

Editorial Anomalies and Stage Practice

A Midsummer Night's Dream 3.2-4.1

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Sometimes small details can tell us a great deal. This paper discusses two such details in the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that present editors with the need, or at least the opportunity, for intervention. Both concern stage directions and the question of scene division, so although neither is particularly obscure, they have tended to receive less critical attention than have issues raised by the spoken words of the main text. Editors consistently make some comment on them, but there is, I think, more to be said, as their full significance has not generally been recognized. They are especially interesting in that they affect editorial principles as well as local practice: principles concerning when and how intervention is justified, as well as the practicalities of what decision should be made in these particular cases. Furthermore, both potentially carry significant consequences for recovering something of the original performance – for informing speculation about casting practices and costuming.

The points at issue occur in all modern editions first at the transition between Act 3 (usually numbered as the end of 3.2) and Act 4; and secondly, in the middle of 4.1, with the stage direction after 4.1.101 for the exit of Oberon and Titania and the entry of Theseus and the hunting party.¹ At the end of 3.2, the lovers appear onstage one after another and fall asleep, after which Puck anoints Lysander's eyes so that

when they wake they will all fall in love with the "right" partners. The start of Act 4 is marked by the entrance of Titania and her fairy train along with Bottom. It is a long scene encompassing a series of separate actions: Titania's caressing indulgence of her donkey-headed lover; their sleeping; Oberon's releasing of her from her obsession, and the removal of the ass-head from Bottom; the couple's dance to celebrate their new amity; their exit as the dawn draws near; the entry of Theseus and Hippolyta hunting; their waking of the sleeping lovers; Theseus' setting off back to Athens; the lovers' discussion of what has happened to them; and last, Bottom's awakening, and his own meditation on what it was that constituted "Bottom's Dream".

It has long been known that the printings of early English plays did not have scene breaks, and most did not have act breaks either. The words *act* and *scene* themselves sound thoroughly English, but that is largely an illusion created by the fact that they are monosyllables: they are in fact part of the Classical vocabulary that entered the language in the later sixteenth century, as part of the humanist attempt to theorize about and regulate drama. "Act" in the sense of something done had been around since the late fourteenth century, but it was new as a technical term for the section of a play; it was borrowed in from humanist commentaries on Classical drama, and from neo-Latin plays that imitated those. In the First Folio, it appears in its

Latin form, *actus*. “Scene” similarly appears in the Folio in its Latin form, *scaena*. They belong with the extensive new vocabulary that was being introduced to describe drama, alongside “drama” itself (one of the latest to appear, and initially referring only to Classical plays), “theatre” (introduced alongside, and eventually displacing, “playhouse”), and “comedy” and “tragedy”, available in English since the late fourteenth century but almost always as terms for narrative rather than drama, the dramatic equivalent being simply “play”. The history of act division lies in the five-part structure, marked off by choruses, common in Latin and Greek tragedy; and there were Greek terms for each distinct part, with prescriptions as to what each should contain. Essentially, however, the acts marked individual movements in the plot. “Scene” could mean (as in its Classical sense) the performance space, but from there its standard English meaning transferred to the place or location where the action was set. Classical drama therefore did not have plural “scenes” in that sense, as the stage, in accordance with the Aristotelean unities further fortified by humanist commentators such as Julius Caesar Scaliger, represented a single place. Scenes in a small number of early English neo-Classical plays, as in French drama, are defined in terms of a single set of characters on stage, with a new scene being signalled whenever an individual character enters or leaves, so there is usually no question of a change of place. On the English public stage, by contrast, scene divisions did often mark a change of location, of scene, but not necessarily: they were customarily defined by a cleared stage, as a whole set of characters, of

actors, leaves, and another set enters. The English definition in terms of an empty stage makes a change of place or time not only possible but likely; at the very least, the playwright has the freedom to change them. The one time on the English stage when the same set of characters could close and open successive scenes was when the cleared stage also coincided with what is taken to signify an act break. The sequence of immediate departure and re-entry implies some kind of pause in the performance, but it was still a fairly unusual thing to do. Act divisions become standard only in plays written for the Jacobean stage, partly due to playwrights’ and printers’ increasing conformity with humanist models (evident also in the regular categorization of plays into the Classical generic groups) and partly by the requirements of indoor performance, not least at the Blackfriars – though experience at its reconstruction, the Sam Wanamaker, suggests that the requirement for frequent trimming of the candles may not have been quite as imperative as used to be thought.

