

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM: A RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY

JOHN HUDSON

Introduction

Allegory has long been recognised as a key mode for interpreting Renaissance literature.¹ However, the identification of allegory, especially Christian allegory, in Shakespeare's plays has rightly been questioned because many commentators pay it selective attention, suggesting an isolated parallel without relating it to other aspects of the play and without explaining what purpose the allegorical dimension fulfills.² In order to avoid such pitfalls, this allegorical reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*MND*) concentrates on the inter-relationships between the main characters in Fairyland and identifies the underlying allegorical plot.³ It does not attempt to cover the contemporary allegories⁴ or the lovers at the Athenian court who occupy a different allegorical system.⁵ Being able to distinguish and isolate these different allegorical systems is the first step towards being able to unravel them. It is a task comparable to distinguishing the various lines of music sung by multiple voices in a piece of Renaissance polyphony revealing a further degree of depth and complexity to this play.

MND is one of the very few Shakespeare plays without a single dominant source text. It has been widely acknowledged for two hundred years that the character Puck or Robin Goodfellow bears two different traditional names for the Devil. After reviewing how readers constructed allegorical meanings from texts in the late-medieval period (Bush xi), Patricia Parker detected another major piece of the overall religious allegory in *MND*. In her key article "Murals and Morals: A Midsummer Night's Dream" (1998) Parker demonstrated not only that the characters of Pyramus and Thisbe exemplified a common medieval allegory for Jesus and the Church, found in works such as the fourteenth-century *Ovide Moralisé* and *Ovidius Moraliŕatus*, but that Peter Quince – whose names derive from 'petros' and 'quoin' or rock/cornerstone – symbolises St Peter. Similarly, Wall (played by Tom Snout in the play within the play) represents the Partition that was thought to divide Earth from Heaven, thus delaying Jesus from having intercourse with his 'Bride' (the Church).

Parker's findings suggest that the play is a religious satire, using Biblical typology, and involving figures from first-century Judea. This essay draws upon Parker's work to identify the allegorical identities of Oberon, Titania, the Flower and the Little Indian

Boy. It begins by reviewing the play's overall allegorical plot and examines how it can be independently validated by drawing on leading New Testament scholarship. In the process, it substantiates the evidence for the allegorical identity of each main character and concludes with a discussion of how the allegories can be performed on stage. In the process, this essay offers a new allegorical reading of *MND* which shows the underlying allegorical relationships that exist below the surface. These religious allegories are consistent with others, which have been identified in other Shakespearean plays, such as Steve's Sohmer's (2005) identification of Juliet in the Nurse's scene in *Romeo and Juliet* as a parody of the presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Infancy Gospel of James (413).

1. The Allegorical Plot

The present essay is the first to identify this allegorical plot in *MND*. In this plot we see Titus Caesar (Titania) fighting the Roman-Jewish war (66-73 CE) against Yahweh, the god of the Jews (Oberon), who has come from India (Judea). Titus steals away the Messiah (the "Little Indian Boy") from the Jews and from his mother, the Virgin Mary (the Vot'ress), and has him changed into a false messiah (the Changeling) crowned with flowers. That Changeling is paralleled on stage in the changed figure of Bottom as an Ass with his crown of scratchy flowers (musk roses). He previously promises "by and by I will to thee appear," (3.1.82) making a commitment similar to Jesus who promises he will "come again" (John 14: 3). His identity as Jesus is confirmed by his subsequent playing of the part of Pyramus, an established medieval allegory for Christ. People will "madly dote" on him, after coming into contact with a book (the Flower) that is associated with idolatry (idleness), is purple coloured, and linked to the god of love, namely the Gospel. Different aspects of the iconography of Christ are used to construct several of the characters – the little Indian Boy, Bottom in his ass head, and Bottom as the "lovely Jew" (3.1.90) Pyramus – and understanding their inter-relationship is one of the main challenges in addressing the allegorical plot.

As in the Roman-Jewish war, Titus (Titania) orders the limbs to be cut off one of the descendants of the Maccabees (Bees). Yahweh (Oberon) plots revenge. With the assistance of the Devil (Puck), he administers the Gospel (Flower) to Titus (Titania) while she is asleep to punish her, so that on waking she falls in love with Jesus (Bottom/Pyramus) before giving him his crown of thorny flowers. Yahweh (Oberon) then kills Titus (Titania) by the administration of wormwood (another name for Dian's Bud) – the same convulsive poison supposedly administered to Jesus on the cross – and resurrects her as a new compliant soul.

