tis almost fairy time” (V. i. 371).

The fairies return to Athens on the night of the new moon to bless the royal marriage. That is, the revolving sphere of night brings them once again to the geographical starting point of the play, where they pause to celebrate the royal nuptials. The lovers, who have been caught up in the fairy world—in that same revolving sphere of night—for close to sixty hours, have been left behind earlier at that same point (that is, on the morning of 1 May). Unlike the fairies, they are understandably worn out by the seemingly endless experience. But their confusion is simply their inability to grasp the adventure in familiar terms.

The disorder which marks the episode in the wood is beautifully reflected in the unconscious irony of Hermia’s lament for Lysander:

The sun was not so true unto the day
As he to me. Would he have stolen away
From sleeping Hermia? I’ll believe as soon
This whole earth may be bor’d, and that the moon
May through the centre creep, and so displease
Her brother’s noontide with th’ Antipodes.
(III. ii. 50–55)

This, unknown to her, is precisely what has happened. For the two “lost days,” Lysander has in fact “stolen away from sleeping Hermia,” and the moon has indeed displaced “her brother’s noontide with th’ Antipodes.” But Lysander’s desertion is only a temporary aberration, like the apparent displacement of the

¹³ See also later references: V. i. 28–29, 32–34, 36–37, 39.

THE LOST DAYS IN *Dream*

sun. The fairy world is not for mortals; Theseus cannot begin to grasp the strange phenomena reported to him by the lovers: "I never may believe / These antique fables nor these fairy toys" (V. i. 2–3). Even to those who have lived through it, the experience appears—once they have been restored to the light of day—to have been an impossible dream, a suspension of time. Back in their familiar surroundings, they once more become sure of themselves (to the point of arrogance in the case of Demetrius). Restored to their own world, they seem to forget what has transpired and fall easily and quickly into old routines and habits. The experience of "inconstancy" remains with them as a flash of insight, an emotional truth that escapes definition.

VI

But Shakespeare has traced the lesson and the experience for *us* very clearly, providing the necessary clues to follow the lovers through the magic maze. The sleep of the lovers, coupled with the gracious anointment of their eyes and their vivid dreams,¹⁴ enables us to translate the seemingly chaotic events of the long night into part of an ordered sequence, beginning and ending with the familiar patterns of sun-time, which frame the enveloping action and define the limits of the magic night. For us, the entire sequence is consistent and forms an organic whole.

Back in the bright day at first "everything seems double" to the lovers (V. i. 193), their human eyes readjusting to their familiar surroundings. But as their sight grows accustomed to its natural environment once again, the dream-like experience is transformed into human feelings and is given a kind of order and permanence:

. . . 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.

(V. i. 23–27)¹⁵

Back in the familiar light of day, the prolonged exhaustion and the despair which marked the actual experience gradually disappear and the sense of haunting magic which accompanied it is intensified.

This, at least, is the reaction of the lovers. But the poet who traces it has, in fact, resolved the two levels of consciousness and the two worlds they represent into a single consistent whole. The "confusion" Shakespeare depicts is by no means the result of "haste or inadvertence,"¹⁶ nor is the "variance between the

¹⁴ Dante's journey through *Purgatorio* furnishes an interesting parallel: it too is marked by interludes of sleep, blessed by the gift of love, and visited by prophetic dreams and visions. (See *Purgatorio*, IX, 13 ff.; XIX, 1 ff.; XXVII, 9 ff.)

¹⁵ Of the critics I have read on the subject, Furness alone has suggested a double time scheme and worked it out to some extent. Furness finds the "lost days" in the allusions to dawn (the cock crowing, the singing of the lark, the first streaks of dawn in the sky), an interesting but problematic attempt to solve the difficulty; for while providing suggestive insights into the imagery of the fairy night, Furness's scheme forces him to violate clearly established facts, such as the time of the play-rehearsal, which—he is forced to argue—takes place during the day of 29 April rather than on the night of 28–29 April, the time agreed upon by the players in an earlier scene (I. ii. 101–5). See *Variorum*, pp. xxix–xxxii. Although I cannot share Furness's conclusion, I recognize in his approach an authoritative suggestion for my own analysis.

¹⁶ *Variorum*, p. 297.

SHAKESPEARE QUARTERLY

different parts” of his time scheme “inexplicable.”¹⁷ Theseus’ veiled tribute to the poet’s art is much closer to the truth:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(V. i. 12–17)

Through “the magic hand of chance,” the phantasmagoria of the fairy night—like the representation of Pyramus and Thisbe—proves a challenge to the imagination. Like the Interlude of the artisans, it emerges as something both tedious and brief—too long for the strangers who are caught up in it, too short for those who are at home there. Where the poetic eye is wanting to grasp the paradox, three hours can be a “long age”: a single hour may be tortured into an eternity of anguish, and two days may seem like one long darkness.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298. Cf. p. xxvii.