English drama thus had a strong sense of what constituted a scene, a sense that modern dramatists, audiences and editors have inherited to the point where it becomes an unexamined assumption. A cleared stage in a play by Shakespeare or his contemporaries is a trigger to editors to mark a new scene division, even though the early play scripts, and their quarto printings, did not mark them as such. The Shakespeare quartos before the late *Othello* of 1622, and therefore including *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, had no breaks marked at all in their quarto prints, either acts or scenes, just a

succession of entrances and exits, presumably in keeping with his own drafts; and this is sometimes carried forward into the Folio. There, for instance, *Henry VI* parts 2 and 3 start with the heading “Actus Primus Scaena Prima”, but are then printed with no further divisions at all. Most of the Folio plays do have a consistent pattern of act and scene division and numbering, however; and those that do not were given them by their eighteenth-century editors, who were both Classically trained and regulatory-minded, and modern editors normally keep those divisions. The *Dream* itself appears in the Folio with act divisions but no scene divisions; the ones now generally used were supplied by

Nicholas Rowe early in the eighteenth century. The editors of that era furthermore began the practice of adding additional defining material for each scene, specifying not only a number for each but also a place, even for battle scenes of a few lines each. Battles were thus subdivided into a multiplicity of short scenes headed “another part of the field” or similar words whenever a pair of combatants left and others rushed on, a habit that is only recently being overridden. What matters in the plays as written and performed is not whether the stage represents a single specific locality, but what action is taking place: a battle is a single event, and modern productions, and presumably Elizabethan ones

Figure 1 1600 Quarto v Folio

Quarto:

Iacke shall haue Iill: nought shall goe ill:

The man shall haue his mare againe, & all shall be well.

Enter Queene of Faieries, and Clowne, and Faieries: and the king behinde them.

Tita. Come sit thee downe vpon this flowry bed...

Folio:

Iacke shall haue Iill, nought shall goe ill,

The man shall haue his Mare againe, and all shall bee well.

They sleepe all the Act.

Actus Quartus

Enter Queen of Fairies, and Clowne, and Fairies, and the King behinde them.

Tita. Come, sit thee downe vpon this flowry bed...

too, have the characters of such successive “scenes” overlapping on stage between the exit of one set of fighters and the entry of the next.

The act division at the end of Act 3 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* raises a related set of problems – though they in fact begin a few lines earlier, when Puck apparently leads Demetrius off the stage before Lysander's entry (3.2.412), so leaving the stage empty. The scene in the sense of a place does not however change – Demetrius returns a few lines later, followed by the women, so that all four lovers are asleep together – and the action is evidently continuous, so most editors do not insert a scene break. Once the lovers are all asleep, Puck de-enchants Lysander's eyes, and speaks a final verse over them. See figure 1 for a comparison of the Quarto, with its lack of act and scene divisions, and the Folio.

The Clown is of course Bottom, and his name is normally substituted in later editions. Editors since the eighteenth century have not only followed the Folio's act division here, but added “Scene 1”. It is also standard practice to provide an exit direction for Puck, since both the Quarto and the Folio have him re-enter some 45 lines into the new scene when Oberon addresses him (at which point the Folio also adds a further entry for the fairy king, despite its instruction at the start for him to be already on the stage watching Titania and Bottom). That the lovers remain onstage is made explicit in the Folio's stage direction “They sleepe all the Act,” a direction unnecessary in the Quarto since there is nothing to suggest they might do anything other than remain asleep.

