

**Prat Mélanie**  
[melimopi@yahoo.fr](mailto:melimopi@yahoo.fr)

**Shakespeare et l'imaginaire**  
**Gisèle Venet**

**Imagination and Theatrical Illusion in the Chorus of**  
**Henry V and A Midsummer Night's Dream (with**  
**special references to Act V).**

A Midsummer Night's Dream and Henry V, written respectively in 1596 and 1598, are very different plays. The latter is a great historical fresco whereas the former is a comedy of love. Yet they both deal with the same themes though on different tones. Indeed they are both reflections on imagination and theatrical illusion.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a strange play, since the denouement takes place, it seems, at the end of act IV, and there remains a whole act before the end of the play. The fifth act has to serve a purpose yet. It opens on a dialogue between Theseus and Hippolyta. And Theseus makes his famous speech about lovers, madmen and poets. He dismisses imagination as something unreasonable and irrational. Indeed he embodies "cool reason". He represents the rational judge as we witness during Hermia's trial, and through his opinion of the lovers's dream. He says he "never may believe these antique fables nor these fairy toys". Yet we can feel Shakespeare's irony for Theseus is himself an antique fable. Then he goes on accusing poets of giving shape to "things unknown" and to "airy nothing a local habitation and a name". He thinks that excess of imagination is ridiculous, since one can mistake a bush for a bear. Of course thanks to Shakespeare's skill this disparaging speech is also a praise of imagination, for the words do not have the same meaning at all for Theseus and for us. Although we hear Theseus talking, we, the audience also hear Shakespeare behind Theseus. The "fine frenzy" of which Theseus accuses the poets is nothing less than the "*furor poeticus* so much honoured in the Renaissance, following Plato and Aristotle"<sup>1</sup>.

Theseus's deprecating words on imagination in love (A Midsummer Night's Dream; V.1.4-11) seem to confine him in the role of the rational man to whom imagination is almost evil. But in that he is only the product of Shakespeare's time since Elizabethan England regarded imagination as a highly potential evil faculty, too easily overcome by passion<sup>2</sup>. And yet it is he who asks for a play

"What revels are in hand? Is there no play  
To ease the anguish of a torturing hour?"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream ;V.1.36-37)

His attitude is paradoxical since he dismisses imagination in love, but when he declares that "the best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them" (A Midsummer Night's Dream;V.1.209-210) he implies that "all are shadows, including the best, so all need the help of imagination"<sup>3</sup>. And by asking for a play he declares himself ready to use his imagination, and suspend his disbelief<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless it must be added that for Theseus a play can only serve two functions: an innocuous pastime or a praise for a prince. Thus he never respects the marsterly use of imagination done by playwrights.

It is the aim of any poet or playwright to create things which *seem* to be true, or that people *imagine* to be true at least for an hourglass. But though it is Shakespeare's aim in all of his plays, he particularly insists upon that in Henry V. Indeed A Midsummer Night's Dream and Henry V have in common that they are both reflection on imagination and theatrical

---

<sup>1</sup> Brooks p. CXL.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Wiliam Rossky: "Although instrumental to the healthy operation of the soul, imagination, according to the psychology, is a faculty for the most part uncontrolled and immoral – a faculty forever distorting and lying, irrational, unstable, flitting and insubstantial, haphazardly making and marring, dangerously tied to emotions, feigning idly and purposelessly." Quoted in Dent p.101., in Kehler.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks p. CXXXIX.

<sup>4</sup> Lull. p.245. in Kehler.

illusion. And they both have a fifth act which breaks away from the rest of the play and comes as a denouement after the first denouement. In A Midsummer Night's Dream it is almost entirely composed of the Mechanicals's performance of the Pyramus and Thisbe play, and in Henry V, after the victory at Agincourt, the fifth act deals with the treaty which will ensure a *durable* peace. But the other specificity of Henry V is the presence of the Chorus who appears six times. Indeed though Shakespeare used prologues before – as in Romeo and Juliet – they had never had the same role as in Henry V. For the first time Shakespeare seems to doubt his ability as a playwright to create theatrical illusion and make his audience imagine what he wants them to<sup>5</sup>. He feels obliged to pray the audience to "piece out [their] imperfections with [their] thoughts" (Chorus p.46) he seems to doubt the ability of his actors (the Lord Chamberlain's Men) to play princes or the "wooden o" to represent "two mighty monarchies". The Chorus keeps appealing to the audience's imagination