Next in the allegorical plot, the Partition (Wall) between Heaven and Earth falls down, bringing about the day of Apocalypse on which Jesus and the Church will be reunited. Saint Peter (Quince) directs his comic playlet, but in this Apocalypse the Church (Thisbe) dies. Jesus (Bottom/Pyramus) is crucified again. His death derives its main features from the Gospel Passion stories and is framed by an *inclusio* of two instances of the word ‘passion’ (5.1.277 and 303). His coming back to life then goes on to parody the Resurrection.

Finally, the spirits arise from their graves (5.1.366), appropriately for the Apocalypse – the day of Resurrection – and Yahweh (Oberon) distributes dew to the dancers in order to “consecrate” the world (5.1.401). This feature is not found in Christian apocalypses but only in Jewish accounts of the resurrection on the Last Day.⁶ Thus, it implies that the playlet of Christianity is over and that this is the first day of a new Jewish world.

This allegory constitutes a highly consistent narrative. It can also be validated, at least in part, by recent developments in New Testament research. One strand of scholarship suggests that after the Roman-Jewish war, Titus Caesar commissioned the writing of the Synoptic Gospels as a literary portrait of a pro-Roman fictitious messiah, Jesus, as a form of propaganda to counter Jewish messianic fervour.⁷ Something of this was apparently known to a small number of intellectuals in Elizabethan London. As Marlowe put it, scripture was “all of one man’s making” (Kuriyama 159)⁸ and Jesus was a “deceiver” in “vain and idle stories” that were created as a “device of policy” (Beard book 1, ch. 25, 148).⁹ Marlowe also appears to have been correct in his claim that Christians were “n’er thought upon till Titus and Vespasian conquered” Jerusalem, as Barabas, the Jew, complains in *The Jew of Malta* (2.3.10).

The Shakespearean plays were heavily influenced by Marlowe and contain various parodies of Christian doctrine, such as comic satires of the Virgin Mary.¹⁰ It is therefore conceivable that the author of the Shakespearean plays also used these plays as vehicles to allegorically communicate the same dangerous knowledge that Jesus is a literary, not a historical figure, and to recount how he was created. The present analysis suggests that the underlying allegorical plot of *MND* was also created to take comic revenge upon Titus (Titania), humiliating him by making him fall in love with the allegorical figure of Jesus (Bottom/Pyramus), by administering the Gospel to him while he is asleep. The allegorical plot is therefore in the vein of that increasingly popular Elizabethan genre, the revenge play, which later came into its own in the Jacobean era. Moreover, the allegorical plot appears to have been created by someone well versed in Hebrew literature, since it depends in part on the Mishnah (Altimont 275-7) which was not

translated into Latin until 1698 and therefore could have been read only by a tiny number of English Hebraic scholars and London's population of a hundred Marrano Jews, of which the most prominent was the Bassano family.¹¹

2. The Characters

I have already mentioned that Patricia Parker has identified the characters of Pyramus and Thisbe as an established medieval allegory of Jesus and the Church, that Peter Quince symbolises St Peter, and that Wall represents the Partition that supposedly divided Earth from Heaven. In the following sections, this essay expands upon Parker's allegorical identification and further extends it to other characters.

2.1 The Little Indian Boy

A major plot point turns on the war that is taking place between Oberon and Titania. The war has been caused by Titania stealing away a "Little Indian Boy," whose mother is a Vot'ress (holy virgin). Moreover, Titania crowns him with flowers (2.1.27). We are not told which flowers, but the forest contains several notably thorny flowers such as eglantine or the musk roses which made Bottom scratch in a parallel crowning sequence (4.1.3-23). This is all very strange. The term Vot'ress means a woman consecrated by a vow to the religious life, especially referring to virgins, who do not have children. Yet, one exception to this rule was the Virgin Mary, whose son was eventually crowned with thorns. The implication is that the little Indian Boy perhaps represents the messianic figure of Jesus.

His nationality is another clue. What is an Indian Boy doing in the forest? Since this play is set in Athens should he not be a little Athenian boy? Bearing in mind that several other characters come from first-century Judea, could he perhaps rather be a Little Judean Boy? In *Othello*, for instance, the reference to a "base Indian" in the 1622 Quarto (i.e. the first extant quarto) was emended to "base Judean" (5.2.345) in the First Folio. Contrary to Fleissner's claim that the word "Judean" was not in use in Shakespeare's time (Fleissner 137-8) and must therefore be a misprint, it was actually used in print in 1596, the very year in which *MND* was performed, so this pun certainly could have been implied,¹² and it strengthens the identification of the Boy as Jesus.