The phrase “all the Act” has however elicited some comment: is it simply an instruction to the company to ignore the exit implied by the Folio's act division, or does “act” here imply music played between the acts, or is it a reminder to the actors of the continuity of the action – a continuity it would never occur to anyone to question from the Quarto text?² Dr Johnson noted that there was no reason for an act division here: it “seems to have been arbitrarily made” and “may therefore be altered at pleasure” – though editors have not done so.³ Realist productions wanting to preserve the act division or indicate the passing of time (the lovers come together late at night in 3.2, dawn breaks in the course of 4.1) could dim the lights, or bring down a curtain on the sleeping lovers and raise it again to show them still there. Furness makes the point in his variorum edition: “It is precisely because there is so little ‘interruption of the action’ that it is necessary to have an interruption of time, which this division supplies. At the close of the last scene the stage is pitch-dark, doubly black through Puck's charms, and a change to daylight is rendered less violent by a new Act.”⁴ The comment not only disregards the conditions of Globe staging, but seems to confuse what might be happening if the action were real with what it is sensible, or practicable, to do on any stage: the actors will not be blundering about in the “pitch-dark”, despite, or because of, what they say. The darkness, here as throughout the play, is primarily an effect of the language, not the staging. In modern, less literal-minded, productions, which tend to run the action straight through, scene divisions are always less

and Fleay suggested a scene break here, no modern editor has ever done so.⁶

These various paratextual directions raise a related question that goes right back to the earliest editorial intervention, in the First Folio: the question of whether Heminges and Condell put the act break in the wrong place. There is a sense in which such a question is a counterfactual, since if the Quarto text is anything to go by, Shakespeare did not put an act break anywhere at all; but act breaks may have had more function in the theatre as the years went by, and especially with the extension to Blackfriars. Even though the lovers are still asleep on the stage, there is at least as much *theatrical* justification for inserting the act division at 4.1.101, between the departure of the fairies and the arrival of Theseus and Hippolyta, as there is for putting the division where the Folio does, when the lovers are first left asleep. A later division would also solve the problem of the Folio's "They sleep all the Act": it would mean just what it appears to mean, that the lovers should stay asleep for the rest of the act, until the hunting party arrives that will wake them. Pope suggested that a new scene, IV.ii, should start here, and Fleay, who proposed that Act IV should begin with the present 3.2, marked the start of his Act V at this point.⁷ The lovers would thus be directed to stay asleep twice, if we follow the Folio's stage directions: once to sleep "All the Act", to stay asleep for the rest of an extended Act 3, until a later act division at 4.1.101; and again to "lye still" at that later point where the new act division would occur, whether "still" means quietly or unmoving, or still asleep – in practice, both. An act break here

would make for a short Act 4, but that would not be unparalleled in the Shakespeare canon.

A later act division might also cast further light on another problematic issue relating to performance rather than editing: the question of whether Theseus and Hippolyta could have been doubled with Oberon and Titania. To do so would fit with what we know of doubling patterns in Elizabethan acting companies, where actors would regularly be assigned comparable roles. The fairy and mortal rulers are never all on the stage at same time; and such a doubling would be thematically significant too, as the paralleling of the two sets of rulers is stressed many times over – not only in the power that they wield, but in the love of the fairy king and queen for their mortal counterparts (2.1.68-80). Such a doubling has however commonly been ruled out on the grounds that it does not allow any time for a change of costume, and that would seem decisive: the fairies leave the stage, and Theseus and Hippolyta enter. Normally where a doubling is at issue, at least a whole scene intervenes, or a minimum of some fifteen or more lines. If an act break did indeed indicate a pause in the performance, however, and if the start of the act were more properly placed at 4.1.101, then that could have allowed a small extra time at least for some divesting of an upper costume to take place. Dr Johnson's remark that the arbitrariness of the earlier act division means that it "may therefore be altered at pleasure" may not be acceptable to modern editors who necessarily work from the evidence of the Folio as well as the Quarto, but in so far as it allows for evidence from staging, including the

stage directions, to be taken into account as well, it is not without some heft.

There is, furthermore, an additional way of allowing for the doubling of the characters that is encoded in the further stage directions of the early texts. “Winde horns”, indicated in both the Quarto and Folio texts, signals a hunt: the horns give advance notice of Theseus’s arrival, and explain, even before he enters with talk of his forester and his hounds, the reason for his arrival in the wood. The fanfare would be appropriate music to play between acts; but it may have had another function too, to do with how the two pairs of rulers were both cast and costumed. We know that in at least one performance of the source story on which *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is based, Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” from the *Canterbury Tales*, that the sound of Theseus’s hunt was something of a set piece: this was Richard Edwards’ *Palamon and Arcite*, which was played for the Queen at Oxford when she visited it in 1566. The full text does not survive, but both the play and the hunt (the sound effects being provided by hunting dogs and, presumably, horns outside the hall where the play was being staged) made more than a passing impression;⁸ and either this or a different adaptation was staged by Henslowe’s Admiral’s Men in 1594, at a time when they were closely co-operating with Shakespeare’s own company, the Chamberlain’s Men.⁹ The *Dream* itself is in effect a riff on the earlier play and its Chaucerian sources.¹⁰ Chaucer, like Edwards later, lays some stress on the music of the hunt; so whether from their knowledge of the earlier play, or plays, or from the original Chaucerian text (much more widely known, if the abundance