"...And the scene  
Is now transported (gentles) to Southampton.  
There is the playhouse now, there must you sit,"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act II,p.86)

"Thus with imagin'd wing our swift scene flies  
In motion of no less celerity  
Than that of thought"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act III,p.140)

"Play with your fancies, and in them behold... "  
(Henry V, prologue to Act III,p.140)

"Yet sit and see,  
Minding true things by what their mock'ries be".  
(Henry V, prologue to Act IV,p.220)

Thus Shakespeare explicitly expresses what is the usual *implicit* contract between actors and audience. Theatre goers know that they are not to take all they see for granted, and know they will have to "eke out [the] performance with their mind", or suspend their disbelief, at least for an hourglass. Because these are the terms of the contract of theatrical illusion.

In fact in the Chorus of Henry V and the Pyramus and Thisbe play, Shakespeare deconstructs theatrical illusion in the same way but with very different results. In A Midsummer Night's Dream Bottom presents us a "device to make all well" (Midsummer Night's Dream, III.1.15). A device that Shakespeare would use a few years later in Henry V, for indeed there are echoes of Bottom's speech in the prologue to the great historical play. Bottom says

"...Write  
me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we  
will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus  
is not killed indeed"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream III.1.15-18)

which is echoed by

"Where (O for pity ) we shall much disgrace,

---

<sup>5</sup> Venet p.2.

With four or five most ragged foils,  
(right ill-dispos'd, in brawl ridiculous)  
the name of Agincourt"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act I)

(the "ragged foils" are the swords which do no harm, and one is not killed in "brawl ridiculous"). Or does not

"and for the more better assurance,  
tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus,  
but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of  
fear"

(A Midsummer Night's Dream, III.1.18-21)

echo, with a reverse effect

"And let us, ciphers to this great account,  
On your imaginary forces work" ?  
(Henry V, prologue to Act I)

Both speeches confess to the audience that they are not fighting for real, but with wooden swords, and that they are not what they seem to be - Pyramus is a weaver and soldiers are ciphers - but in the former it is to "put them out of fear" whereas in the latter it is to exhort the audience to use their imagination even more.

"The success of any play ideally demands the effective use of the imagination by the author, the producers, and the audience."<sup>6</sup> But whereas in Henry V the Chorus asks the audience's imagination to amend what the actors cannot represent and enhances theatrical illusion by emphasising the discrepancy between the real and the stage world

"Can this cock pit hold  
the vasty fields of france? Or may we cram  
within this wooden O the very casques  
that did affright the air at Agincourt?"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act I)

in A Midsummer Night's Dream "what the Mechanicals fail to understand, obviously, is the audience's awareness that drama is drama to be viewed imaginatively but not mistaken in any realistic sense, for reality."<sup>7</sup> The Mechanicals kill all theatrical illusion because they "abuse their imagination by a failure to understand those of the audience. [...] they think their audience both over and under imaginative."<sup>8</sup> Indeed they decide to explain that Pyramus is not Pyramus and the lion not a lion not to frighten the ladies. But paradoxically they decide to represent concretely Wall and Moonshine "in a play where Shakespeare 's audience has been imagining moonshine since the beginning"<sup>9</sup>. And indeed Theseus's stress in his speech is on the "'airy nothing' which is all that the poet's fabrics is made of: but to make a world out of nothing is a godlike attribute"<sup>10</sup>. And Shakespeare knows it very well. Name the "cock-pit" a "green spot" (III.1.3.) and it becomes so; name the actor a king and he becomes so. That is why the Mechanicals insist upon their being *named* during the representation,

---

<sup>6</sup> Dent p. 96. in Kehler.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98., and Brooks p. CXXXIX.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks p. CXL.