Significantly, in *MND* the Boy is three times called the "changeling" (2.1.23, 2.1.120, 4.1.58). The superficial reason is that fairies were thought to steal children and substitute fairy babies as changelings. However, the rhetorical term 'changeling' was also

how George Puttenham translated the Greek rhetorical term ‘hypallage’ in *The Art of English Poesie* (1589), a work employing the fairy tradition in which, as Miriam Joseph puts it, “the application of words is perverted and sometimes made absurd” (55). ‘Hypallage’ is a version of the broader grammatical form known as ‘hyperbaton,’ meaning a deviation from established order. The audience is therefore warned that the Boy is associated with such a departure, in which words are given perverted and absurd meanings.

The properties of having a mother who was a virgin, being a Judean, crowned with flowers, stolen away and a Changeling, all make sense in terms of a single identification. They mark the Boy as the figure of the Jewish messiah. One recent strand of New Testament scholarship suggests he was indeed stolen away from the Jews by the Flavian Emperor Titus Caesar after the end of the Roman-Jewish war, at whose Court he was translated into the literary figure of Jesus (Atwill, 2005).¹³

2.2 Titania

The reason why the author deliberately chose this peculiar name, Titania, from the Latin text of Ovid, where it refers to the two goddesses who are shape-shifters, Diana and Circe, remains unidentified. In the present reading, however, Titania’s name is interpreted as having been chosen because she is a literary allegory for Titus Caesar.

The play provides several pieces of evidence to suggest this allegorical identity of Titania. One is the death scene of Pyramus which contains an allusion to the crucifixions that Titus Caesar ordered towards the end of the Roman-Jewish war (5.1.298-9) as described in the *Autobiography* of Josephus.¹⁴ Another is found in the



1. “Oberon confronts Titania over Judean Boy”

orders that Titania gives to crop the legs of the bees (3.1.162), as an allegory of the instruction that Titus gave to amputate the limbs of one of the descendants of the Maccabees (Atwill 106, 303). A third concerns Titania’s relationship to Oberon. If Titania is an allegory of Titus Caesar, Oberon would need to be a depiction of the Jewish leadership which he was fighting, implying that Oberon would be an

allegory of the Hebrew god Yahweh. That is indeed who he appears to be.

2.3 Oberon

In *MND* Oberon becomes “invisible” (2.1.186), and the appearance of the terms “jealous” (2.1.61) and “Lord” (2.1.63) in close succession echo the description in Exodus, “for I the Lord thy God am a jealous god” (20:5) which appears almost identically in the Bishop’s Bible, Coverdale Bible and Geneva Bible. An invisible, jealous Lord who is the King of Judea is a good descriptor of the Hebrew god Yahweh. Further evidence is found in the passages where Oberon says that he welcomes Aurora, the harbinger of dawn (5.2.387), claiming to have made sport with the Morning’s love “Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red/Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams,/Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams” (3.2.391-93). This passage is a conflation of two Psalms. It specifically refers to an “eastern gate” turned to “yellow gold” and presents Oberon as passing through a full solar day from playing with the dawn to the setting sun (i.e. from dawn to dusk). Psalm 19 refers to Yahweh’s solar journey, his “rising place at one end of heaven and his circuit reaches the other.” More specifically, the passage in Psalm 24: 7, “lift up ye heads oh ye gates,” was interpreted by some Jews and early Christians as signifying the eastern gate of the Temple, known as the golden gate or sun gate (J. Glen Taylor 246), to which Oberon is referring. Overall this language represents the sun god, which Yahweh was, according to these passages. Thus, from this evidence, Oberon appears to be that “Indian,” the Judean king, from whom Titania has stolen the boy, namely Yahweh, the Hebrew god.

2.4 The Wall

In her article “Murals and Morals,” Patricia Parker has already identified the Wall as the partition that comes down on the day of the Apocalypse. This is confirmed since the end of the play, after the death of Bottom/Pyramus, is the Day of Judgment, when the spirits come out of the graves and are blessed with dew. This peculiar characteristic is



2. “Wall”

found in no Christian apocalypse, but does appear in the *Zohar* as an act of the Hebrew god. This further confirms Oberon's identity and that of his opponent.

