INTRODUCTION.

I. LITERARY HISTORY OF THE PLAY.

The Registers of the Company of Stationers for the year 1600 contain, amongst other entries of books "allowed to be printed", the following: Entry in the Stationers' Register, Oct. 8th, 1600.

8 Octobris

Thomas ffysher Entred for his Copie vnder the handes of master Rodes and the Wardens. A booke called *A myd-sommer nightes Dreame* vj^{d}.

During the same year, that is, before March 25, $160\frac{0}{1}$, two editions of the play in Quarto form appeared. A careful comparison has established the fact that the earliest of these, known as the First Quarto, or Q 1, is that which has the following title-page:— The First (Fisher's) Quarto of 1600.

"[Ornament] | A | Midsommer nights | dreame. | As it hath beene sundry times pub- | *lickely acted by the Right honoura-* | ble, the Lord Chamberlaine his | *seruants.* | *Written by William Shakespeare.* | [Fisher's device: a kingfisher] | ¶ Imprinted at London, for *Thomas Fisher*, and are to | be soulde at his shoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart, | in *Fleete streete.* 1600."

This is often called Fisher's Quarto.

The Second Quarto, known also as Q 2 or Roberts' Quarto, is a reprint, page for page, of Q 1. The typographical details are better arranged, the spelling is less archaic, a few misprints are corrected, and a somewhat more than compensating number of errors have been allowed to creep in. The title-page runs as follows:— The Second (Roberts') Quarto of 1600.

"[Ornament] | A | Midsommer nights | dreame. | As it hath beene sundry times pub- | *likely acted, by the Right Honoura-* | ble, the Lord Chamberlaine his | *seruants.* | *Written by William Shakespeare.* | [Roberts' device: the Geneva Arms: a Half-Eagle and Key.] | *Printed by Iames Roberts*, 1600."

It has been thought that Roberts' edition was merely a pirated version of that published by Fisher; but on the whole it appears more likely that Fisher, who was not himself a printer as well as a publisher, got the second edition, if not the first also, printed for him by Roberts, who was both; and that the issue of two editions in six months was simply due to the success of the play. No third edition was, however, printed before the great collection of all Shakespeare's plays, known as the First Folio (F 1) of 1623. The version of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* there given appears to have been printed from a copy of Q 2 kept for use in the library of the theatre. This is shown by the fact that the stage-directions which it contains are more numerous and elaborate than those given in either of the Quartos, and were evidently written for practical use.[1] The text of the First Folio was reproduced in the Second, Third, and Fourth Folios of 1632 (F 2), 1664 (F 3), and 1685 (F 4).

The Quartos and Folios.

The text of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* has come down to us in a singularly perfect state. This is probably due to the First Quarto having been originally printed from a clear and authentic manuscript. The slight variations introduced from time to time in the later editions do not appear to rest upon any independent authority. When they are not mere mistakes, they are only conjectural emendations of the printer or editor. Sometimes, of course, they happily correct a slip in the First Quarto.

Purity of the Text of the First Quarto.

The date of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* has given rise to more than the usual amount of vain imaginings. The only

[1] See the notes on iii. 2. 415, 418, 463; v. 1. 128. A fuller account of the two Quartos, and of their relations to the First Folio, is given in Appendix B.

precise external indication which we have to go upon is the mention of the play in the list of Shakespeare's comedies given in Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia*, which was entered in the Stationers' Register on September 7, 1598. Later than 1598, therefore, it cannot be, but in attempting to fix a year in the previous decade we have only internal evidence to go upon. Several passages in the text have been taken hold of by one critic or another as containing some contemporary allusion which might yield such evidence. Most of them will not bear serious discussion;[1] and a careful consideration of all which are of any real importance, together with the arguments, less easily stated but not less cogent, which can be derived from the thought and style of the play, leads me to the belief that the probable date is to be found in the winter of 1594–5. I will now attempt to justify this conclusion.

Date of the Play: mentioned in *Palladis Tamia*, 1598.

Probable Date: the winter of 1594–5.

Amongst the entertainments proposed for Theseus' wedding eve in act v. is included—

> "The thrice three Muses mourning for the death
> Of learning, late deceased in beggary" (v. 1. 52–53).

This passage can hardly refer, as has been suggested, to the death of Spenser, for that did not take place until 1599, and was most probably not 'in beggary' at all. It might possibly refer to the death of Robert Greene in 1592. Greene was learned, *utriusque Academiae in Artibus Magister*, and he certainly died in extreme want. But then Greene was almost certainly no friend of Shakespeare's, and as will be seen presently, it is just possible that he is caricatured, rather than complimented, in this very play.[2] Moreover, Theseus says of the

The Allusion to the Death of Learning in v. 1. 52.