"In this same interlude it doth befall  
That I, one Snout by name, present a Wall;"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.1.154-155)

"Then know that I as Snug the joiner am  
A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.1.218-219)

so that they do not become what they are supposed to be, thus destroying all theatrical illusion. Of course the effect on the audience is quite opposite from one play to the other. The complicity established by the Chorus assures him that his audience *will* "amend them". Whereas it is obvious that Theseus's group quite naturally makes no effort in that sense, first because they are not in the mood for a tragedy and then because it would be too great an effort for anyone's imagination to amend *these!*<sup>11</sup>

The question remains to know why Shakespeare did feel the need to include a play within the play, to which almost a whole act is dedicated. It has to belong to the logic of the play. Some critics say that he wanted to parallel the actual situation of the performance, implying that the Lord Chamberlain's Men were giving a performance in an aristocratic mansion to celebrate a wedding. But why did he chose the story of Pyramus and Thisbe? A tragedy is not really the appropriate theme for a wedding. It is probable that Shakespeare chose Pyramus and Thisbe as a dark counterpart for the whole story of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Indeed the Ovidian story was well known of Elisabethans and from the very first scene they would have drawn a parrallel between Hermia and Lysander and Pyramus and Thisbe (as well as Romeo and Juliet). Maybe Shakespeare wanted to show them the potential tragic end their adventure could have had. But not to be out of tune with the first four acts he perverted the tragedy into a "very tragical mirth". In that case, we, the audience of A Midsummer Night's Dream, laugh at the pitiful representation of the Mechanicals but also at the blindness of their arisotcratic audience, for they are unable to see the link between the play and their own story. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that we know that without the interference of the fairies, the lovers' adventure would probably have had that same tragic end. Theseus and his group easily dismiss the shadows on stage and other fairy toys not knowing that they owe their happiness to shadows and dreams.

"Beeing good Elisabethans, we may well remember that not all dreams are the product of disordered, passion-stimulated, never-sleeping imagination: some dreams are divine revelations of truth [...] and A Midsummer Night's Dream – although a poet's revelation rather than divinty's – may be one of them"<sup>12</sup>. Indeed Theseus himself says that

"The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.I.12-13)

The poet was often seen as a kind of go-between between Gods or God and men, or at least their inspiration was thought to be divine through the intermediary of the muses, as the prologue of Henry V hints at

---

<sup>11</sup>Dent p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

"O for a muse of fire, that would ascend  
the brightest heaven of invention"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act I, p.44)

or as Milton would later say

"Sing Heavenly Muse....  
... I thence  
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,  
That with no middle flight intends to soar  
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues  
Things unattempted yet in prose or in rhyme."  
(Paradise Lost, Book I.6-16)

Dreams are visions, but visions were often seen as divine, then as true. And indeed be it in Richard III or in A Midsummer Night's Dream dreams are prophecies, since Hermia's fear turns out to be real. So what are we supposed to think about A Midsummer Night's Dream as a whole since Puck invites us to

"Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumber'd here  
While these visions did appear.  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream."  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.1.410-414)

yet dreams are

"the children of an idle brain,  
begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
which is as thin of substance as the air"  
(Romeo and Juliet, I.5.97-99)

as Mercutio states it. Indeed in dreams all seem real yet the senses are deceived, exactly as in the play. Sight is troubled because of the magic juice but also when Puck creates a fog to loose the young men. At that moment they can only rely on hearing but they are also deceived by Puck's voice. Titania is enamoured of an ass head and delights in his voice which is all but harmonious. So senses are not reliable, a confusion paralleled in the Mechanicals's performance by the confusion of words

"I see a voice; now will I to the chink,  
To spy and I can hear my Thisbe's face"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.1.140-141)

"tongue, lose thy light"  
(A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.1.293)

but these misusages of words justly apply to theatrical illusion, since as the Chorus says

"Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them"  
(Henry V, prologue to Act I, p.46)

In theatre you see but what you hear, especially in Shakespeare's time when the use of props was not as developed as now. This is what Lear tells Gloucester: "look with thine ears"