2.5 The Flower

The allegorical identity of the Flower is more complicated. The term for flower gathering in Greek is *anthologia* (anthology), and to the Elizabethans the word 'flower' was another name for a book – such as the 100 poems in Gascoigne's *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (1573). In *MND* the Flower's name is "love in idleness," which has been identified by Richard Wilson as an Elizabethan pun on idolatry (Wilson, 2002), implying love of a false god. The flower is also coloured in the imperial purple and can fill someone with hateful fantasies (2.1.258). The play even provides a dramatised example of how this book or "flower" misleads someone into falling in love with a "vile thing" (2.2.33) who is later identified as Pyramus, the allegorical Jesus. Only one book fulfils these criteria: the Gospel. The implication for the allegorical plot is that the god of the Hebrews will apply the Gospel to the eyes of Titania/Titus, in an act of comic religious revenge, to make her unwittingly fall in love with the changeling in his guise of an ass.

2.5 The Bees

The strange instruction that Titania gives to crop the waxen thighs of the bees has not been commented upon by critics. It appears to be the only extant example in western literature of anyone amputating the legs of bees and there is no record of it having been dramatised in productions.¹⁵ The reason for the play emphasising this peculiar activity might be that during the Jewish war Titus Caesar is described as having caught a Jewish leader. His family all bore the names of the family of the Maccabees, and Titus had him crucified alive, and then ordered his torso to be cut down, being "pruned like an almond tree" by having his limbs amputated (Atwill 106). If Titania is an allegory for Titus, then the Bees allegorically represent the Jewish rebels, the Maccabees, and they have their limbs cut off accordingly.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Begins with Theseus saying "This passion and the death of a dear friend . . ." (5.1.277)

Pyramus is stabbed in the side (5.1.287)

the light disappears (5.1.294)

Gospels/Roman Jewish War

'Passion' is the technical term for the death of Jesus (Cross 1021)

Jesus was stabbed in the side (John 19: 34)

darkness came over the whole land (Mt. 27: 45)

men say “no die but an ace for him” and play dice (5.1.296-7)

men played lots or dice at foot of the cross (Mt. 27: 35)

Theseus says he may recover at the hands of a surgeon (5.1.298)

in the *Autobiography* by Josephus, the crucifixion victim recovers at hands of a surgeon (para. 420-21)

Theseus refers to the Passion again “her passion ends the play” (5.1.303)

Pyramus returns alive as Bottom (5.1.337)

Jesus returns alive at the resurrection (Mt. 28)

spirits come out of the grave (5.1.367)

Wall between Heaven and Earth comes down (5.1.203)

tombs open and spirits come out (Mt. 27: 52)

2.7 Bottom/Pyramus

To Parker’s identification of Bottom/Pyramus as a traditional allegory for Jesus, can be added the suggestion that the death of Pyramus has been carefully composed out of the Gospels’ crucifixion stories – which I developed independently from Parker’s work. The stabbing in the side, the disappearance of the light and the references to playing dice, are all framed within a rhetorical *inclusio* comprised of two references to the “passion” (5.1.277 and 303). A point by point comparison of the typology in the death of Pyramus makes this especially clear.

In the death scene (5.1.277-303), Lysander and Demetrius represent the soldiers who – in the account in the Gospels – crucified Jesus and sat at the foot of the cross. In the play they imagine Pyramus’s dying words as referring not to his death but to his score in a game of dice. Both in paintings of the *Arma Christi*, medieval poems and in Mystery Plays the soldiers at the foot of the cross also cast lots and play dice (Kolve 186). According to Demetrius, Pyramus is not a plurality of dies (i.e. a set of dice) “but an ace for him; for he is but one”; Lysander says he is even less than an ace, “he is nothing” (5.1.295-7).

Further, in the line about recovering at the hands of the surgeon (5.1.298), the playwright is referring to the crucifixions at Thecoe, which were ordered by Titus around 70 CE, in which Josephus bar Matthias took men down from the cross, one of whom survived at the hands of the physician (Atwill 172). The playwright links this to the crucifixion in the Gospels, where a man is taken down by the comparably named Josephus AriMathea, and also survived. By correlating these two improbable events, the

playwright highlights the likelihood that the account in the Gospel was created as a literary satire – a fictional parody of an event in the Roman-Jewish war – and thus does not constitute a historical reality from the year 33 CE. This implies, as Marlowe remarked, that the Gospel accounts are indeed “vain and idle stories,” (Beard book 1, ch. 25, 148) a deeply heretical view which, if directly expressed, would have been punishable by death. It is this heretical content that explains why the playwright chose to convey it through this system of complex allegories.

