

**The “Shaping Fantasies” of  
Inset Playlets in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

《仲夏夜之夢》中戲中戲的「型塑幻境」

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**Abstract**

This study examines the significance of an inset playlet, or a play-within-a-play. An inset playlet can lend a fuller insight into the interplay of illusion and reality, presenting two, sometimes even more, different planes of dramatic illusion. It mirrors the larger play in some detail, from the casting of roles, rehearsing, and playacting on the same stage, to matching a play to an audience. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* brings up the subject of theater and theatrical performance in their dramatic action, the internal theatrical practices reflecting the self-conscious and self-reflexive impulses common in the early modern period. By bringing in a group of players, the play draws our attention to the whole business of theater.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* plays up the nature of dramatic performance, including the impersonation of the player and the falsification of feelings. Bottom discloses his real-life identity as a weaver during his performance in *Pyramus and Thisbe*, thus questioning the genuineness of Pyramus’s playacting pretense, a gesture underscoring his own theatrical impersonation and pretense as Bottom.

The predominance of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* highlights its self-analysis. Through using the metatheatrical device of an inset playlet the comedy holds up a mirror that keeps reflecting itself and defines itself as a medium where illusion, imagination, reality and truth may meet and interact.

**Key Words:** *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, an inset playlet, a play-within-a-play, metatheater, theatrical self-reflexivity

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摘要

本研究探討戲中戲的戲劇意義。戲中戲往往並置兩個或兩個以上的戲劇世界，讓觀眾一窺現實與幻相交織與糾纏的戲劇世界與現實世界。戲中戲映照著主戲本身的戲劇性，舉凡選角、排演、現場舞台演出等皆映襯著主戲。《仲夏夜之夢》一劇將劇場與戲劇表演融入劇情，呈現出英國早期戲劇經常可見的自我反身性，透過一班戲中戲演員的演出，該劇將戲劇藝術的種種問題呈現於觀眾眼前。

《仲夏夜之夢》探索戲劇藝術表演的本質，包括演員的演出與角色塑造、情感的偽裝。例如，巴頓演出《皮樂摩與希思比》時，提醒觀眾他是織工巴頓，因而揭示出他所扮演的角色皮樂摩演出時的情感偽裝，進而揭露在主戲中他的真實身份織工巴頓也不過是一種戲劇演出。

《仲夏夜之夢》一劇透過充滿自覺與自我反身的後設劇場手法不斷的反思戲劇藝術，自我分析，舉起一面鏡子映照自我，界定戲劇作為虛幻、想像、現實與真實可以彼此相遇或產生糾葛的空間。

關鍵詞：《仲夏夜之夢》，戲中戲，後設劇場，戲劇自我反身性

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The present study dwells on the significance of inset playlets, the *crème de la crème* of metadrama. A play-within-a-play can instill a fuller insight into the interplay of illusion and reality, presenting two, sometimes even more, different planes of dramatic illusion. It mirrors the larger play in some details, from the casting of roles, rehearsing, playacting on a stage, to matching a play to an audience. The plays, with a play-within-a-play arranged on the inner stage watched by onstage spectators, are quite common on early modern stage.<sup>1</sup> It is regarded as one of "the most versatile and adaptable dramatic conventions" and thus a "highly complex and not easily definable dramatic technique."<sup>2</sup> A play-within-a-play can take many forms. A dumb show, an interlude, a pageant, a masque, or an inset playlet is a type of it. At times, a long story, a set speech, a report, a song, a dance, or a choral speech can also be regarded a variety of a play-within-a-play.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to the play proper, a play-within-a-play would also involve impersonation and audience perception. In brief, a play-within-a-play refers to a play where an inset playlet or a dramatic encounter is staged on the inner stage with onstage spectators watching it.<sup>4</sup> It not only brings forth a dynamic interaction with the play proper, but also exposes a self-reflexive impulse of a playwright's art.