[1] See the notes on the supposed imitations of or allusions to *The Faerie Queene*, Bk. vi. (1596) in ii. 1. 5, Lodge's *Wit's Miserie and the World's Madness* (1596) in v. 1. 11, and *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* (1600) in ii. 1. 14.

[2] See the note on iv. 1. 210. Mr. Fleay is of opinion that in Bottom and his fellows Shakespeare satirized the Earl of Sussex' Players, with whom Greene apparently became connected after the decay of the Queen's Company, and who probably produced his *George a Greene*. These men appeared once, and once only, at court, on Jan. 2, 1592, and acted at the Rose in the spring of 1593.

proposed performance, "This is some satire, sharp and critical";[1] and therefore it seems most likely that Shakespeare had in his mind those elaborate complaints, often allegorical, of the neglect of learning, which were so fashionable in Elizabeth's reign. And if so, he probably took the hint for his title from Spenser's *Tears of the Muses*, a poem of just this sort, which was published among the *Complaints* of 1591.[2] In any case, it is clear that whatever the point of the allusion may be, it does not bring us so far on as 1594.

The Allusion to the Weather in ii. 1. 81–117.

The passage which primarily suggests this date is that in act ii. sc. 1. 81–117, where Titania describes at great length a season of extraordinarily bad weather. Now it so happens that we have several contemporary descriptions of a quite exceptionally wet and cold summer which occurred in this year of 1594, descriptions which in many points appear to echo Titania's very words.[3] It goes, of course, without saying that Shakespeare might perfectly well have described a rainy season without the slightest reference to the year in which he was writing, or to any other year in particular. At the same time, such a passage would have had its special point for the audience in or immediately after 1594, and it is worth noting that, looked on merely as part of the play, it is somewhat irrelevant and even dramatically out of place; for the larger part of the action is carried on out of doors, and clearly demands fair weather. On the whole, the coincidence appears to me at least to raise a presumption in favour of the proposed date, provided that it is in other respects acceptable.

A third allusion also tells in favour of 1594, and, moreover, points distinctly to the latter part of that year. In act i. sc. 2 and in act iii. sc. 1, there is some alarm amongst the clowns lest that "fearful wild fowl", the lion, should frighten the

[1] If the allusion is to Greene, perhaps Shakespeare was thinking of the unfair attack made on him after his death by Gabriel Harvey.

[2] I do *not* suggest that Shakespeare is returning a compliment paid him as "pleasant Willy" in the *Tears of the Muses*. Willy may be Sidney, or he may be Lyly; but what is said of him is quite inconsistent with Shakespeare's position even in 1591, still more at the earlier date at which the poem appears to have been written.

[3] I have reprinted these descriptions from Stowe's *Annals* and elsewhere in Appendix C.

ladies. It can hardly be doubted that this is a reminiscence of what actually happened in the Scottish court at the baptism of Prince Henry on August 30th, 1594, when a triumphal car "should have been drawn in by a lion, but because his presence might have brought some fear to the nearest, or that the sight of the lights and torches might have commoved his tameness, it was thought meet that the Moor should supply that room".[1]

The Allusion to the Lion at Edinburgh in i. 2. and iii. 1.

This same date of 1594–5 seems to me to suit admirably with the character and style of the play. It clearly belongs to the earliest group of Shakespeare's comedies. It abounds with rhyme, with strained conceits, with antithesis and other rhetorical devices. The blank verse is far more regular and monotonous than that of any of the later plays: the use of trisyllabic feet, of run-on lines, of broken lines, of feminine endings, of the countless other devices by which Shakespeare gradually came to give infinite variety to his rhythm, is as yet timid and rare.[2] Then, again, the interest of character is very slight. Bottom is a masterpiece and Theseus a clever sketch, but how wooden are the rest compared with the living figures of *The Merchant of Venice*, which probably dates from 1596–7! Moreover, they fall naturally into pairs, with that antithetic grouping, which, like the antithetic rhythm, is so marked in Shakespeare's early work. On the other hand, if *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is compared with the other early comedies, with *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, it betrays in many ways a notable advance.[3] It is written with a firmer and less experimental hand, with a more daring use of materials, with a more striking mastery of poetic expression. And technically,

Aesthetic Evidence as to the Date.

[1] An account of the ceremony was published at Edinburgh in 1594 (?). This was reprinted from the later edition of 1603 in Nichols' *Progresses of Elizabeth*, iii. 365.