3. Implications for Performance

Audiences in Elizabethan London went not to “see” but to “hear” a play: it was an auditory rather than a visual culture as Lukas Erne has shown in his book, *Shakespeare as a Literary Dramatist* (2003). As Andrew Gurr (2000) has emphasised, players gave meta-theatrical, oratorical performances designed to enable theatre-goers to explore beyond the surface text to discern the underlying meanings. Most audience members recognised important biblical passages, and some also knew their Josephus, their Roman history, and understood enough about rhetorical figures to be able to discern some of the allegorical meanings. However, because the allegorical system is so complicated, it would have been very hard to discern, even if one had the necessary time and interest, because it requires reinterpreting various key assumptions in Christian doctrine.

To enable modern audiences to discern the allegorical meanings during performance requires making them visible through costuming, staging, lighting, props, movement and other theatrical techniques as well as a meta-theatrical and non realistic acting style that ‘points’ at the underlying meanings. One attempt to highlight the



3. “Crucifixion”

allegories in Shakespeare was Alan Dessen’s demonstration at the Center for Performance Studies in Early Theatre at the University of Toronto in February 2010, titled “The Persistence of Allegory in Renaissance Performance.” However, this was limited by what could be detected from the stage directions and provided a

comparison of the *psychomachia* scenes, the ‘struggle for the soul’ from several plays. To convey the allegory in a complete play and to make it understandable to a modern commercial audience requires going much further, making careful dramaturgical choices in deciding where to make cuts, and what parts of the text to dramatise.

After detecting the allegories in *MND*, I formed a theatre company, the Dark Lady Players, to produce them on stage. The first demonstration was at the Washington Shakespeare festival in 2007, followed by a week-long run in New York, directed by Jenny Greeman and Yana Landowne using an adapted text.¹⁶ This production extensively cut the scenes of the lovers – and demonstrated their separate allegorical schema very briefly – but extended the fairy scenes by dramatising pieces of the text which are not normally staged. For instance, the only male actor in this cast was given the part of Titania and was costumed in a purple Roman toga. Puck’s identity was conveyed by a red trouser-suit and little red horns. The Bees/Maccabees were brought on stage as actors wearing six-legged bee costumes and when Titus/Titania instructs the fairies to cut off their legs (3.1.162), the fairies (costumed as Roman soldiers) did precisely that. All the while Bottom was reading a newspaper with a headline referring to the corresponding passage in *The Roman-Jewish War* by Josephus. When Bottom subsequently orders a fairy to kill a red-hipped humblebee, accompanying the multiple references to “monsieur” (4.1.6-20), another bee is killed on stage while singing the last verse of the song “Monsieur,” referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and signalling the importance of the battle being fought (Duffin 266).

The death of Bottom/Pyramus was staged as a crucifixion, the actor dressed in a loincloth and with outstretched arms, with dice-players sitting at his feet, with very large dice in their hands. The word ‘passion’ was above his head and accompanied by sacred music. The Flower was brought on stage as a large purple book, with the cover title “The Book of Hateful Fantasies” (2.1.258) and Puck carried it into the theatre while intoning a liturgical chant used in the Catholic Church to precede the reading of the Gospel. The identity of the Dian’s bud, used to ‘cure’ Titania, was indicated by it being poured out of a large bottle marked with the alternative name of the herb, Wormwood, in a reference to the bitter gall administered to Jesus on the cross. Its poisonous effect was shown by Titania’s death, after which Oberon resurrected her.