In terms of its dramatic form, Richard Hornby distinguishes two kinds of plays-within-the-plays: (i) the "inset" type, in which the inner play is secondary, a performance set apart from the main action, for example, *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet* and *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; (ii) the "framed" type, in which the inner play is primary, with the outer play as a framing device, for example, the taming story of *The Taming of the Shrew*.<sup>5</sup>

For an example of the first type: the inset type. Take *Hamlet* for instance. It has a designated play-within-a-play. By bringing in a group of touring players, the play draws our attention to the whole business of theater. Beginning with some comments on the contemporary fashion of boy actors, the reception of a group of touring players, an improvised performance, a dumb show, and a play-within-a-play, the play makes theater one of its major subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wei-yao Lee, different forms of "shows within" (such as plays-within-the-plays, masques, dumb shows and pantomimes) "carried over 35% of all the plays produced in English Renaissance Period in 1550-1642." See Wei-yao Lee, *Shakespeare's Inset Plays: Semiological Studies of Henry IV, Part One, Hamlet, and A Midsummer Night's Dream*, M.A. Thesis (Taipei: National Taiwan U, 2002) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Dieter Mehl, "Forms and Functions of the Play within a Play," *Renaissance Drama* 8 (1965): 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (London: Associated UP, 1986) 33.

<sup>4</sup> Chi-fan Lee, *The Plays within the Plays in Shakespeare* (Taipei: Hai Kuei Cultural Enterprises, 1985) 15; Ching-Hsi Perng, "The Playwright's Nightmare: A Histrionic Reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Studies in Language and Literature* 3 (1988): 63.

<sup>5</sup> Hornby 33-34.

*The Murder of Gonzago* is Hamlet's device to "make mad the guilty" (2.2.558), an example of the influence of theater on reality. The inset play, however, brings forth a two-way transaction. To Hamlet, Claudius's abrupt abandonment of the onstage playlet signifies his fear and torture intensified by the dramatic representation of a murder in every way similar to old Hamlet's foul death. To other onstage spectators, in contrast, the inset play discloses Hamlet's threat to murder his uncle, in parallel to Lucianus's murder of Duke Gonzago, his uncle.

In addition, the framing structure produced by a play-within-a-play draws an analogy to the play-watching framework in a playhouse. The Danish courtiers as audience on the stage watching *The Murder of Gonzago* are closely observed by Hamlet. Hamlet, in turn, is also observed by the audience in the theater. For the audience, three levels of performance simultaneously exist: *The Murder of Gonzago*, the on-stage audience's, especially Claudius's, response to the inset play, and Hamlet's interaction with other members of the onstage audience and his continuous comments and interruptions.

For the second type—the framed type—*The Taming of the Shrew* serves as an instance. The Induction serves as a framing structure of the inner-play, a shrew-taming story performed by a band of touring players arriving to render their service to the Lord. In the second scene of Induction, the Lord's playlet is set in motion with Sly sitting and watching a play.

Other aspect of an inset play is also taken into consideration. Dieter Mehl classifies two devices of plays-within-the-plays according to the composition of the players of the inset play. The first type is the introduction of a group of touring players, who then perform before an onstage audience made up of characters from the main play.<sup>6</sup> Examples are *Thomas of Woodstock*, *Antonio's Revenge*, *A Mad World*, *My Masters*, *Sir Thomas More*, and *Hamlet*. These may provide, for Mehl, comic relief, interaction between the two levels of dramatic performance (especially the reaction of the onstage spectators), moral lessons, comment on contemporary stage practices and conventions, or the dramatist's own view on the function of drama.<sup>7</sup>

The second type of a play-within-a-play is that performed by characters from the main play.<sup>8</sup> Examples of this type are abundant, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Women Beware Women*, and *The Roman Actor*. They may offer, according to Mehl, a satire on dramatic conventions employed in the main play, a deliberate blurring of the dividing line between reality and dramatic illusion with the common players in both the inner and outer plays, an exploration of the nature of dramatic illusion and its bearing on reality, a sharp contrast between a person's assumed

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<sup>6</sup> Mehl 43.