[2] See the Essay on Metre, § 19.

[3] If the order of the plays were determined solely by the proportion of rhymed to unrhymed lines, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* would be the earliest but one, not the latest of its group. See Essay on Metre, § 17. But the test is fallible, and the exceptionally lyrical, masque-like character of the play fully accounts for the amount of rhyme.

too, the absence of doggerel rhyme from the comic scenes is a mark of development. If we make it one of the early group, but the last of that group, all the conditions of the problem are satisfied. Certain themes and situations are repeated from the earlier plays: thus the situation of the lovers before Theseus recalls that of Aegeon before the Duke in *The Comedy of Errors*; but the closest affinities in this respect are with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the play which on this hypothesis immediately preceded. In both, the interference of the claims of love with those of friendship forms an important element in the plot.[1]

Affinities of the Play with *Richard II.* and *Romeo and Juliet.*

But the chief advantage of dating *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* in 1594–5 is that it brings it into close neighbourhood to *Richard II.* and to *Romeo and Juliet.* These three plays, a comedy, a history, and a tragedy, make up a well-defined group, all alike characterized by a markedly lyrical quality. They are dramatic poems rather than dramas, and appear to point to an attempt, a transient attempt, of the poet to find dramatic value in painting the phases of emotion rather than the development of character.[2] The connection of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* with *Romeo and Juliet* is even closer: they are in some sort pendants to each other. Both deal directly with the same problem of the function of love in life: but whereas in the comedy, as will presently be shown, it is love the lawless, the misleader, that is put before us, the tragedy aims deeper and gives us love the redeemer, the reconciler. Finally, it may be pointed out that the fate of the "star-crossed lovers" creates a situation exactly parallel to that burlesqued in Pyramus and Thisbe.

Was the Play performed at a Wedding, and if so, whose?

Such evidence then as we can arrive at points to the winter of 1594–5 as the most probable date for the composition of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream.* Bearing this in mind, we may consider the attempts that have been made to determine the precise occasion

[1] Shakespeare's preoccupation with this theme at this period of his life should be read in the light afforded by the *Sonnets.*

[2] See the Introduction to my edition of *Richard II.* in the Falcon Series.

on which it was first presented. The character of the play is in some respects peculiar. In its wealth of dance and song, in its capacities for scenic effect, in its introduction of supernatural beings, it resembles, more than any other of Shakespeare's comedies, the type of the fashionable Elizabethan Masque. And in the juxtaposition of clowns and fairies we get just that favourite contrast of poetry and burlesque out of which Jonson afterwards developed the set form of the Anti-masque.[1] Now Masques were distinctly aristocratic and not popular entertainments; they took place not on the public stages, but in the palace, or in the great halls of the Inns of Court or of private dwellings. They were especially in vogue at marriage festivities. Seeing that *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* deals with a marriage, and ends with what is practically an epithalamium, it is at least a plausible theory that it was written to grace the wedding night of some young noble. Moreover, in view of the graceful and extremely irrelevant compliment to Elizabeth which is inserted in act ii. sc. 1,[2] it is difficult not to suspect that the wedding in question was one at which the queen was herself present. The two occasions for which this extraordinary honour have been most often claimed are the marriage of the Earl of Essex to Frances Lady Sidney in 1590, and that of the Earl of Southampton to Elizabeth Vernon in 1598.[3] Both of these appear to me decidedly out of the question. Not only is the one too early and the other too late, but also they were both secret marriages, carefully concealed from the displeasure of the queen, and certainly not celebrated in her presence or likely to have been attended with any sumptuous festivities

[1] See the admirable sketch of the history of the Masque in Mr. Verity's Pitt Press edition of Milton's *Arcades* and *Comus.*

[2] See Appendix F.

[3] The two champions of the claims of Essex have been Elze in his *Essays on Shakespeare*, and Herman Kurz in the *Jahrbuch* (vol. iv.) of the German Shakespeare Society for 1869. Those of Southampton are supported by Mr. Gerald Massey in his *Secret Drama of Shakespeare's Sonnets* and earlier work. Mr. Massey interprets the whole plot as referring to the rivalry for Southampton's affections between Elizabeth Vernon and Penelope Rich. A pretty show for a wedding night! But then Elze finds in the Ariadne and Perigenia passage an allusion to Essex' past amours!

