

Meta-theatrical aspects of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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Introduction

Shakespeare's use of a play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a distinct metatheatrical strategy rooted in a long-standing tradition that dates back to ancient Greek drama, where actors sometimes broke character to address the audience directly (Gounaridou 8). Through the staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in Act 5, the mechanicals revive this convention: their awkward performance and overly literal explanations constantly interrupt the illusion of theatre, and foreground the constructed nature of it. As the nobles on stage mock the mechanicals' clumsiness, the real-life audience is invited to reflect on its own willingness to believe in equally unlikely events—such as Oberon being visibly "invisible" (2.1.186), or Titania's sudden love for a donkey-headed Bottom (3.1.134).

The inset play thus functions on multiple levels. Besides entertaining the wedding guests, and providing a comic closure to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it foregrounds the topic of theatrical illusion. Shakespeare uses the play-within-a-play to explore how performance constructs belief, how easily that belief can be disrupted, and how audience expectations shape what is considered "good" theatre (Calderwood 514). Such reflexivity belongs to what Lionel Abel termed "metatheatre"—drama that reflects on its own theatricality (qtd. in Mancewicz 41). Accordingly, one critic emphasizes that metatheatre captures a "fundamental and revolutionizing insight" by making its own theatricality the object of performance, turning characters, audiences, and even objects into centers of dramatic focus (Bierl 107). To explain how this reflexivity is structured, it is helpful to consider the idea of the *locus*, the fictional world inhabited by the characters, and the *platea*, a liminal space where actors step outside that fiction to address the audience (Weimann 12). These

concepts may be expanded with the so-called *meta-locus* and the *meta-platea*: zones in which the play exposes and comments on its own fictionality and where the boundary between stage and audience becomes thematized even more (Leonard 50–51). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, such layering is central. For instance, when Bottom insists that the lion is "a man as other men are" (3.1.40), the play-within-the-play draws attention to its own illusion from within, which is an example of *meta-locus*. Similarly, the nobles' mocking commentary during the mechanicals' play reflects *meta-platea*, as the audience watches another audience respond to a play, mirroring their own viewing position.

A structural layering as such further enables Shakespeare to address broader social dynamics like class-based assumptions about artistic legitimacy (Robinson 9). Against this rich backdrop, the following paper asks how Shakespeare uses the mechanicals' play to critique audience biases around class and artistic value in theatre. By analyzing the interplay of theatrical illusion, class dynamics, and audience perception, I examine how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* employs metatheatre, most notably through the play-within-the-play, to show the mechanisms of performance and question the social and aesthetic biases that impact the reception of the play.

Theatricality and Illusion

From its very first act, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* foregrounds the theme of illusion, which shapes the play's narrative, characters, and structure. Illusions appear in various forms, for example, in the lovers' shifting affections towards each other (3.2), in the enchantments of the fairy world (2.2), and in Bottom's surreal dream (3.1). Most significantly,

however, illusion operates on the level of theatre itself. Through the metatheatrical device of the play-within-the-play, Shakespeare exposes the workings behind theatrical illusion and invites the audience to reflect on their own role in sustaining it, while also testing the viewers' expectations about theatrical value (Mancewicz 37–38). In this context, the play constructs parallel narratives—the elegant entanglements of the noble lovers and the clumsy dramatics of the working-class mechanicals—to explore how illusion is created, sustained, and judged (Calderwood 507). The lovers' plot, with its sophisticated language and magical resolution, relies on the audience's readiness to accept improbable scenarios as emotionally resonant: that a love potion might realign affections overnight or that a dream could explain away the chaos of shifting desires. As James L. Calderwood writes in "The Illusion of Drama," the illusions experienced by the characters "mirror the illusion experienced by the audience watching the play," meaning that the spectators themselves are drawn into the same suspension of disbelief that the play ultimately questions (507). In other words, the play makes the audience complicit in the very act of make-believe it explores on stage, and prompts them to question how and why they accept what unfolds as real or meaningful.