of Chaucerian allusions in the period is anything to go by, than modern criticism has allowed¹¹), the audience may have been hoping for a similar sound effect. All those suggest that the music may have been more than just a perfunctory phrase or two: it may have been a bravura performance, even a brief interlude.

If that were so – and such suggestions are necessarily hypothetical, though the circumstantial evidence is not negligible – then it might solve that question of whether it is possible for the actors playing Oberon and Titania to double as Theseus and Hippolyta. Could such a change have been achieved in the time allowed by that winding of the horns specified in both forms of the text? If it could – or rather, if it was – then that tells us something about how those four characters were presented. Theseus and Hippolyta would presumably be in court costume, as rulers, but little is known about how supernatural characters (and fairies in particular) were dressed on the early modern stage. Henslowe’s inventories of stage apparel list nothing specific to fairies, nor anything at all like the masque costumes used at court. An instant conversion for the actors in the *Dream* from their fairy roles to their court counterparts, however, would not necessarily have involved a *change* of costume, just the removal of an outer layer and a mask. Full-length mantles, or perhaps a “robe with sleeves” such as do appear in Henslowe’s inventory, would cover court clothes completely, and could be removed very fast, with a pull on a lace. The “robe for to go invisibell” listed by Henslowe would presumably also be a cover-all; Oberon announces himself as invisible at 2.1.186, but the announcement is enough to

inform the audience, and a special costume would not have been essential for the purpose, or even likely.¹² Despite our ignorance about the costuming of stage fairies, we do know, from notes of stage properties in both medieval and early modern records, that gilded masks were used for God or the gods,¹³ just as the celestial spirits who appear in Katherine of Aragon's vision in *Henry VIII* 4.2 wear "golden vizards". Their use for fairies too would be no great step – and especially as the immediate forebears of Oberon and Titania were indeed gods, the Pluto and Proserpina who appear as gods-cum-fairies having their own marital squabble in the "Merchant's Tale". If Shakespeare's fairy monarchs wore "vizards" and sleeved robes, the actors would only need seconds to remove them. It might still be the fastest change of both character and costume in all Elizabethan drama; but if that horn fanfare lasted several bars, that would be long enough to make it all possible – to turn the strangely robed fairies with their golden masks into familiar court figures.

Since 1967, and especially since Peter Brook's remarkable production three years later, it has become common for productions to double both pairs of roles, sometimes by means of the quick removal of an outer costume analogous to that described above, sometimes by more distinctively modernist or meta-theatrical methods such as Brook used, by having the characters walk upstage in one role, turn round and walk back downstage in the other. Onstage changes of costume did also happen in the early modern theatre, but only when the *same characters*, as distinct from the same actors, change role. When vice figures in

moralties disguise themselves as virtues, for instance, they occasionally do so in front of the audience by the speedy addition of a sober robe over a gallant's outfit; Avarice in *Respublica* turns his gown inside out to hide his moneybags.¹⁴ Changing costume within sight of the audience was a way to indicate that the underlying character was indeed the same; unannounced offstage changes indicated a different character played by the same actor. The separation between the two forms was not necessarily absolute, however. The likely doubling in *The Winter's Tale* of Mamilius, the heir dead in infancy, with Perdita, the lost heir found, suggests at least a subtextual effect parallel to the resurrection of Hermione;¹⁵ and the doubling of the monarchs in the *Dream* would be similarly suggestive, even if the original audience, or indeed Shakespeare, would have thought more in terms of the parallelism and difference of role between mortal and fairy sovereigns rather than the Freudian lines of interpretation popular with psychoanalytic criticism.¹⁶