at all. We owe a much more likely suggestion to Mr. Fleay. On January 26th, 1594/5,[1] William Stanley, Earl of Derby, married Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford. The wedding took place at the Court at Greenwich, and therefore almost certainly in the presence of Elizabeth. Lord Derby, like all the Stanleys, was interested in the drama (see Appendix H), and it is worth noting that the very company to which Shakespeare belonged had been up to his death, on April 16th of the previous year, the servants of his elder brother and predecessor, Ferdinando. Yet one more point. I have explained the allusion to the "thrice three Muses" as referring to Spenser's *Tears of the Muses*. But why, writing in 1594–5, should Shakespeare refer pointedly to a poem published so far back as 1591? The present hypothesis affords an answer. An honoured guest at William Stanley's wedding would be the widow of Ferdinando, Alice, dowager-Countess of Derby. And the allusion to Spenser's poem would be a compliment to her, for to her, Spenser's cousin, and then Lady Strange, it had been originally dedicated in 1591.[2]

Was it at the Wedding of the Earl of Derby on 26th Jan. 1594/5?

We have passed into the region of conjecture. The dating of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* in 1594–5 I regard as fairly certain; but I do not pretend to do more than guess at the actual occasion upon which it was performed. Whatever this occasion may have been, we know from the Qq. that the play was performed "publickely" before it was printed in 1600. There are certain indications which make me think that it was also at some period slightly retouched. Two passages, iii. 2. 177–343 and v. 1. 1–105, show a markedly larger proportion of feminine endings than the rest of the play.[3] In the earlier

The Play possibly retouched at a later date.

[1] This is the date given for the event in Stowe's *Annals*. All the peerages give it, probably copying each other, as 26th June, 1594. Of course this brings us temptingly near to Midsummer Day (June 24th), but then it would be too early for the allusion to the lion at Prince Henry's christening on August 30th.

[2] If this hypothesis has anything in it, Lady Derby will have received special honour from the three greatest poets of two centuries: for it was for her, in her old age, that Milton's masque of *Arcades* was written.

[3] See Essay on Metre, §§. 13, 16.

passages, this may be due merely to the excited state of the speakers, but I cannot resist the suspicion that the opening of act v. shows some traces of later work. Perhaps in its original form, it was even more personal to the Stanley family than it is now.

The later history of the play is not without its points of interest. It appears to have been performed on Sunday, 27th September, 1631, in the house of John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln. This performance on the Sabbath gave great offence to the Puritans, and there exist among Laud's papers (*Lambeth MS.* 1030, *arts.* 4, 5) two documents referring to the matter. One is a letter of reproof from John Spencer, a Puritanical preacher, to a lady who was amongst the audience. The other is a burlesque order or decree of this same John Spencer, condemning the Bishop, and concluding as follows: "Likewise wee doe order, that Mr. Wilson, because hee was a speciall plotter and Contriver of this busines, and did in suche a brutishe manner acte the same with an Asses head, therefore hee shall uppon Tuisday next, from 6 of the Clocke in the Morning till sixe of the Clocke at night sitt in the Porters Lodge at my Lords Bishopps house with his feete in the stocks and Attyred with his Asse head, and a bottle of haye sett before him, and this superscripcion on his breast—

The after-history of the Play.

> 'Good people I have played the beast
> And brought ill things to passe
> I was a man, but thus have made
> Myselfe a Silly Asse'".

Some later hand has written upon the document "the play M. Night Dr.", and one cannot doubt that this is correct.[1]

After the suppression of the theatres, the play was abridged into a farce or droll, under the title of *The Merry Conceited Humours of Bottom the Weaver*, which seems to have been acted in private. This was printed in 1661, and again

[1] Spencer refers again to the event in his *Discourse of Divers Petitions* (1641), p. 19, and speaks of Wilson as "a Cunning Musition". I suppose he was Dr. John Wilson whose *Psalterium Carolinum* was published in 1657, and *Cheerful Airs or Ballads* in 1660.

amongst other drolls in Kirkman's *Wits, or Sport upon Sport* (1672). The original play was restored to the stage at the Restoration, when Pepys saw it, and commented as follows, under the date Sept. 29, 1662:—"To the King's Theatre, where we saw Midsummer-Night's Dream, which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life". In 1692 it was converted into an opera, with music by Purcell, and numerous additional songs and other sophistications of the text. This and other adaptations continued to be acted until the present century, when a purer text was restored. Mendelssohn's famous music was written in 1826, and performed at a revival of the play under the direction of Tieck at Berlin in the following year.

The influence of the Play upon Literature.