In contrast to the illusions sustained elsewhere in the play, the mechanicals fail to uphold any theatrical suspension of disbelief. Their exaggerated literalism—such as Snout physically representing a wall or Starveling acting as "Moonshine" (5.1.155; 5.1.135)—lays bare the limits of mimesis. Thus, instead of hiding the artificial nature of performance, the mechanicals call extra attention to it as they shift uneasily between fully inhabiting their roles and repeatedly reminding the audience of their real identities. As critic Aneta Mancewicz rightly notes, Shakespeare here uses physicality and sensory elements to highlight the constructed nature of theatrical illusion, which draws attention to the representation itself

rather than trying to immerse the audience in the play (37–38). For instance, Bottom's death as Pyramus is wildly exaggerated both in speech and action as he stabs himself in the "left pap" and then performs an extended, melodramatic death scene—repeating "Thus die I, thus, thus, thus..." while dropping the sword, staggering across the stage, and finally collapsing into the tomb, followed by the drawn-out repetition, "Now die, die, die, die, die" (5.1.295–304). Also, when Theseus jokes that "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again," Bottom responds, "No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall," directly breaking the fourth wall to explain the play's timing (5.1.181–86). Similarly, Starveling steps out of character to clarify the stage device, announcing that "This lanthorn doth the horned moon present" (5.1.237). These explanations and interruptions call attention to the mechanics of performance and prevent any suspension of disbelief from happening. Niall Rudd's observation that the mechanicals perform "absolutely straight" (64) shows that sincerity alone is not enough for theatrical success. Their earnestness fails to convince the court, highlighting that theatre depends on an upheld illusion as well as the expectations and attitudes of its audience, which will be discussed more closely in the following chapters.

By juxtaposing the mechanicals' broken illusion with the enchantment sustained in the lovers' story, the audience is not asked to compare good and bad theatre on technical grounds alone, but to reflect on how delivery and context shape their judgment. As Mancewicz notes, Shakespeare's metatheatricality enables the "layering of environments" and the "experiences of transition between those environments" (3), which prompts viewers to question what counts as convincing illusion and why. This aligns with Anton Bierl's notion of "total theatre," where every element, including the audience, becomes part of the

performance, and the play ultimately "exploits and engages with its own theatrical nature" (107, 129). The play-within-the-play thus becomes more than comic relief; it shows the challenges and limitations of creating believable illusion on stage.

Class and Artistic Legitimacy

If illusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is both constructed and judged within performance, then the question inevitably follows: who is allowed to create illusion convincingly, and who is dismissed before their performance begins? This is not only a matter of theatrical technique but of class and artistic legitimacy. Shakespeare uses the mechanicals' performance to expose how assumptions about social rank determine what audiences perceive as good theatre. In doing so, he shows that aesthetic judgment is never neutral and that it is shaped by who is speaking, not just by what is being said.

The spatial staging of *Pyramus and Thisbe* already encodes this social asymmetry. On the early modern stage, the mechanicals perform from the *platea*—a liminal, low-status area associated with comic and popular performance—while the noble characters sit above on the *locus*, the elevated, illusion-rich realm of courtly drama (Weimann 12; Lin 284). According to critic Alexandra Robinson, this visual separation reinforces the idea that the artisans' play cannot be taken seriously as they are physically and symbolically confined to a theatrical space that marks them as inferior (11). Their failure to "cross" into dramatic illusion is not just a flaw in performance but a function of structural exclusion. Notably, the *platea* was historically a space for figures who were not granted full access to theatrical transformation and the mechanicals' failure must be read within that tradition (Aebischer 14).

Furthermore, the mechanicals occupy the *meta-platea* which is where their marginality is thematized as part of the play's self-reflexive structure. Their performance is so *doubly* framed as amateur and inadequate. Meanwhile, the court occupies a *meta-locus* that grants them representational authority as well as interpretive control (Leonard 54).

