Names and References in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* is about true love and felicitous marriage as essentials of both natural and social order. With three interwoven plots, Shakespeare's names and references reflect three types of sources, each with associative possibilities relevant to the basic themes. The main plot is about Athenian nobles whose names draw symbolic meaning from Greek mythology. It focuses first on Theseus and Hippolyta, whose approaching marriage symbolizes the settlement of domestic order, while dramatic tension emerges in the pairing of four young lovers. A second plot is about the 'mechanicals' preparing entertainment for the noble wedding, whose names are figurative coinages associated with common trades and English life. The third plot is about the fairy world and the troubled marriage of its king and queen, whose names suggest an overriding hierarchy and order in nature – a significant reinterpretation of traditional folklore. This paper will describe various associative possibilities (iconic, indexical, and symbolic) of *Theseus* and *Hippolyta*, and will present a detailed classification of all names and generic references. It will illustrate a semiotic approach advocated in 'Theoretical Foundations of Literary Onomastics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*.

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Let me begin by saying that a name can mean anything we want it to, just as appellatives or any other form of reference. Deciding what a name means is an act of interpretation, guided by the physical attributes of the word (e.g. its sounds), by the possibilities of reference within a specific context (such as the people standing on a stage), and by the significance of the name as a word related to other words in all other contexts (i.e. sources) known by the interpreter.

This is how we may describe the three basic modes of interpretation – the *iconic*, the *indexical*, and the *symbolic* – more or less as Charles Sanders Peirce described them about a hundred years ago. I have used these concepts before and most recently in a chapter that appeared in the *Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Smith 2016). My purpose here, today, is to examine Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* as an example of literary and language theory.

The symbolic mode of interpretation is the combination of indexical references from two or more different contexts, and it is certainly the most important mode in literature. Symbolic interpretation is thematic, and themes are generated by words having indexical reference in more than one context. All names have indexical reference – i.e. a fixed designation and one-to-one correspondence – in at least one context, but in literature they have their most important meaning in their thematic relevance – i.e. a significance because of their relationship to other words within other contexts (sources) as well as within the specific work at hand as a whole.

Thus, we must begin with the assumption that Shakespeare's names can mean whatever we want them to, depending on the interpretations we might want to give to his plays. That is to say, the names might elicit references to things in our time that did not exist in Shakespeare's time. However, it is easily observed that most, if not all of his names have obvious and very specific reference in pre-existing or co-existing contexts in Shakespeare's time. The only question is the degree to which, if any, those pre-existing references and contexts might be relevant to the themes apparent in the work at hand, which, of course, is an interpretive question, requiring us to recognize a similarity between references in two or more different contexts – the play itself and some other context.

We need not pursue Shakespeare's personal intentions, but the study of his names, as in the works of any author, ties us closely to the text of his works and to the pre-existing contexts (i.e. sources) in which the names might have reference. That is to say, we begin with a name, a specific indexical reference to a character or other entity in a play, and by studying how this same word is used as a specific indexical reference in pre-existing contexts (e.g. in sources or the culture of Shakespeare's time) we may infer a similarity of importance and thereby gain an understanding of its *symbolic* value and a richer understanding of thematic meaning in the work at hand.

Of course, it may be that a name has a different kind of reference in contexts that neither Shakespeare, nor his audience could know. For example, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, the character Dogberry insists that he 'be written down an ass'. Modern audiences laugh in part because the word *ass* now has an anatomical reference, and a director in the 21st century certainly should have the artistic freedom to take advantage of this interpretation. However, an onomastic scholar is obligated to acknowledge that it is not an interpretation clearly available to Shakespeare or his audience. To understand Shakespeare's achievement as an artist we need to focus on the texts of his plays and on the pre-existing contexts of his references.

Midsummer Night's Dream appears to have been written initially to celebrate a specific wedding of mature English nobles and the sources and other contexts in which the names have pre-existing reference illustrate themes of love, marriage, and domestic order as a part of civic order. Appendix 1 lists and (for convenience) classifies all the names in this play. I shall describe the central importance of Theseus and Hippolyta.

A good marriage follows personal choice, and true love is found when the natural order is undisturbed. There are three distinctive plot lines in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The main plot is about nobles whose names derive from Greek mythology. It focuses first on the approaching marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. They are the lead couple, but their marriage is a settled matter. For them there is no drama, just a celebration. The drama of the main plot lies in the tribulations of four young nobles – especially the fickleness of the two young men, Demetrius and Lysander. The tribulations of the young nobles help to show the stability of the older, mature nobles.

The other two plots show other contrasts. One is about commoners, the 'mechanicals', who are preparing the 'Pyramus and Thisby' play for entertainment at the noble wedding. Their names are all figurative references to specific English trades, clearly tying the real context of this play to England rather than ancient Athens.