The play occupies a considerable place in the history of fairy literature. To it and to the description of Queen Mab in *The Merchant of Venice*, Drayton's *Nymphidia*, the fairy poems in Herrick's *Hesperides* and Randolph's *Amyntas* owe their inspiration. The figure of Robin Goodfellow became a popular one in ballad and chap-book. Besides the prose *Life of Robin Goodfellow* (1628) there exist two or three ballads, one of which has been attributed without much authority to Ben Jonson. The same poet modelled upon *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* his *Masque of Oberon, or the Satyr*. Still earlier, the curious anonymous play of *Narcissus, A Twelfth Night Merriment*,[1] and W. Percy's *Fairy Pastoral, or Forest of Elves*, in which Oberon is introduced,[2] show marked traces of the same influence. Finally, Mr. Verity, in his admirable edition of the play, has called attention to the frequent reminiscences of it that are scattered through the poems of Milton.[3]

[1] See Appendix F.

[2] This play was edited by Hazlewood for the Roxburghe Club (1824) from a MS. at Alnwick Castle.

[3] There is a careful study of Shakespeare's imitators in C. C. Hense's *Untersuchungen und Studien* (1884). See also Appendix A.

II. SOURCE OF THE PLOT.

So far as we know, Shakespeare was not indebted to any single model for the plot of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. It combines situations and motives gathered from widely different sources, and welded together by the incomparable art of the poet. But clearly the framework of the story, so far as it centres in Theseus, is adapted from the *Knightes Tale* of Chaucer. In the tale, as in the play, the action has its rise in the celebration of Theseus' wedding; there, too, the characters go forth to "doon their observance to May", and there the theme of friendship broken across by love is illustrated in Palamon and Arcite, as here, though differently, in Hermia and Helena. Several slighter parallels of incident and phrase are recorded in the notes.[1] Other facts with regard to Theseus Shakespeare probably obtained from the *Life of Theseus* in Sir Thomas North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives* (1579). I have thought it well to reprint all the passages from which he appears to have borrowed anything in Appendix D.[2]

The Theseus story.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe was a familiar one to Elizabethan readers. Shakespeare probably read it in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, iv. 55–166, or in the translation of that poem by Arthur Golding (1565). Chaucer included the *Legend of Thisbe of Babylon* in his *Legend of Good Women*; and the Stationers' Registers for 1562 record a license to William Greffeth "for pryntynge of a boke intituled Perymus and Thesbye". A poem on the subject in Clement Robinson's *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites* (1584), by I. Thomson, has some verbal resemblances

The Pyramus and Thisbe story.

[1] See notes to i. 1. 16, 167; iii. 2. 338; iv. 1. 116; v. 1. 51. *The Knightes Tale* had already been dramatized in Richard Edwardes' *Palamon and Arcite*, as it was afterwards by Fletcher, together, as many think, with Shakespeare himself, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The relation of Shakespeare's plot to that of Chaucer has been worked out by L. Proescholdt, *On the Sources of Midsummer-Night's Dream* (1878), and B. Ten Brink in the *Jahrbuch*, xiii. 92.

[2] See also Appendix I on the connection of Titania and Theseus.

to Shakespeare's burlesque. It will be found, with Golding's version, in Appendix E.[1]

The incident of the Love-juice.

Two sources have been suggested for the incident of the love-juice. In neither case, I think, is the suggestion very convincing. One is Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, in which Pluto and Proserpina, who answer as elf-king and elf-queen to Oberon and Titania, magically restore the sight of an old man, in order that he may witness his wife's frailty.[2] The other is an episode in the Spanish *Diana Enamorada* of the Portuguese Jorge de Montemayor (circ. 1512–62). In this a charm is used to transfer the affections of an amorous shepherd from one object to another, much as the affections of Demetrius and Lysander are transferred in the play.[3] The English translation of the *Diana Enamorada* by Bartholomew Yong was not published until 1598, but in the preface it is stated to have been written sixteen years before, and therefore Shakespeare may have seen it in manuscript. Further, a play called *The History of Felix and Philiomena*, which was probably founded on Montemayor's romance, was acted at court in January, 1585. Whether in the original or in a translation, Shakespeare seems clearly to have used the *Diana Enamorada* as a source for *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

The sources of Shakespeare's fairy-lore are set out at length in Appendix A.

III. CRITICAL APPRECIATION.

The character of the Play that of a Masque, yet with the unity of a central idea.

A Midsummer-Night's Dream is a dramatic fantasy rather than a drama. It was written, in all probability, not for the public stage, but as an interlude in the festivities of some wedding at court. The conditions of its production were those of the Masque, and to the limits imposed by those conditions it was

[1] There is a complete account of the many versions of the legend in Dr. Georg Hart's *Die Pyramus-und-Thisbe Saga* (Passau, Part i. 1889, Part ii. 1891).