(King Lear; IV.6)<sup>13</sup>. This is the whole process of theatrical illusion, look with your ears because you cannot trust your eyes, since all is illusion. A Midsummer Night's Dream is thus an illusion revealing truths but so is Henry V. The Chorus confesses that all is illusion. What is striking is that Shakespeare had never before cared about the preoccupations which are those of the Chorus, so he has to mean something by it. It may be that the play is just a representation of other *plays*. Indeed Shakespeare is telling us to imagine that the actors are kings or soldiers but they are not. Just as Henry is to believe that the Bishops are true whereas they are not, indeed they manipulate the king to convince him to declare war on France so as to divert the attention of the Commons from the reform they intend, a reform which would deprive the clergy of "the better half of [their] possession"(HV.I.1). But if we consider the other possible interpretation of this scene the result is the same, Henry is manipulating the Bishops in order to legitimate the war he prepares, and the people are to believe the King is true. Then Henry himself stages a scene with a drunkard so as to condemn his former friends, now traitors to the state. So politics may be seen as a world of illusion. But in A Midsummer Night's Dream life itself seems to be an illusion, since the lovers are manipulated by the Fairies, Titania by Oberon, and Bottom by Puck. The play of Pyramus and Thisbe represents, as we have seen, the possible tragic ending of the play, nevertheless it seems an illusion to the audience, mere shadows, just as the night's events seem but a dream to the lovers, and A Midsummer Night's Dream as a whole a dream to us (as Puck invites us to think). Titania wants to "dream away the time" but it seems to be what we are doing unconsciously. Theatrical illusion would thus be a summary of life. The lion is not a lion, it is Snug the joiner, but the loyal friend is not a loyal friend, he is a traitor, the dark figure in the night is not a soldier, it is the king, but the king is himself an actor. Life is a piece of acting and acting counterfeits life, both are interdependent.

Henry V is the last of Shakespeare's English history plays. It ends a cycle. But what is to be noticed is that the following plays would be deeper, more reflective, thoughtful, sceptical, some would say more mature. We could wonder if Shakespeare did not use this fake humility as a way of signaling the seriousness of his subject as he began to realise how far more linked life and theatre were. A Midsummer Night's Dream was written in 1596/7, Henry V in 1598/9, just as As You Like It, Hamlet would be written around 1600, Antony and Cleopatra in 1607/8 and Macbeth around 1606/8. So even though as early as 1596 Shakespeare thought about his own art and its implications, it seems that he grasped the full depth of the matter gradually and his mind took a different turn until his death, or at least his last plays. Indeed it is easy to link Cleopatra's "little O, the earth" (Antony and Cleopatra; V, 2, 80) to the "wooden O" of the prologue in Henry V, thus comparing the earth to a stage. The Chorus in Henry V would then be a hint at what Shakespeare would develop later as one of his favourite metaphors: life as role playing.

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more."  
(Macbeth; V.5.31-33)

"...All the world's a stage,  
and all the men and women merely players;  
they have their exits and their entrances;  
and one man in his time plays many parts"  
(As You Like It; II.7.139-142)

---

<sup>13</sup> Venet p. 6.

If Shakespeare saw life differently, it may not be because he was growing older, but it may be linked to the exterior atmosphere. Indeed the end of the sixteenth century was already the beginning of the baroque era which was characterised by a certain instability. Indeed because of the crisis of succession which happened at the time in England (Elisabeth being old and childless the question was to know who would succeed her), it was the beginning of a period of doubt and instability which was to go on until about 1610 when James I would at last gain a firm control over his kingdom<sup>14</sup>. But the end of the sixteenth century was felt as the end of the golden age, the era of Queen Elisabeth had passed and there was a general feeling of scepticism and anguish concerning the future. Moreover scientific or artistic discoveries participated of this movement with, for instance, the anamorphoses paintings which emphasised the weakness of the senses and blurred the frontier between illusion and reality.

Apart from the reflection on life and illusion, both the Chorus and the Mechanicals are also political tools for Shakespeare. Indeed while apparently denouncing political tricks and manipulations in Henry V, Shakespeare also seems to state clearly his opposition to Spain in the praise of Essex

"Were now the General of our gracious Empress,  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword;  
How many would the peaceful city quit  
To welcome him?"