There are two somewhat contradictory conclusions to be drawn from this discussion – perhaps almost morals rather than conclusions. The first is a warning against trusting edited texts: even the things that we are most likely to take for granted and so overlook, such as act and scene numbering, may misrepresent what Shakespeare wrote and how his plays were performed. This is true even of the very earliest act of editing, in the First Folio. Second, as an opposing principle, is the importance of trusting the earliest prints, and of reading them not just as textual evidence, but as scripts for

performance: they may encode significant clues about acting practices that we would otherwise miss. The instruction for the hunting horns may tell us not only what sort of instruments should be played at that point, but by extension how long such a fanfare should last, and even how the fairies were clothed – evidence for costuming on the basis of what would be possible if the doubling of actors followed the usual pattern. There is plenty of speculation here, but it is speculation based on oddities within the printed texts themselves and which have to be explained *somehow*; and where hard evidence is lacking,

informed speculation based on what evidence there is may legitimately come into play.

My thanks to Sukanta Chaudhuri, Peter Holland, Christa Jansohn and Svenn-Arve Myklebost for comments and help with this article.

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¹ Line numbers vary in different editions dependent on the lineation of the prose earlier in the scene: references here are based on Peter Holland's excellent edition for the Oxford Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, general eds, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, and its second, 2005, edition), are an exception to the general practice of dividing Act 3 into two scenes only: they end 3.2 at line 412 and then start a new scene numbered 3.3.

² There is a supposition that the direction might have been added to the promptbook when (or if) the play transferred to the Blackfriars, where music between the acts was more likely. Possible meanings are helpfully discussed in the New Cambridge edition by R.A. Foakes, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 141-3, where he comes down in favour of "all the Act" referring to "a section of a play in performance". Holland, note to 3.2.464, disagrees, taking it "to indicate the interval between acts".

³ Noted in the New Variorum Edition ed. Horace Howard Furness, *A Midsummer Nights Dreame* (1895; 8th edn, Philadelphia and London: J.P. Lippincott, 1923), note to Actus Quartus.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Wells and Taylor, *Complete Works*, give an exit line for Puck at the end of 3.2 (their 3.3) but no direction to the sleepers. See also the brief discussion in their *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 279-80.

⁶ Ed. Furness, textual note to IV.i.115.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Ros King, *The Works of Richard Edwards: Politics, Poetry and Performance in Sixteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 81, where she also discusses Shakespeare's likely knowledge of at least some of the text.

⁹ Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, p. 211.

¹⁰ Although the "Knight's Tale" is the primary inspiration, Shakespeare certainly drew on more of the *Tales* than that alone: see Cooper, *Shakespeare*, pp. 211-19, and E. Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare reading Chaucer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 30-49. The standard works on Shakespeare's sources, like most editions, downplay the debt; the play is still commonly described as being without a source, or at least without a single dominant source, though the presence of the "Knight's Tale" is at least now widely acknowledged -- e.g. in Harold F. Brooks' Arden edition, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: Methuen, 1979) pp. lxxvii-ix, and, along with *Sir Thopas*, in Holland's Introduction to his edition, pp. 49, 82, 87-8.

¹¹ For the density of Chaucerian allusions in the period, see *Chaucer's Fame in England: STC Chauceriana 1475-1640*, ed. Jackson Campbell Boswell and Sylvia Wallace Holton (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), and *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-1900*, ed. Caroline Spurgeon, 3 vols (1908-17; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925); and for an overview, see Helen Cooper, "Poetic Fame," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 361-78 (361-9).

¹² *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R.A. Foakes and R.T. Rickert, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 323 (robes with sleeves), p. 325 ("invisibility" robe) -- and see also Holland's note to 2.1.186.

¹³ The post-Reformation Chester Banns, for instance, probably of the 1560s, note that God was customarily represented with "the face gilte" (but that it was better not to represent him visibly at all): *REED: Chester*, ed. Lawrence M. Clopper (Toronto and Buffalo: Toronto University Press, 1979), p. 247.

¹⁴ *Respublica*, ed. W.W. Greg, Early English Text Society OS 226 (1952 for 1946; repr. 1969), lines 416-32.

¹⁵ M.M. Mahood, *Playing Bit Parts in Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 14.

¹⁶ See Holland's Introduction, pp. 96-8.