This spatial exclusion mirrors their inability to disappear into their roles. Unlike the enchanted lovers, who lose themselves in their forest drama, the mechanicals "remain obtrusively present and untranslated"; they never fully become their characters, because their social identity as craftsmen constantly resurfaces (Calderwood 513–14). Even as they attempt to enact tragic romance, they remain visible as Bottom the weaver (1.2.15), Snug the joiner (1.2.59), and Snout the tinker (1.2.56). Their "amateur" status is not only technical but ideological and they are denied the suspension of disbelief that more "legitimate" performers receive.

Thus, the mechanicals' inability to sustain metaphor shows how their class position disqualifies them from producing meaningful illusion. When Snout declares both that he is "Wall" and that he is not a wall, the metaphor collapses under the weight of literal clarification (5.1.155; 5.1.205). Also, this breakdown exposes a deeper insecurity about representation. The artisans assume their performance will be misread unless carefully controlled. Their exaggerated clarity is less a failure of imagination than a response to their social status. As working-class craftsmen, they are not trusted to perform convincingly or to signify beyond their literal selves. Shakespeare stages this interpretive mistrust as integral to the politics of reception. The mechanicals are not allowed to act—only to illustrate—and their performance is judged before it begins.

Yet Shakespeare further complicates this judgment. For instance, Bottom's behavior during his enchantment is unexpectedly dignified and, according to Robert Maslen, it is "modest," "courteous," and full of affection (19). His kindness towards the fairies calling them "good monsieur" (4.1.10–17), and the warm welcome he receives upon return ("Bottom! "O most courageous day! O most happy hour!" 4.2.22–23), suggests that emotional depth and imaginative capacity are not confined to the noble class within the play. In this way, the play undermines rigid class hierarchies and suggests that the ability to move others—perhaps the essence of good theatre—belongs to no single social stratum.

Through the mechanicals' failed but heartfelt attempt at tragedy, Shakespeare critiques the very standards by which theatrical legitimacy is determined. He exposes the audience's role in affirming or denying artistic value based on class-coded expectations. What is dismissed as comic ineptitude may in fact be an honest and revealing attempt to access the emotional truth at the heart of performance. Yet the play does not stop at exposing the performers' exclusion. In the final act, it also turns the lens toward the audience itself and dramatizes the act of reception. The mechanicals are judged before they speak—but what does this judgment reveal about those who sit in judgment?

Audience Reception

Having established that illusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not simply achieved or failed but also socially mediated, the final chapter of this paper turns attention to how theatre is received and by whom. The play's closing performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* draws attention to both *what* is staged and *how* it is watched. By making the courtly

spectators visible to the theatre audience, Shakespeare layers audience roles and sets up a framework where metatheatre invites us to reflect on the act of watching itself. Here, the play foregrounds the politics of reception by showing how aesthetic judgment functions as a form of social performance.

This structural layering makes the audience part of the spectacle. As Robinson rightly notes, metatheatrical plays often collapse the divide between actor and spectator, "drawing the real audience into complicity" with the mockery or judgment enacted onstage (10). During *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the nobles ridicule the mechanicals' performance with sarcastic commentary, thereby guiding the real audience's interpretation. For instance, Theseus claims that "This fellow doth not stand upon points" meaning that Quince did not bother with rhetorical finesse in his Prologue (5.1.118). Further, Hippolyta states that "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" (5.1.209). Their ironic comments, ridicule and verbal interruptions become cues that disrupt the frame through which both performances are viewed. Theseus in particular embodies this mediating role. Although he encourages a generous reception—"The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them" (5.1.210–11)—meaning that even a weak performance can succeed if the audience uses imagination, his later dismissal of the play as "palpable-gross" (5.1.365) shows the limits of the previous generosity and stresses that artistic legitimacy ultimately strongly depends on the imagination and condescension of the elite viewer.