<sup>7</sup> Mehl 43-45.

<sup>8</sup> Mehl 46.

role and his real character, a means of deception and mischief, or a way of finding out reality and actuality.<sup>9</sup>

Dieter Mehl concludes his study of the plays-within-the-plays with a comparison of the device used in earlier Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. The techniques of inset playlets, in earlier plays, serve simple purposes: they either underline the didactic and moral function of the play, or introduce some playful experiments with dramatic conventions. In contrast, Jacobean dramatists employ inset plays to give a detached view of certain characters and situations, and thus leave the audience unsure about their moral bearings.<sup>10</sup> This may lead to different results in different genres:

In comedy this can lead to a bewildering confusion of identities and a grotesque distortion of reality. In serious drama it often means a deep probing into the very nature of reality and the validity of certain moral positions.<sup>11</sup>

The application of a play-within-a-play calls into question the relationship between reality and fiction. Often the boundary between reality and drama is dissolved or disappears. In contrast to the use of inset play as a parodying device of some theatrical styles from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, the predominant employment of the inset play in the Renaissance period reflects a unique world view which finds that the boundary between reality and fiction is fluid, and even that life is an illusion, the Christian idea of *contemptus mundi*.<sup>12</sup>

Next I will explore how Shakespeare tackles the complicated relation of illusion and reality through the application of an inset playlet in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This self-conscious and self-reflexive device not only yields insightful evaluation of the dramatic art itself, but also enables us to see human life through its representation.

### ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Theatrical Pretense as Truth***

In contrast to the professional touring players of *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*, a bunch of rustic mechanics put up a play, called “The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe” (1.2.11-12),<sup>13</sup> in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to entertain an onstage audience of the newly wed royal couple and courtiers. Unlike *Hamlet’s* morally instrumental intention to use *The Murder of Gonzago* to catch his uncle’s conscience, *Pyramus and Thisbe* is purely a sport that Theseus requests “To wear away this long age of three hours / Between [their] after-supper and bed-time” and “To ease the anguish of a torturing hour” (5.1.33-34, 37). The popular critical assumption to

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<sup>9</sup> Mehl 46-51.

<sup>10</sup> Mehl 60.

<sup>11</sup> Mehl 60.

<sup>12</sup> Hornby 46.

<sup>13</sup> References to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are to the Arden edition, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979).

regard *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a dramatic epithalamium to grace an aristocratic marriage adds even more framing structures to the play itself: with real-life wedding nobles watching onstage royal couples watching *Pyramus and Thisbe*.<sup>14</sup> It claims to be only an entertainment, a sport, an occasion for delight. Besides Quince and Bottom's playlet, another metaphoric play-within-a-play directed and collaborated by Oberon and Puck is also woven into the main plot bridging up the fairy world and the mortal world. *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in many ways, provides a burlesque version of a theatrical production, mirroring the larger play in some details. It enacts certain theatrical practices on the stage, including the casting of roles, rehearsing, playacting, and matching a play to an audience.

Inbetween the love stories of the main plot, some Athenian rustics are busy with the mounting of a play. In their first meeting, they have a preliminary preparation for the playlet *Pyramus and Thisbe*, including an ineffective assigning of cast, a sparse discussion of line delivery, a quick consideration of audience reception, and an appointment for a rehearsal in their next meeting. Their piteous ineptitude and earnest enthusiasm give rise to an interesting and funny burlesque of a theatrical production. First, the title of the playlet. Peter Quince tells his "company" their play is "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe" (1.2.11-12). This descriptive title indicates a common practice in the naming of a play at that time. But to call the play a comedy is simply a blunder, indicating Quince's ignorance of the dramatic genre.

Secondly, the resistance in the process of role-assigning and the power struggle between a director and his players are interesting. Bottom keeps challenging Quince by offering to play all available roles:

If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes: I will move storms, I will condole in some measure. To the rest—yet my chief humour is for a tyrant. . . . And I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. . . . Let me play the lion too. I will roar, that I will do any man's heart good to hear me. (1.2.22-24, 47, 66-67)

Even Flute refuses the role of Thisbe, not wanting to crossdress a woman: "Nay, faith, let not me play a woman: I have a beard coming" (1.2.43-44). Peter Quince has to impose his domination and authority as a director all the time, not to be overturned by his fellow players.

