Neil Gaiman's "A Midsummer Night's Dream": Shakespeare Integrated into Popular Culture

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> How this particular man produced the works that dominate the cultures of much of the world almost four hundred years after his death is one of life's mysteries—and one that will continue to tease our imaginations as we continue to delight in his plays and poems.
>
> (Mowat and Werstine 1993: xxxv)

> Bill Moyers: But, Shakespeare has no audience, today, to speak of. He really doesn't.
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> Peter Sellars: Well, our audience has been taught that Shakespeare is not theirs. Our audience has been taught that Shakespeare belongs to the British and to the Royal Shakespeare Company[...]. What is maddening in America is most people have been separated from their culture. They've been told there's a special privileged class of artists—they have a special insight. A normal person doesn't have this insight and is not on the inside track of this work. That is a monstrous lie and it is hideous, because it is taught to us early on as we grow up in this system.
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> (Moyers 1990)

The twentieth century saw about three hundred and eighty-five film and television adaptations of Shakespeare's plays—two hundred and thirty-four for film and one hundred and fifty-one for television (IMDB). Thirty-six of these films were made in the 1990s, the largest amount in any decade, except for the 1910s, when fifty-two of Shakespeare's plays were adapted to film. The most popular Shakespearean films of the 1990s in America most notably correspond with Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), which led a Branagh-Shakespearian renaissance through such films as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Othello* (1995), and *Hamlet* (1996), all of which (except *Othello*) he directed. This popular British resurgence of Shakespeare on film also included Ian McKellen's adaptation and lead role in *Richard III* (1995) and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996). Also, other popularizations of Shakespeare's plays adapted to film in the 1990s revolved around the popularity of movie stars, beginning most strikingly with action movie star Mel Gibson's appearance in the title role of Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), as well as Leonardo DiCaprio and Clair Danes in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996), Al Pacino's documentary-postmodern rendition of *Richard III* in *Looking for Richard* (1996), and Calista Flockhart's, Kevin Kline's, and Michelle Pfeiffer's appearances in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999). The 1990s Shakespearean film renaissance seemed to peak with *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), which earned an Academy Award for best picture in 1999, indicating not only the "high brow" sensibility of the Academy, but also the film's popularity in the larger public, a popularity not seen in America since the first half of the nineteenth century.

Interviewer Bill Moyers, talking to theater director Peter Sellars, mused about how he was fascinated to learn that "in the nineteenth century, great American actors would roam the countryside in the small towns. In Marshall, Texas, they would get off the railroad and they would perform Shakespeare for mill workers, for saloons, in mining camps, and they were speaking to an untutored, but appreciative audience" (1990). In fact, researching popular novels, playbills, and newspapers of the nineteenth century, historian Lawrence Levine discovered that Shakespeare's works were so integrated into American culture during the time period Moyers speaks of that he drew the following conclusion: "Shakespeare was popular entertainment in nineteenth century America" (Levine 21)—a view lost to most of the twentieth century, as Sellars bemoaned in the interview opening this essay.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the plays of Shakespeare, Levine observes, were "presented as part of the same milieu inhabited by magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics. [His works] appeared on the same playbills and was advertised in the same spirit" (23). Spectators didn't see Shakespeare as someone to revere, but as

"part of the culture they enjoyed, a Shakespeare rendered familiar and intimate by virtue of his context" (23). Indeed, Richard Penn Smith even wrote a play, which, like the recent film, was also called *Shakespeare in Love*—about a "poor, worried, stumbling young man in love with a woman of whose feelings he is not yet certain" (23). A vaguely similar plot occurred in the 1998 film, in which we see Shakespeare getting the inspiration for his stories from the life he lives as he falls in love with a royal woman who wants to be an actor, which, at the same time, allows for the development of a parallel plot line with *Romeo and Juliet*, and, to some extent, *Twelfth Night*. The fact that both of these stories, focusing on the historical figure of Shakespeare, occurred during the height of Shakespearean popularity in their respective time periods cannot be understated.

If the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are on the tip of a new Shakespearean popularity wave—which the evidence of these Shakespeare films seem to suggest—then it is important to note how Shakespeare lost his popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period, Levine observes, Shakespeare evolved into a figure of "high brow" culture, and because of this *cultural invention* that the twentieth century inherited, Shakespeare lost his status as a figure of popular culture—the consequences of which I will state in the conclusion. However, suffice to say, as Levine contends, when Shakespeare remained a part of "free exchange" and was assimilated in popular culture, this process reflected the values and tastes of a "heterogeneous audience," but when cultural elitism removed Shakespeare from an atmosphere of "shared culture"—from a "mixed audience and from the presence of other cultural genres" (popular culture)—and as Shakespeare and his works were "removed from the pressures of everyday economic and social life" and placed within elite "cultural institutions," then that was when Americans were "taught to observe" Shakespeare "with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness" (229-30), a view that most Americans, today, still share. Shakespeare and his works, according to the cultural elite, are essentially meant to be worshiped in a special place, cut off from the practice of everyday life that other works of popular culture seem to enjoy.