Calderwood highlights this imbalance: emotional sincerity, when performed by socially marginal characters, is quickly recoded as comic failure (514–15). The mechanicals' earnest attempt at tragedy is not judged on its affective depth but on its distance from expected decorum. Their failure so reveals more about the evaluators of taste than about the

content of their play. Theseus and Hippolyta's mockery demonstrates what critic Nathaniel C. Leonard identifies as a hierarchical model of spectatorship, where the powerful not only consume performance but actively shape its interpretation (61).

At the same time, the inset play turns this gaze back onto the court. In this context, Leonard also argues that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* inverts traditional metatheatrical roles. While the mechanicals perform ostensibly for the court, their exaggerated reactions also frame and expose the behavior of their spectators (62). Bottom's mid-performance defense that was mentioned before—"Deceiving me' is Thisbe's cue" (5.1.180-83)—interrupts Theseus's critique and asserts the performer's agency within the theatrical frame. In doing so, the play grants the mechanicals a surprising degree of metatheatrical authority, and allows them to resist and reflect elite expectations. This moment also reveals a central irony: those deemed least capable of art produce the conditions for the most pointed theatrical insight.

Moreover, the fairies' final appearance in Act 5, Scene 2—blessing the sleeping couples after the spectacle—complicates the notion of stable spectatorship further. The fairies, who have watched the action invisibly, now step forward to close the performance. This reversal makes even the courtly audience subject to evaluation, and evokes the idea of *theatrum mundi*, where all roles, including those of spectators, are performances under watch (Leonard 66). By shifting the gaze back onto the viewers, Shakespeare implicates everyone, including the playhouse audience, in the social dynamics of theatrical interpretation.

Finally, the metatheatrical structure functions not to offer easy conclusions about art or genre, but to implicate the audience in the very judgments the play examines. Because

the mechanicals cannot create a convincing illusion, the audience sees them as ordinary craftsmen instead of the lovers they pretend to be, which shows that whether actors are accepted in their roles depends largely on how willing the audience is to play along (Rudd 191). The real spectators "strain to catch their whispers and join in their superior giggles," aligning themselves with the court even as the play gently undermines their complicity (Rudd 191). In this way, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages not just a comedy, but an inquiry into the ethics of spectatorship: who gets to define art, and who merely gets laughed at?

Conclusion

Ultimately, Shakespeare's use of metatheatricality in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* allows the play to examine its own theatrical conditions. By placing *Pyramus and Thisbe* at the center of the final act, he creates a frame that draws attention to the mechanisms of performance, the social position of its performers, and the reactions of its spectators. The mechanicals' failure does not arise solely from their lack of dramatic skill, but from the refusal of the court—and by extension the audience—to suspend disbelief. Judgments about theatrical success, then, emerge from systems of class and cultural expectation rather than only from intrinsic qualities of performance.

Throughout the play, the mechanicals are excluded from theatrical legitimacy because of who they are, not what they perform. Their sincerity is misread as parody, their symbolism dismissed as error. Yet in their awkwardness, they reveal how fragile illusion is, and how much it relies on context and cooperation. The courtly audience laughs, but the frame of the play positions them as subjects of scrutiny as well. Their reactions are staged

just as much as the mechanicals' lines, making the reception of theatre a dramatic act in its own right.

In this way, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages a metatheatrical inquiry into the politics of performance and spectatorship. It exposes the audience's role in sustaining illusion, judging value, and enforcing hierarchies. The beauty of art, as Calderwood suggests, must be "mirrored" back to the artist through the eyes of others (517). Shakespeare challenges his audience to consider what kind of mirror they offer—and whether their laughter reveals more about the play or about themselves. As Maslen observes, the play's comic "tininesses" cast doubt on tragic grandeur, inviting the audience to experience dramatic intensity "with a pinch of salt, a leavening of laughter" (18). In that spirit, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* treats theatre itself not as a sacred space, but as a site of shared illusion—always provisional, always subject to laughter, and always open to reflection.

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