Allegorical production also requires actors to take a new approach to their craft. As director Jenny Greeman comments:

It’s completely different from modern, internalized techniques of acting. If you’re playing Titania as an allegory for Titus Caesar it’s going to inform your body movement in a much different way than if you’re playing Titania with a pink dress and a tiara. The main difference is working on such a familiar piece of material in a completely different

way, and it's been amazing how we've been able to find them so easily – it's started to seem odd that it's not what everyone's doing with this play.¹⁷

MND is the most Lylyesque of the comedies and as Saccio has shown it was John Lyly who exemplified the use of allegorical dramaturgy. However under Greeman's direction the Dark Lady Players have gone on to demonstrate the religious allegorical systems in other plays including *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*, suggesting that this is a systematic characteristic of many of the Shakespearean plays. This would not be surprising since traces of allegories being employed elsewhere on the English Renaissance stage include the stage directions in John Wilson's plays, the administrative papers that describe the symbolism of *Gorbudoc* (1561), and occasional accounts of audience reactions to allegorical plays like *The Cradle of Security* (c. 1572) or the political allegory in *The Game at Chess* (1624).

Any creative theatre company can find exciting new ways of staging the allegorical plot and only in rare cases is it necessary to add an extra line or have a character make an aside to the audience. For instance, in this production Puck made asides to the audience during the death of Pyramus which gave the citations from the Gospels for the stabbing in the side, the light disappearing, and the dice playing. It was, moreover, helpful to have a talk by the dramaturge before the production to introduce the key ideas. It also helped to have extensive signage in the lobby, significant pre-production press coverage, and a more detailed programme note than usual. In future social media could be used to inform some of the potential audience members in advance. By such means, the allegorical meanings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be staged and revealed to an audience, after remaining largely undetected for the last 400 years. However, some of those meanings were perhaps noticed by what Gabriel Harvey called the "wiser sort" among contemporary audiences.¹⁸ After all, *MND* is clearly a pastoral and any educated Elizabethan knew that the pastoral genre was a rhetorical strategy designed to deceive.

4. Implications for Shakespearean Performance Theory

Unlike 'high-concept' productions of Shakespeare which inflict confusing and extraneous meanings upon the text – such as setting a play in outer space or in a concentration camp or trying to allegorise President Obama's Washington – the approach outlined in this essay uses dramaturgy to emphasise what appears to be the original underlying meanings of the play. Those meanings could not have been performed explicitly on the Elizabethan stage, since the playwright and all the actors would have faced charges of heresy, which was why those meanings were concealed at the allegorical level. Following the 1568 blasphemy laws, it was illegal to bring religion

onto the stage at all, although this did not stop Christian doctrine from being “derided and jested at in filthy plays on stages” as Philip Stubbes put it in his *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583, cited in Courthope 1911, 388). But jests were one thing, a direct challenge to the core premises of Christian history and doctrine would not have been tolerated. In today’s secularised culture, prosecution for heresy may no longer be a constraint, but an audience cannot approach a play performance with the implicit knowledge that an Elizabethan audience possessed. Such adaptations designed to explicitly reveal the allegorical level therefore offer a way forward.

Allegorical performances are also one way to help bridge the current impasse in performance criticism of Shakespeare. Until this production of *MND*, the only significant allegorical productions of Shakespeare in modern times had been a handful of English productions of *Measure for Measure* in the 1960s. However, allegorical productions are only the latest instance of what J.L. Styan termed the “Shakespeare Revolution.” He argued in 1977 that a number of modern critics were looking for a return to the flexibility of Elizabethan performance, free of the pretence of realism and “generating a stage action allegorical and symbolic” (5). That was not, however, provided by the materialistic orientation of “original practices” at The Globe, and allegorical theatre took another thirty years to re-appear. Now that it finally has, it provides a new perspective on some of the issues raised recently by W.B. Worthen (2007) and R.A. Foakes (2006) concerning the interpretation of Shakespearean performance, and on the long standing debate about whether watching a performance provides better insight into the plays than reading them. For when literary critics comment upon how performance may convey little of the meaning of a Shakespearean play they should be more precise: it is performance *in accordance with the modern conventions of realism* that conveys very little of the underlying meaning of a Shakespearean play.

Reading is an act of interpretation. As Worthen suggests in his article “Reading the Stage,” interpretations of Shakespeare are inevitably informed by performances, and vice versa, perhaps more so than for any other playwright. The process of creating a theatrical production begins with reading, interpreting, and finding ways in which to express that interpretation. The interpretation’s relationship to the text is determined by local interests and ideology as well as by the reader’s skills and understanding. As Foakes implies, the text does not have a fixed set of meanings in itself, but the reader can be equipped with the skill, time, knowledge and awareness to penetrate beneath the surface, understand the underlying intra-textual and inter-textual references, and to selectively construct a coherent system of meanings that can be expressed through the theatrical conventions that the theatre and producer have established.

