

MND III, 1, 1-87

INTRO

III, 1 = heart of the play. 2nd time we see the mechanicals, after the casting of the play at the end of Act 1. Here they are in the woods, along with Titania (sleeping right next to them, though they cannot see her), not far from the lovers who have fallen asleep too.

Act II = ending on a first round of the lovers' "fond chase", with climactic awakening of Lysander, suffering the effects of the love juice and abandoning Hermia, while Hermia wakes up terrified and recounts her dream – and while, next to them, Titania is asleep on stage, having also received Oberon's love juice.

→ act II thus ends on a dramatic note (Hermia's violent and meaningful dream) and leaves the audience breathless with expectation (what will happen to the lovers now that Puck has made a mistake? Whom will Titania wake up to see and fall in love with?)

→ Beginning of Act III is thus rather unexpected and clearly works like a **comic relief** from the dramatic tension. Other main characters are asleep and mechanicals enter the stage to provide some sort of **farcical interlude**

Of course the scene is far from disconnected from the rest

- thematically: the play they rehearse, P&T, carries some echoes of the crossed love of Lysander and Hermia + they are meant to perform on the night of Th and Hipp's wedding

- dramatically: intricate interweaving of different strands of the play as, on the stage, are meant to coexist the mechanicals / Titania asleep in her bower / Puck / possibly, also, the lovers, asleep (→ hence the importance of the name given to Bottom, "the weaver")

Interest of the scene is of course also to deride the mechanicals' naïve conception of the theatre, while providing an insight into the technical difficulties involved in the staging of an Elizabethan play.

Guiding thread: **By comically mocking the artisans' theatrical incompetence, Shakespeare of course promotes his own magical dramatic skills, embodied in the figure of Puck, here an 'auditor / an actor, too', even a stage director of the play.**

I/ A farcical interlude

1. A blundering crew

→ Highly inadequate troupe of actors, piling up mistakes and malapropisms: Bottom calling a lion 'a most fearful wildfowl' (25); 'to the same defect' (30) (// effect); 'to disfigure' Moonshine (47) (// to figure), 'the flowers of odious savours sweet' (65) (odours / odourous); 'he goes to see a noise that he heard' (74); 'Ninny's tomb' (79) (Ninus)

→ most of these malapropisms are of course involuntarily apt: 'defect' and 'disfigure' underline the dreadful acting skills of the mechanicals, literally 'disfiguring' what they are trying to represent, 'odious' is hilariously inappropriate when referring to a smell, 'Ninny', meaning 'fool', is a most fitting term for the simple-minded gang of mechanicals gathered here.

→ Puck's interventions create a complicity with the audience, commenting on their lack of skill and, later, offering a moment of pure comedy when Bottom arrives on stage with an ass-head. Obviously the choice of the animal is not gratuitous – the ass evoking stupidity, grossness and vulgarity

2. Burlesque and mock-heroic notes

→ Like in all the scenes involving the mechanicals, the comic effect stems from the contrast between the tragic content of the play and its ornate, inflated poetry and the coarse language and understanding of the artisans. Coarseness, humble condition of the mechanicals is underlined by Puck in his alliterative qualification 'What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here'... (l. 60) – echoing the various derogatory expressions used in relation to the mechanicals throughout the play ('A crew of patches, rude mechanicals' (III, ii, 9-10, while Bottom is called 'the shallowest thickskin of that barren sort'). 'Hempen' = reference to the crude material of their outfit, defining them as members of the lowest levels of society

→ Parody of contemporary tragedies, with grandiloquent, pompous, emphatic style: cumbersome hyperbole + repetition 'Most radiant Pyramus, most lilywhite of hue / Of colour like the red rose on triumphant briar' = here, like in the later scene of the actual performance of the play, Sh seems to parody his own style in *Romeo and Juliet* (= mock-Petrarchan style).

→ Flute's transformation of 'Ninus' to 'Ninny' illustrates this degradation of the tragic into the burlesque and farcical (Ninus = ancient king of Babylon)

→ Puck's verb 'swaggering' pinpoints the artisans' comical pretensions at making high art, contrasting with their poor abilities. In this respect, Bottom, the leader of the pack, is the most burlesque of the characters, as he is the one displaying both the greatest deal of theatrical ambition and the highest ability to blunder and misunderstand. Cf. his improvised attempts at writing a prologue, with false starts and hesitations, illustrating both his literary ambition and hilarious lack of skill, in a parody of the process of writing: 'Ladies', or, 'Fair ladies, I would wish you', or, 'I would request you', or, 'I would entreat you...'