<sup>14</sup> See Brooks lxxxix; James L. Calderwood, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: The Illusion of Drama," *MLQ* 24 (1965): 510; R. A. Foakes, ed., Introduction, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 2-3; Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1978) 151.

Also, the issues of dramatic illusion and audience perception come up when they fear that the lion's roar might scare the Duchess and other ladies: "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" (1.2.70-72). To moderate the effect of illusion, they opt for a disruption of dramatic illusion, a solution they later adopt in rehearsal and formal performance in the final scene.

For rehearsal, they all travel to the forest where reality and dream merge, where the human world and fairy world interact with one another, and where imagination and fantasy predominate over reason and reality. Some technical considerations of a theatrical production are further exposed in the process of their rehearsal. First, the stage. Coming to a spot in the forest, Quince tells the others to rehearse their play in this green plot, which will serve well as a stage:

Pat, pat; and here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal.  
This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our  
tiring-house; and we will do it in action, as we will do it before the  
Duke. (3.1.2-5)

In this seemingly casual arrangement, Quince incidentally exposes the make-believe mechanism underlying all theatrical productions: the audience is willing to take the stage as a green plot first, and then, as requested, a stage. The willingly imaginative collaboration among the players, the audience and the director not only facilitates the development of any dramatic action, but also contributes to the establishment of a fictional world.

Bottom poses a question about the audience response: "Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself; which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?" (3.1.9-11). Not waiting for Quince's answer, he himself proposes a solution:

I have a device to make all well. 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; 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. (3.1.15-21)

They solve the problem of audience engagement with the disruption of dramatic illusion, if only in a burlesque way, a gesture reminiscent of Shakespeare's own self-referential devices disrupting the illusion common in his works. These amateur players either overrate their acting skills or underrate the audience's imagination.<sup>15</sup> Their adherence to the literal meaning of the presence of moonlight when Pyramus and Thisbe meet indicates their inflexibility and ignorance to the power of imagination. In a somewhat

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<sup>15</sup> Chin-jung Chiu, *Metadrama: Shakespeare and Stoppard* (Taipei: Bookman, 2000) 55.

self-contradictory way, they regard their audience “both over- and under-imaginative.”<sup>16</sup>

R. W. Dent points out their self-contradictory efforts:

Thus, to avoid the threat of over-imagination, they resolve by various ludicrous means to explain that Pyramus is not Pyramus and that the lion is not a lion; then, to counteract the audience’s under-imagination, they will create Moonshine and Wall.<sup>17</sup>

This burlesque produces an interesting contrast to the play proper whose audience, from the beginning, is asked to imagine the existence of diminutive fairies, the foggy and dark forest in broad daylight (if it was performed in the afternoon before the playgoers in the Globe), the transformation of Bottom with an ass-head, and the magic power of the juice of love-in-idleness, to name just a few instances.

The rehearsal is aborted when Bottom is suddenly transformed.

Snout. O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?

Bottom. What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you? (3.1.109-12)

Bottom’s transformation and his subsequent love affair with Titania the Fairy Queen could be compared to a dramatic encounter directed by the Fairy King. Not overtly drawing parallel to a dramatic production, Oberon and Puck, a director-playwright and his assistant, busy themselves with the interference of human affairs, setting up actions and scripts for the mortals as well as for the Fairy Queen.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, the forest incidents help us to recognize “the prevalence and power of illusion and fantasy in human experience.”<sup>19</sup> This manipulation of human destiny, on the other, has a hidden implication of the biblical analogy that the world is but a vanity, overseen by God.