(Henry V, prologue to Act V)

Even more than the opposition to Spain, we might feel an implicit criticism of the ageing Elisabeth in the praise of Essex and of Henry's youth. Indeed as I said above it was the time of the crisis of succession and Essex being very popular, many people thought he would be a great King and hoped he would succeed Elisabeth even before her death. So under the appearance of respect for the Queen ("gracious Empress") Shakespeare is very critical. But it corresponds to the other question raised by A Midsummer Night's Dream especially which is the role of theatre in society.

Theseus explains that a play can have only two functions, one of them being to please the prince. Of course most playwrights disguised their critics under ambiguous praises, as in Henry V. And in A Midsummer Night's Dream we can feel the critics in the Mechanicals' words. When they first meet to form the company they express their anguish at the idea of frightening the ladies

*Quin.* And you should do it too terribly, you would fright  
the duchess and the ladies, that they would shriek:  
and that were enough to hang us all.

*All.* That would hang us, every mother's son.

*Bot.* I grant you, friends, if you should fright the ladies  
Out of their wits, they would have no more discre-  
tion but to hang us.

(A Midsummer Night's Dream, I.2.70-76)

They fear that if they displease the prince and his court they would be punished. Though in this context it is funny to think that they could be executed because they frightened the audience with a roaring actor, Shakespeare is asking a real question on the power of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ellis-Fermor.

aristocracy and the court over actors<sup>15</sup>. Actors had to please aristocrats otherwise they were censured or imprisoned. Shakespeare is here hinting at the power of theatre as a political or social weapon<sup>16</sup>, but once again it is a fool who expresses it, to avoid repression. If a Midsummer Night's Dream was really performed before an aristocratic audience for a wedding, the mise en abîme was then an audacious criticism of the behaviour of ruling classes.

Of course there would be much more to say about the political implications of all of Shakespeare's play and though politics is often linked with theatrical illusion in other plays than A Midsummer Night's Dream or Henry V, as in Hamlet for example, the two themes are not systematically dealt with together. But the reflection about theatrical illusion is a characteristic feature of Shakespeare's theatrical work, much more, it seems, than any other playwright of his time, in England or elsewhere. So more than a baroque reflection on appearance and reality, Shakespeare showed a timeless concern about theatre and life which renders him still so contemporary.

---

<sup>15</sup> Montrose p. 235. in Kehler.

<sup>16</sup> The count of Essex had Richard II performed the day before his rebellion. Thus acknowledging the power of theatre as conveyor of ideas and opinion.

## Bibliography

- Barber, C. L., Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Bell, H. G.,(ed.), As You Like It, in "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare", London and Glasgow, Collins' Clear-Type Press, 1899
- Bevington, David (ed.), Antony and Cleopatra, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Braunmuller A. R., (ed.), Macbeth, the New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Brooks, Harold F. (ed.), A Midsummer Night's Dream, the Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen, 1979.
- Dent. R. W., "Imagination in A Midsummer Night's Dream", in Kehler, Dorothea (ed.), A Midsummer Night's Dream critical essays, New York and Garland, 1998.
- Ellis-Fermor, Una, The Jacobean Drama, London, Methuen, 1936, 1947, 1953.
- Fowler, Alastair, (ed.), Paradise Lost, by John Milton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London and New York, Longman, 1998.
- Gibbons, Brian, (ed.), Romeo and Juliet, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen, 1980.
- Kehler, Dorothea (ed.), A Midsummer Night's Dream critical essays, New York and Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Lull, Janis, "Textual Theory, Literary Interpretation and the Last Act of A Midsummer Night's Dream", in Kehler, Dorothea (ed.), A Midsummer Night's Dream critical essays, New York and Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Montrose, Louis A., "A Kingdom of Shadows", in Kehler, Dorothea (ed.), A Midsummer Night's Dream critical essays, New York and Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Venet, Gisèle, Leçons Littéraires sur Henry V de Shakespeare, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.
- Venet, Gisèle (ed.), Henry V, edition bilingue, trad. Déprats J.M., Folio Gallimard, 2000.