3. A mix of different registers

The dramatic success of the scene stems from its contrasts and mix of registers

- The **prose** used by the mechanicals, underlining their lowly condition and reinforced by their linguistic approximations and coarseness

- the lofty but absurd style of the play, a parody of outmoded verse written in **rhymed pentameters**

- the elegant, **rhymed tetrameters** of Puck. Interestingly, some of his interventions rhyme with those of the mechanicals → cf. 70-71 :

'And by and by I will to thee appear /
A stranger Pyramus than e'er played here'

On a dramatic level, coexistence on the same stage of the coarse farce of the mechanicals with the delicate flowered bower of Titania (and with Puck's sprite-like interventions) → characteristic mix of high and low // end of the scene, with appearance of ass's head on Bottom (telling name of course: bottom of the social scale coexisting with queen of the fairies), anticipates his incongruous, beauty-and-the-beast union with Titania

→ A scene that offers **many opportunities in terms of staging** → organization of the stage / how to make Puck appear to the audience while he is meant to be invisible to the mechanicals / where to situate Titania's bower, so that its presence is felt as a constant and comical counterpart to the gross comedy of the artisans

→ A scene that relies on **many different comic devices**: linguistic, dramatic (comic of situation with sudden appearance of ass-headed Bottom), characterization (role of Bottom, interactions between the different characters – cf. 2nd part)

→ Puck's presence creates a distance with the mechanicals and a dramatic complicity with the audience: both laugh at the ridiculous artisans

II/ Behind the scenes with the mechanicals

Mechanicals' many interrogations reveal their naïve conception of the theatre but also offer a glimpse of the technical and moral constraints of Elizabethan theatre

1. Peter Quince and company

Like in the casting scene, a certain sense of organization emerges from the group of mechanicals, mimicking that of a real theatrical company: Peter Quince clearly adopts the position of playwright – Bottom requires him to “write (him) a prologue” (l. 13) – and stage director. All of the remarks about the staging are addressed to him and, when the proper rehearsal starts, he is the one giving directions to his actors (“Speak, Pyramus! Thisbe, stand forth!”, for instance, l. 63). He appears as some sort of intellectual and artistic reference for the rest of the group, displaying his resourcefulness when presented with the mechanicals' queries, and responding in a patient, seemingly knowledgeable manner (“for you must understand he goes but to see a noise that he heard, and is to come again” (l. 73-74).

The comic of the scene stems partly from the interactions between the characters, as Peter Quince has trouble maintaining his authority on his company – particularly on the ebullient Bottom, whose enthusiasm pushes him to take the lead and usurp Quince's position, speaking a much greater number of lines and making numerous suggestions about the play. Quince sometimes loses his patience and displays a comic exasperation when his actors blunder (“odours – odorous!” l. 6-7, or “‘Ninus' tomb', man!”, l. 80).

On the other hand, the scene displays an impression of collective creation, as all the actors participate and suggest their solutions to amend the play, showing their zeal and enthusiasm → Shakespeare both pays tribute to and parodies the difficulty of staging a play

2. A rehearsal fraught with difficulties

Despite Peter Quince's attempts, the rehearsal does not go as planned, because of his actors' incompetence: their malapropisms, as we saw earlier, Flute's misunderstanding of his role, as he speaks “all (his) part at once, cues and all” (l. 81), or Bottom's ignorance in terms of versification (demanding the prologue to be written in ‘eight and eight' rather than ‘eight and six', in his typical aggrandizing fashion)

The other problems are raised by Bottom and concern the essence of theatricality:

- The first point is to avoid frightening 'the ladies' with Pyramus's suicide and with the lion. 2 different solutions are suggested: one which is non-theatrical (the writing of an explanatory prologue), the other which is a theatrical artifice, aiming at exposing the difference between the actor and his role ('half his face must be seen through the lion's neck...' (l. 28-29). These problems show the mechanicals' understanding of the theatrical and moral codes of the time, requiring a certain decency → Elizabethan authorities controlled theatrical performances, and companies like Shakespeare's ones were well aware of the risks involved if rules of decency were broken. Mechanicals apply self-censorship rather than risking being censored or punished by the duke.
- the second point highlights, on the contrary, the difficulty of creating theatrical illusion, as Peter Quince and co. wonder how to represent the moon and a wall, suggesting comically inadequate solutions revealing their naïve conception of the theatre

3. The mechanicals' naively literal understanding of the theatre

All the discussions about staging the play indeed reveal the mechanicals' literalism, i.e. their inability to grasp the "willing suspension of disbelief" on which the art of the theatre relies:

- they either repeatedly break the theatrical illusion and heavily underline the "reality" of the actors and objects represented on stage: "I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver", l. 16, or "let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner", l. 35. Bottom's pleonastic phrasing highlights this literal conception of the theatre, dispelling any magic and enchantment to fall back on a prosaic reality
- or they use cumbersome and inefficient theatrical devices to create the sought illusion, either a character plainly telling the audience he comes to "disfigure, or to present the person of Moonshine", or another actor covered in plaster or loam "to signify Wall" – another literal, unimaginative device pointing out the artisans' theatrical incompetence: they react to the problems they are faced with using their practical skills corresponding to their professions as craftsmen, but useless when it comes to put up a visually efficient theatrical performance.