Dreams are essential in the forest world and are used to generalize the lovers’ strange experience. The forest episode is not a mere illusion, but another form of reality. Yet, the only actual dream is Hermia’s when she starts up from a dream just after Lysander, being affected by the powerful influence of the love juice, has stolen away from her. Not knowing Lysander has already gone, she cries for help:

Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best  
To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!  
Ay me, for pity! What a dream was here!  
Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.  
Methought a serpent ate my heart away,  
And you sat smiling at his cruel prey. (2.2.144-49)

<sup>16</sup> R. W. Dent, “Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.2 (1964): 126.

<sup>17</sup> Dent 126.

<sup>18</sup> Calderwood 512; Perng 60-64.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Egan, *Drama Within Drama: Shakespeare’s Sense of His Art in King Lear, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest* (New York: Columbia UP, 1975) 7.

She soon finds out the dream becomes reality. Lysander is the serpent that stings her heart.

Helena regards the sudden reversal of courtship in the forest as a show that Lysander, Hermia, and Demetrius put on to make fun of her:

Ay, do! Persever: counterfeit sad looks,  
Make mouths upon me when I turn my back,  
Wink each at other; hold the sweet jest up;  
This sport, well carried, shall be chronicled. (3.2.237-40)

She mistakes reality for fiction, and insists on disbelieving the whole episode.

Waking up from their forest experience, the young couples are all confounded. Trying hard to recollect what has happened, they can only vaguely recall:

Demetrius. These things seem small and undistinguishable,  
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.

Hermia. Methinks I see these things with parted eye,  
When everything seems double.

Helena. So methinks;  
And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,  
Mine own, and not mine own.

Demetrius. Are you sure  
That we are awake? It seems to me  
That yet we sleep, we dream. (4.1.186-93)

Their strange encounters in the forest are dismissed as fantasies by the all-too-rational Theseus, who never believes in "antique fables" or "fairy toys" (5.1.3). But, quite interestingly, he is the person who makes a famous speech on imagination supplying a wonderful definition of the term:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;  
That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
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. (5.1.7-17)

As some critics point out, this play is one of the most imaginative works in Shakespearean cannon.<sup>20</sup> Quite appropriately, imagination is the central focus of this play. What happens in the forest is basically magical, resorting to imagination, rather than cool reason. Bottom's speech after awakening from the forest experience is marked by its "misassignment of sense-experience," to borrow from Brooks.<sup>21</sup> This points up the limits of man's empirical experience. Bottom's dream is inexplicable—it is beyond language, and beyond empiricism. He is not equipped—like Shakespeare—with the wit and verbal competence to expound the significance of his dream.

The formal performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* toward the end of the play explores further some theatrical and metatheatrical issues, including audience response, playacting, engagement and disruption of dramatic illusion, permeability and impermeability of illusion and reality through a dramatic performance.

The inset playlet is marked by an outmoded style with archaism ("certain"), trite comparisons (Thisbe's beauty to flowers), lines padded out with expletives or redundancies, multiplied alliteration, and fustian apostrophes (to Furies and Fates, to Night, to Nature, and to Wall), all of which might mock works by poetasters.<sup>22</sup> The personifying of characters and the awkward prologue burlesque the interludes still popular then.

The onstage audience derive their enjoyment from the amateurs' ineptitude: "Our sport shall be to take what they mistake" (5.1.90). With this in mind, they intrude the playlet with their sarcastic comments or exchanges from time to time, not respecting it as a self-contained artifice. The actual mounting of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is full of interruptions. For example, on hearing Theseus's comment that "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again" (5.1.180-81), Bottom jumps out of his role to reply: "No, in truth sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisbe's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I told you: yonder she comes" (5.1.182-85). In this direct address to the audience, Bottom breaks the boundary between the play world of *Pyramus* and the "real" world of Athenian court, coming in and out of his dramatic role.<sup>23</sup> Or, to see from a metatheatrical level, the actor playing Bottom playing *Pyramus* shifts between his roles as Bottom and as *Pyramus*.