[2] L. Proescholdt, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[3] F. Krauss, *Eine Quelle zu Sh. Sommernachtstraum* (Jahrbuch, xi. 226).

bound to conform. Now the Masque, unlike the regular drama, was always presented with an abundance of scenery and stage accessories. It was light and amusing in character, making its principal appeal to the senses and the fancy of the audience. It had no need to touch the deeper springs of imagination, nor to win the attention of critical spectators. A profusion of dance and song, picturesque staging and pretty costumes, a sprinkling of courtly compliment, a piquant contrast of poetry and clowning, these things were enough for the entertainment of the nobles and the maids of honour who assembled at Gloriana's palace of Greenwich. These things, therefore, we find in full measure in the play. They give it its tone and dramatic character.[1] Yet the poet being Shakespeare, we do not, as in a modern burlesque, find these things and nothing more. For in Shakespeare the philosopher and the playwright go hand in hand; he will not write merely to enchant the eye and delight the ear, nor merely for the excitement of a good story, but always and at all times to utter forth the truth that is in him, to give dramatic form to significant ideas, ideas that are a criticism of life. And therefore we may be sure that at the heart even of a dramatic fantasy by Shakespeare, there will lie some such central idea, which will give an inner meaning and unity to the whole, without disturbing the madness of the fun and frolic. For this is perhaps the consummation of his art, to be a thinker without being pedantic, and while handling the deep themes of conduct and existence never to mount the stage in the inappropriate garb of the pulpit.

The Central Idea of the Play deals with Love.

The vital question, then, for the student of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is: What did the poet mean by it? What central idea, over and above the poetry and the sensuous charm of the presentment, does it contain? We have seen that the plays which fall nearest to this in point of date are *Richard the Second*,

[1] Probably there was even more singing and dancing in the play than the printed text indicates. See, *e.g.*, the note on v. 1. 386. I suspect, moreover, that the rhymed trochaic speeches assigned to the fairies were sung or given as recitative.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In these we find the young poet concerning himself with the two subjects of perpetual interest to youth, Politics and Love. He has begun that great trilogy in which, under the guise of history, he purposed to deal with the central problem of politics as these presented themselves to a subject of the Tudors, the problem of the relation of king to people. Negatively in *Richard the Second* and *Henry the Fourth*, positively in *Henry the Fifth*, he works out, as Plato might have worked out, if he had written dramas, his conception of the essential nature of the genuine king.[1] Of his preoccupation with this theme we cannot but find a trace in our play in the character of Theseus, so obviously a sketch for the more finished picture of Henry the Fifth, the broadly human king, the man of deeds not words, not too finely tempered to be in touch with his people, and in whom we recognize the leading features of Shakespeare's ideal of sovereignty. But the character of Theseus is only a side issue in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*: it is not there that we look for the key-note of the play. Outside the sphere of the Histories, we find Shakespeare at this time particularly absorbed in what, to all poets in all ages, has been more than the half of life, in the theme of love. It fills comedy and tragedy alike. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* he deals with the conflict in a life of the rival claims of love and friendship, a motive which, if we may trust the evidence of the *Sonnets*, had had for him already its intimate and personal application. This motive also recurs in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and to this we must presently return; but it is worth while first to look for a moment at Shakespeare's dramatic treatment of love in the two of his great tragedies which have love for their burden.

The Tragic treatment of Love in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, love is represented as the supreme power, imperious and resistless in its oncoming, which lays hold of two lives, and exalts them almost in a moment to the highest pitch of dignity of which human nature is

[1] See the introduction to my edition of *Richard II.* in the Falcon Series of the plays.

capable. Of a boy and a girl it makes a man and a woman; it purifies and glorifies, reconciles and redeems; and is strong even from the grave to compose the ashes of an ancient feud. This is what Browning calls "One way of love". "Another way" Shakespeare ventured to paint, some ten years later, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the love that instead of elevating destroys, that by subtle sorceries ensnares to its undoing the conscience and the energies of a mighty spirit.

Now these two tragedies, though not written together, are complementary to each other: they both treat of love as an extremely serious thing, of high significance for life, and closely interwoven with destiny. For in the character of a man's love, in its purity or its degradation, lies ultimately the secret of his success or failure. But *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is a comedy, and to the comic spirit this Proteus love betrays itself in quite another shape. It is no longer Dante's 'lord of terrible aspect' with whom we have to do, but rather the roguish little Cupid of Ovid, the irresponsible child-god, with his blinded eyes and his erring arrows. "Hast been in love?" says the young shepherd to the old one in *As You Like It*, then—

Love and the Comic spirit.