Of course, the mechanicals' incompetence, particularly visible in their "disfigurement" of the Moonshine, only enhances, by contrast, Shakespeare's own virtuosity – as the play abounds in various references to the moon. The scene thus becomes a celebration of Shakespeare's magical art of the theatre

III/ The magic of the theatre

1. Several levels of metatheatricality

The scene displays an almost dizzying metatheatricality

- thematically, the concern of the scene is a play being rehearsed, entailing discussions about technicalities of staging, thus taking the audience behind the scenes and raising questions about the nature of the theatre as an art of make-believe. The actual rehearsal of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is literally a play-within-the-play. Cf Quince's first lines: 'This green plot shall be our stage', creating a mirror-effect with the actual stage of the theatre → a great potential for the actual staging of the scene, where the metatheatricality may be underlined by the acting and the props

→ The presence of Puck creates a distance and a mediation: he explicitly presents himself as an 'auditor' of the play, thus establishing a parallel with the actual audience. Yet the 'play' he is watching is *both* what is for him an actual play (*Pyramus and Thisbe*), and the antics of the mechanicals' rehearsal of it (which constitutes the play MND).

→ The audience of MND, thus, witnesses all these different 'spectacles' = the mechanicals rehearsing / the actual performance of P&T / Puck watching the scene and participating to it

Puck's role in the scene is that of 'auditor', but also of 'actor', as he ends up 'translating' Bottom – thus becoming something of a stage director, pulling the strings (as in the rest of the play where Oberon and Puck are responsible for much of the humans' actions)

2. Sh's lesson in theatre

Arguably 2 oblique representations of Shakespeare himself =

- a parodic though affectionate one through the figure of Peter Quince

- Puck = a portrait of the artist as a magician

Indeed the scene reads like Shakespeare's lesson in the magical art of the theatre, symbolized by Puck's sudden trick of transforming Bottom into an ass = stroke of magic clashing with mechanicals' labouring rehearsal of P&T, creating effect of surprise for them and the audience

Contrast between the theatrical incompetence of the mechanicals, puzzled by elementary difficulties – unable to convincingly represent such simple things as the moon and a wall, or scared of frightening women with a lion (something regular theatregoers are fairly used to) AND what Shakespeare is doing on stage = interweaving several levels of understanding of the scene, representing invisible (and presumably minuscule) fairies, and transforming a man into an ass → Shakespeare makes demands on his audience that the mechanicals could not even dream of

→ magic of the fairies is to be taken metaphorically as that of the playwright AND of the stage director // magic of make-believe, theatrical illusion that drives audiences into 'willing suspension of disbelief' = here the spectators are asked to believe in a great number of 'impossible things', while, at the same time, through the mechanicals' interrogations, being shown the tricks of the trade

CC°

Key scene to understand Shakespeare's conception of the theatre: an art of illusion that is not literal or realistic, relying on its audience's imagination and faculty of suspending its disbelief. Cf. prologue of *Henry V*: anything may be shown on the tiny stage of the theatre, provided the acting and staging are skilful and provided the audience is willing to be carried along → A scene offering many possibilities in terms of staging – comic effects + theatrical experience of confronting bad actors and their naïve interrogations with the creative solutions chosen to represent the fairies (always a conundrum for directors of the play) and Bottom's transformation. Stage directors may choose very sophisticated devices and costumes (to enhance the contrast between the mechanicals' ineptitude and a 'real', skilled company), or, on the contrary, choose extremely simple or plain ones to insist on the fact that what matters is less the realism of the representation than the performance's capacity to appeal to its audience's imagination through acting and clever staging (cf. Peter Brook's famous 1970 staging)

The Names

The craftsmen's names reflect their jobs:

- Quince, the carpenter – would use wooden wedges called quines or quoins.
- Snug, the joiner – would make snugly tight joints.
- Flute, the bellows mender – suggests a pipe on a bellows-powered church organ, and also a flute like voice which is not yet fully broken.
- Snout, the tinker – mends the spouts (or snouts) of kettles.
- Starveling, the tailor – tailors were proverbially undernourished.
- Bottom, the weaver – unwinds the thread from a bottom or reel. His name may also carry the sense of 'bottom' as the sitting part of the body, which might then tie in neatly with his later transformation into an 'ass'. While it is not certain that either of these words had their modern vulgar meaning in Shakespeare's day, Shakespeare's use of the word 'ass' (for example in Hamlet) does sometimes sound suspiciously as if it has its modern associations.

quoin = coin d'angle / d'un mur

joiner = menuisier / snug = bien ajusté

bellows = un soufflet / une soufflerie (orgue)

tinker = rétameur (to tinker = bricoler) – a spout: un bec / a snout: un museau

tailor: tailleur



Henry Fuseli, *Titania and Bottom*, 1790



Vivien Leigh as Titania, Old Vic Theatre production directed by Tyrone Guthrie, 1937



Images from Peter Brook's production of *MND*, 1970