Impatient with the silly playlet at first, Hippolyta cannot help but be drawn and moved by the dramatic illusion when *Pyramus* is convinced by the blood-stained mantle of Thisbe's death: "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man" (5.1.279). After the death of *Pyramus*, she is the only onstage spectator concerned about the plot while most of the others try their best to make fun of *Pyramus*'s dying speech. She wonders, "How chance

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<sup>20</sup> Dent 125.

<sup>21</sup> Brooks cxix.

<sup>22</sup> Brooks cxviii-cxix.

<sup>23</sup> Perng 66.

Moonshine is gone, before Thisbe comes back and finds her lover?” (5.1.300-1). Throughout the whole performance, Hermia and Helena do not have a single line of speech. We do not know whether they are exactly like their insensitive husbands, failing to recognize in the play a dim similarity to their own story up until their safe return from the forest. Pyramus and Thisbe are Lysander and Hermia, only with different endings. Lysander and Demetrius amuse themselves greatly from the misfortune and silliness of the tragic lovers just like Puck derives great joy from watching these silly mortals fussing over “nothing” in their forest quarrels. Their inability to glean any hint of their own fortune from the tragic story shows the impossibility to shape reality with illusion—unlike the function of *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*.

Despite his dismissal of imagination, Theseus tries to appreciate the amateur players’ good intention behind their inept performance. He tells Hippolyta when she complains: “The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them” (5.1.208-9). He believes, “If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men” (5.1.211-12). In a similar vein, Puck humbly requests the playhouse audience to take the whole play as a dream when he delivers the epilogue:

If we shadows have offended,  
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,  
Gentles, do not reprehend:  
If you pardon, we will mend. (5.1.409-16)

That the playlet “hath well beguil’d / The heavy gait of night” (5.1.353-54) inevitably calls our attention to the popular presumption that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is itself a play to “grace a wedding.”<sup>24</sup> If so, the blessing of fairies on the stage could well disperse into the actual aristocratic house,<sup>25</sup> merging illusion and reality, when Oberon and Titania give the command:

Through the house give glimmering light  
By the dead and drowsy fire;  
Every elf and fairy sprite  
Hop as light as bird from briar;  
.....  
Hand in hand, with fairy grace,

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<sup>24</sup> Brooks lxxxix.

<sup>25</sup> Calderwood 510.

Will we sing, and bless this place. (5.1.377-80, 385-86)

As Oberon's ensuing lines make clear, the blessing is welcome and essential for an early modern marriage which is still vulnerable and susceptible to birth defects and difficult labors:

Now, until the break of day,  
Through this house each fairy stray.  
To the best bride-bed will we,  
Which by us shall blessed be;  
And the issue there create  
Ever shall be fortunate.  
So shall all the couples three  
Ever true in loving be;  
And the blots of Nature's hand  
Shall not in their issue stand:  
Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar,  
Nor mark prodigious, such as are  
Despised in nativity,  
Shall upon their children be. (5.1.387-400)

For Calderwood, Shakespeare plays up “the interpenetration of art and reality”:

In this way the play's openness of form serves the comic theme of social inclusiveness with wonderful felicity, the world of comedy expanding across the borders of fiction to embrace and absorb the social world beyond.<sup>26</sup>

Shakespeare's pen gives “airy nothing” (5.1.16), the fairies, a “local habitation and a name” (5.1.17), turning the popular belief in folklore into reality. And, if the play is an epithalamium to grace a real-life aristocratic wedding, the fiction invades into the reality when the fairies scatter to distribute their blessing.

The predominance of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* highlights its self-analysis. Through using the metatheatrical device of an inset playlet the comedy holds up a mirror that keeps reflecting itself and defines itself as a medium where illusion, imagination, reality and truth may meet and interact. Despite Puck's concluding remarks in an overtly self-effacing manner, Shakespeare seems to indicate that dramatic art is essentially unreal, and can hardly have a direct influence on the world. However, by using dramatic fiction to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601) in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare meditates on the possibility of using drama as “an instrument to influence and even shape reality” through the character Hamlet.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Calderwood 510.

<sup>27</sup> Egan 9.