> "How many actions most ridiculous
> Hast thou been drawn to by thy fantasy".

Love, as interpreted by the comic spirit, is a certain fine lunacy in the brain of youth; not an integral part of life, but a disturbing element in it. The lover is a being of strange caprices and strange infidelities, beyond the control of reason, and swayed with every gust of passion. He is at odds for the time with all the established order of things, a rebel against the authority of parents, a rebel against friendship, a rebel against his own vows. This is love as it figures in comedy, and in the presentation and analysis of this lies the point of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*.

Bearing then in mind this central idea of the lawlessness and the laughableness of love, let us observe how carefully, for all the apparent whimsicality of structure, it is kept to the front in the working out of the

Analysis of the Play.

play. As is generally the case with Shakespeare's comedies, the plot is composed of several stories, which are woven together with remarkable ingenuity. There is the story of Theseus' Wedding, the story of the Athenian Lovers, the story of the Quarrel of Oberon and Titania, the story of the Handicraftsmen's Play, and finally the story or interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe. It is the first of these which serves as the link that holds all the rest together; for it is at Theseus' wedding that Hermia's fate is to be decided; it is to celebrate this that the fairies have come from the farthest steppe of India, and it is for this that Bottom and his fellows are painfully conning their interlude. But the most important story from the point of view of the central idea, and the one to which most space is devoted, is that of the Athenian Lovers. As Ten Brink has pointed out in his excellent study of the play, the motive of this story is varied from that of Chaucer's *Knightes Tale*. In the *Knightes Tale* the friendship of Palamon and Arcite is broken by their common love for Emilia. This corresponds very closely to the relation of Proteus and Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. But both in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* Shakespeare has complicated the situation by introducing a second woman, and in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* he has still further modified it by making the broken friendship that of the women, not that of the men. In this friendship broken by love we get, then, one illustration of the central idea. But there are others in the story. There is Hermia's defiance of her father and of Athenian law for the sake of Lysander; and above all there is the extraordinary inconstancy which both Lysander and Demetrius display in the bestowal of their affections. Demetrius has deserted Helena for Hermia before the play begins; and in the course of the night in the wood, Lysander goes over to Helena and back to Hermia, and Demetrius in his turn goes back to Helena without any apparent rhyme or reason. Surely the central idea of the play is carried to a point that is almost farcical. At the crisis

The story of the Athenian Lovers.

of the play, when the cross-purposes are at their maddest, one can only re-echo Puck's criticism,

"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"

Of course, Shakespeare's treatment of his theme is symbolical, rather than psychological. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he shows us the difference which love makes, in the actual characters of the lovers as they blossom out before us. But it is a commonplace that the lovers of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* are but faintly sketched and barely differentiated. Helena is tall and dark and timid: Hermia is little and fair and shrewish. Demetrius is crabbed and Lysander is languid. It is difficult to say much more. They are but the abstract Hes and Shes of the conventional love-story. But this want of characterization is of little importance, because, which is by no means conventional, the story is told symbolically. The transferences of affection which form its principal revolutions are represented as due to supernatural agency, to the somewhat randomly exercised power of the fairies. Moreover, taking perhaps a hint from Lyly, Shakespeare invites us to consider the whole thing as a dream. This is the significance of the title. It is life seen through a glass darkly; such a vision of life as a man might have on Midsummer Night, the one season of the year around which Elizabethan superstition gathered most closely, when herbs were believed to have their especial virtues, and strange beings to be abroad. And yet it is not all a dream, or, if a dream, it is one which passes very easily into actual life. For these inconstancies of which Oberon's love in idleness is the cause, are after all not really different in kind from the initial inconstancy of Demetrius to Helena, for which no such reason is proposed. And again, when Demetrius is by magic restored to his first love, the effects of this continue on into the waking life as a quite natural thing which provokes no amazement. So that in fact, as far as the story of the lovers is concerned, the introduction of the supernatural element does not bring about anything which would have been impossible or improbable without it. The magical "love in idleness" really does

nothing more than represent symbolically the familiar workings of actual love-in-idleness in the human heart. Boys in love change their minds just so, or almost just so, without any whisper of the fairies to guide them. Romeo left his Rosaline quite as suddenly as Lysander left his Hermia.