The third plot is about the fairy world and the troubled marriage of its king and queen. Most of these names refer to elements of nature or characters in folklore. The unusual feature in Shakespeare's version of this world is that it is hierarchical and guided by beneficent rulers, which is a significant reinterpretation of English folklore.

The names of characters in the main plot derive from very specific passages in classical literature and link these characters to heroes of antiquity. Theseus is most often referred to on-stage as 'Duke', a prestigious English title, but it is not clear for whom Shakespeare may have written the play. The name *Theseus* would link the duke to one of the best known Greek heroes, and the subject of the first story in Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (Rouse 1910). According to Plutarch, Theseus volunteered to be sent by Athens as a human sacrifice in tribute to their Minoan masters in Crete. However, Theseus managed to kill the Minotaur, escape, and thereby free Athens of its annual tribute.

Plutarch emphasizes Theseus's later role as a founding leader of Athens. After his return to Athens, Theseus united all of Attica under Athens as its civic hub. Yet, Theseus always acted as a noble peer and never as a sovereign ruler of Athens. Thus, seeing an English nobleman as a type of Theseus would not be a big stretch of the imagination and in fact reasonably appropriate flattery.

The symbolic meaning of the name is made even more specific, even emphatic, in the context of Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta. Plutarch notes that there are many stories about Theseus and many marriages, but he says that the story of his marriage to Hippolyta comes from a very special source, and that the name *Hippolyta* should not be confused with *Atiopa* or similar sounding names of other romantic encounters. Soon after Theseus organized the young nobles in the government of Athens, they were attacked by the Amazons, young women warriors, and a great battle ensued that was fought to an exhausting draw. Hippolyta was among the Amazons and became the leader who initiated a peaceful end to the war by suggesting her own marriage to Theseus. This war was seen as the quintessential battle of the sexes in all of classical literature, and Plutarch describes Hippolyta's initiative as the archetypal settlement of gender conflict.

Shakespeare could read Latin when he needed to, but here clearly relied on Thomas North's translation of Plutarch, and in this translation the specificity of the context makes the symbolic meaning of Shakespeare's names even plainer. On page 71 there is a side-bar note to guide the reader, saying, 'Peace concluded by means of Hippolyta'. At the same time, Plutarch describes the marriage as a settlement of both domestic and civic customs for Athenian society. Thus, Shakespeare's application of names from this very specific context to an equally specific English context not only confers heroic stature to the central characters, but also focuses the play on marriage and, of course, on love as fundamental elements in a civil society.

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Appendix 1: Types of Thematic Associations of All References in *MND*

    A. References to Characters
        1. Proper Names
            a. Borrowings
                i. Classical:
                    Demetrius, Egeus, Helena/Helen, Hermia, Hippolyta, Lysander, Philostrate, Pyramus, Theseus, Thisby, Titania
                ii. Biblical
                iii. Medieval & Ren. Lit.
                    Goodfellow (Robin), Oberon
                iv. Topical
            b. Descriptive Tags (& Epithets)
                Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed, Peaseblossom
            c. Associative Tags
                i. Occupational
                    Bottom, Flute, Quince, Snout, Snug, Starveling
                ii. Social class
                    Nick, Francis, Peter, Tom, Robin
        2. Descriptive Labels
            a. Occupational (Forester)
                Mechanicals
            b. Social (Titles)
                Duke/Duchess, King of Fairies, Queen (Fairies), Rabble, Train
            c. Personal
                Fairy, Goblin, Hobgoblin, Puck
            d. Theatrical
                Clown
    B. Names of Places
        1. Classical
            Acheron, Athens/Athenian, Crete, Sparta, Taurus' snow, Thebes, Thessaly/Thessalian bulls,
        2. Biblical
        3. Medieval & Ren
        4. Topical

C. Literary Allusions

1. Classical

Aegles, Amazon, Antipodes, Apollo, Ariadne, Aurora's harbinger, Bacchanals, Cadmus, Carthage queen, Centaurs, Corin, Phillida, Cupid, Daphne, Diana, 'Ercles, Fates, Furies, Hecat, Helen (of Troy), Hercules, Jove, Limander, Muses, Neptune, Ninny's/Ninus' tomb, Perigenia, Phibbus' car, Philomele, Phoebe, Procrus, Shafalus, Sisters (Three), Thracian singer, Troyan, Venus' doves,

2. Biblical

3. Medieval & Ren. Lit.

Bergomask, Jack & Jill, Saint Valentine

4. Topical

Peascod, Squash

D. Coinages

Nedar

E. Generic References

Egypt, Ethiop, French crowns, India/Indian, Jew, Tartar

F. Personifications

Hiems, Lion, Love, Moon/Moonshine, Morning's love, Nature, Night's swift dragons, Wall

G. Oaths

God