The challenge for the director or dramaturge is to convey these to the rest of the theatre company so that all can work together to communicate those meanings, thus generating a “multi-leveled and fully aware mode of experience for an audience” (Styan 5). How successfully this can be done will vary with the culture, the time available, the resources and skills of the company, as well as diverse nature of audiences. Perhaps not many companies will devote the time and resources to doing an allegorical production. Nonetheless, such productions potentially offer theatre companies new ways to communicate deep layers of meaning in the text, and to combine textual authenticity with the innovation that may persuade theatre audiences to watch yet another production of a well-known classic.

In the absence of a letter from Shakespeare announcing an allegorical intention, such as the one that Edmund Spenser wrote to Raleigh about the *Fairie Queen*, any allegorical construction is speculative and is only one possible understanding of the play. Nonetheless, the biblical allegory is balanced by accompanying classical and contemporary allegories, as if in a harmonious piece of counterpoint. The advantage of this approach is that it unifies Christian and classical contexts that were common in Renaissance England, as well as being compatible with Renaissance literary theory and stage practice. Explicitly allegorical productions today also have the advantage that they can combine the depth and complexity of scholarly readings with the visual symbolism and physicality of staging. Although allegorical readings are no longer fashionable in literary criticism, they were very much part of Elizabethan culture. Today they offer theatre companies and drama departments an exciting way to combine classical and experimental approaches in rethinking Shakespearean performance.

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Notes

¹ For example see Dunlap (1967), and Caldwell (1977).

² See Vickers (1993), Levin (1974), and Levin (1979).

³ These allegories form the paradigmatic structure of the play as distinct from the surface syntagmatic structure – the division into acts and scenes.

⁴ For instance, in the contemporary allegory the character Bottom has been identified as a comic caricature of King James of Scotland (Taylor, 1973) or at least as a political allegory (Hunt, 2000). But

there is also a classical allegory. As an animal-headed creature, whose name means the spool on which a thread is wound, Bottom is also an allegory for the Minotaur, and is being watched by Theseus – before whom he dies – implying that the play itself is the labyrinth. However, the contemporary and classical allegories are minor in comparison to the major biblical allegory.

⁵ Chaucer provides not merely a source, but a system of allegorical connotative meaning, with Bottom as a version of Sir Thopas, see Bethurum (1945).

⁶ “And at the time when the Holy One will raise the dead to life He will cause dew to descend upon them from His head. By means of that dew all will rise from the dust . . .” *The Zohar* (1978), vol. 2, 21.

⁷ Atwill’s Flavian model of Christian origins in *Caesar’s Messiah* (2005) was greeted by Rod Blackhirst at Bendigo University as an “ice-breaking contribution”; by J. Harold Ellens at the University of Michigan as “innovative” and “radically unconventional”; and by Robert Eisenman at the Institute for the Study of Judeo-Christian Origins at California State University as “challenging and provocative.” The Atwill model is supported by earlier research by Agnew who argued that the Gospel of Mark was composed for presentation to the Flavian family, and by Dungan who thought the Flavians gave direct encouragement to its composition. See Farmer (1983), 440 and 491. So far it has not been adequately countered. Further developments, such as Dennis MacDonald’s book *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* on the Gospels as literary documents incorporating Homeric material, make Atwill’s model increasingly plausible.

⁸ As Marlowe told Simon Aldrich. Papers of Henry Oxinden, London, British Library, Add. MS 28012 ff. 514-5, quoted by Kuriyama 159.

⁹ Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of God’s Judgments* (1597), book. 1 ch. 25, 148.

¹⁰ These were previously outlined in Hudson (2009a).

¹¹ The most famous member of this family was the experimental poet Amelia Bassano Lanier, the so-called ‘dark lady’ of the Sonnets. See Hudson (2009b).

¹² It is used in Richard Johnson, *The Most Famous History of the Seauen Champions of Christendom* (1596). 50.

¹³ See note 10 above.

¹⁴ Josephus para. 420.

¹⁵ For a history of performance see Halio (2003) and Griffiths (1996).

¹⁶ See the review by Amini (2008).

¹⁷ Jenny Greeman, quoted in George Stevenson “The Dark Lady Players’ Midsummer.” *New York Theatre Wire*, <<http://www.nytheatre-wire.com/gs07031t.htm>> [accessed 5 September 2010].

¹⁸ In a manuscript note made on his copy of Speight’s edition of Chaucer (1598), 194.

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