It will help us to see the point of the symbolism more precisely, if we consider what use Shakespeare habitually makes of the supernatural in his plays. Always, as it appears to me, he uses it in much the same way, not with a literal faith in the personages or the acts which he depicts, but symbolically as a recognition of a mystery, of an unexplained element in the ordinary course of human affairs on earth. It is his confession of ignorance, of the fact that just there he has come upon something which baffles analysis, something ultimate, which is, but which cannot be quite accounted for. Thus in *Macbeth* the witches symbolize the double mystery of temptation and of retribution;[1] in *The Tempest* the magic of Prospero and the spiritual forces which are at his beck and call symbolize the mystery of an overruling providence. Now, in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* the mystery, so to call it, the inexplicability which is bound up with the central idea of the play, is the existence of that freakish irresponsible element of human nature out of which, to the eye of the comic spirit, the ethical and emotional vagaries of lovers take their rise. And that this element does exist is recognized and emphasized by Shakespeare in his usual way when he takes the workings of it in the story and explains them symbolically as due to the interference of supernatural agency.

Now in human life the disturbing element of love in idleness is generally only a passing fever. There is a period of *Sturm und Drang*, and then the man or woman begins to take life seriously, and is ready to submit to its discipline and to accept its reasonable responsibilities. And so by the side of Lysander and Demetrius we have the grave figure of the Athenian duke, Theseus. Theseus has had his wayward youth; he

The story of Theseus' Wedding.

[1] See p. 22 of my edition of *Macbeth* in this series.

has "played with light loves in the portal", with Perigenia and Aegles and the rest, ay, and in the glimmering night even with Queen Titania herself. Moreover, in his passion for Hippolyta he has approached her through deeds of violence; he has "won her love, doing her injuries". But now, like the Henry the Fifth of whom he is a prototype, he has put away childish things; he stands forth as the serene law-abiding king, no less than the still loving and tender husband. Thus the story of Theseus' Wedding not only, as has been said, serves to hold the plot together, but also contributes its share to the illustration of the central idea.

When we turn to the Fairies, we find that what enters into human life only as a transitory disturbing element, is in them the normal law of their being. They are irresponsible creatures throughout, eternal children. They belong to the winds and the clouds and the flowers, to all in nature that is beautiful and gracious and fleeting; but of the characteristics by which man differs from these, the sense of law and the instinct of self-control, they show no trace. Puck, the fairy jester, is the tricksy house sprite, whose sport it is to bring perplexity upon hapless mortals. Oberon and Titania will be jealous and be reconciled to each other a dozen times a day, while for culmination of their story you have the absurd spectacle of a fairy in love with an ass. So that in them is represented, as it were *in vacuo*, the very quality of which it is the object of the play to discern the partial and occasional workings in the heart of humanity.

In the story of the Handicraftsmen, the central idea does not find any direct illustration. The story is required, partly to introduce the interlude, but still more to provide that comic contrast which, as has been pointed out, was essential to the masque. It is ingeniously interwoven into the fairy-story by making Bottom the instrument of Oberon's revenge upon Titania. And it is in the person of Bottom that the whole humour of the thing consists. He is the first of Shakespeare's supreme comic creations, greater than the Costard of *Love's Labour's Lost* or the Launce of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, as the masterpiece is greater than the

imperfect sketch. From beginning to end of the play his absolute self-possession never for a moment fails him. He lords it over his fellow actors, as though he, and not Quince, were poet and stage-manager in one; he accepts the amorous attentions of a queen with calm serenity as no more than he might naturally have expected; nor does he ever, either before or after his transformation, betray the slightest suspicion of the fact that he is after all only an ass. It has often been thought that in the rehearsal scenes Shakespeare was drawing upon the humours of such rustic actors as might have ventured a Whitsun pastoral at Stratford upon Avon; yet one fears that the foibles of the green-room are much the same in the humblest and the loftiest walks of the profession, and who shall say that the poet is not poking good-humoured fun at some of his fellows of the Lord Chamberlain's company?

Finally, with the interlude, we come back to the central idea once more. For in the ill-starred loves of Pyramus and Thisbe, their assignation, their elopement, and their terrible end, we have but a burlesque presentment of the same theme that has occupied us throughout. It is all a matter of how the poet chooses to put it. Precisely the same situation that in *Romeo and Juliet* will ask our tears shall here move unextinguishable laughter. And so the serious interest of the play dissolves in mirth, and while the musicians break into the exquisite poetry of the epithalamium, the playwright stands and watches us with the smile of wise tolerance on his lips.

A MIDSUMMER-NIGHT'S DREAM