Such directors as Sellars, as well as the filmmakers mentioned above, have tried to make Shakespeare popular again at the end of the twentieth century. And that is why Sellars, in a 1990 interview with Bill Moyers, called Shakespeare the "great American playwright."[1] Even more telling was Moyers's response, who, usually cool, could not help being taken aback by Sellars's arresting statement, and blurted out, "The great what?—wait a minute" (Moyers). And this reaction reveals the bifurcation of Shakespeare in America at the beginning of the twenty-first century: one that places him on a pedestal, as a man of genius whose works must be revered with awe; and another that integrates Shakespeare into American popular culture. However, in the nineteenth century, a person making such a statement would not have received the same kind of reaction, as noted in James Fenimore Cooper's declaration—more than one hundred and sixty years before Sellars's claim—that Shakespeare was " 'the great author of America' and insisted that Americans had 'just a good a right' as Englishmen to claim Shakespeare as their countryman," because there was not the same level of cultural bifurcation (Levine 20). Although the late twentieth century is nothing like the first half of the nineteenth century—especially in regards as to how we view and consume Shakespeare in our culture and society—we do find a similar parallel, one that marks a small resurgence of Shakespeare being re-integrated into 1990s popular culture. We see evidence for this not just in the medium of film, the desire to see the historical figure of Shakespeare performed, and artists declaring Shakespeare as an American playwright, but we also see an integration of Shakespeare in the popular culture form of the comic book.

Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *The Sandman* is one of the most important works of fiction written in that medium. Born in England and now living in Minnesota, Gaiman's seventy-five monthly graphic-novel stories were published between 1988 and 1996, selling over a million copies per year (Heidel 1). However, as Shakespeare is looked up to by the cultural elite as a genius and high brow author, many look down on the comic book form as "low art" popular culture. But, by doing so, we are giving in to the logo-centric belief that the written word and only the written word is the best way to convey ideals of humanity through art. There are many different ways to enter an author's imaginary environment: through text, image, aurally, moving pictures, and a combination of these. Each one takes the participant into that imaginary universe in a different way, from a different perspective. And by privileging one form (text) over another betrays a gross ignorance about the nature of art and culture itself. Is the written word more "artistic," more superior than image art or a combination of image and text, as we find in the medium of comic books? The following event is revealing: In 1991, Gaiman's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" earned the

World Fantasy Award for best short story, making it the first (and only) comic book ever to be awarded a literary award (Heidel 1). However, the following year members of the rules committee responsible for establishing the procedures on voting—apparently shocked that a "comic book" could win a literary award—changed the rules so only "literature" (text-only short stories) could be nominated. This kind of reaction reflects similar attitudes towards Shakespeare found at the end of the nineteenth century, but it certainly doesn't reflect the quality of alternative cultural creations found in diverse forms usually beyond the cultural elite's attention or understanding.

Because of this, as Shakespeare became relegated to "High Art" status and therefore "less accessible to large segments of the American people" by the end of the nineteenth century, most people had to satisfy "their aesthetic cravings through a number of new forms of expressive culture that were barred from high culture," Levine contends, which included such accessible forms as "the blues, jazz or jazz-derived music, musical comedy, photography, comic strips, movies, radio, popular comedians"—and it was these forms which "contained much that was fresh, exciting, innovative, intellectually challenging, and highly imaginative" (232). All of these qualities are reflected in Gaiman's work, despite the gatekeepers of literary awards and other elitists who would never examine works of art outside conventional literary forms.

Within his overall opus, Gaiman created a mythology that includes the seven sibling Ds: Death, Dream, Desire, Delirium, Despair, Destruction, and Destiny, who evoke in a palpable way the eternal nature of what it means to be human. Gaiman physicalizes these eternal forces of humanity and gives them personified weight, embodying in the character of the Dream Lord, for example, humanity's desire for dreams and the cost of attaining that desire. This is seen clearly in Gaiman's "Men of Good Fortune," issue twelve of the series. Here, we see Shakespeare at the start of his playwriting career talking to Christopher Marlowe: "I would give anything to have your gifts. Or more than anything to give men dreams, that would live on long after I am dead. I'd bargain like your Faustus for that boon" (12). The character of the Dream Lord, overhearing Shakespeare's conversation with Marlowe, comes up to him: "I heard your talk, Will. Would you write great plays? Create new dreams to spur the minds of men?" and Shakespeare replies, "It is." "Then let us talk," is the reply of Morpheus, the Dream Lord (13). We would not see the use of Shakespeare in Gaiman's stories again until "A Midsummer Night's Dream," issue number nineteen, which takes place four years after the "bargain" insinuated in "Men of Good Fortune."

In Gaiman's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" he not only weaves his mythology through the historical figure of Shakespeare, but also through his play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1590s). In brief, Shakespeare's story is set in the world of Athens, containing English tropes, including European fairy myth, and contains four plots: the Athenian Lord Theseus's marriage to the Amazon, Hippolyta; the love triangle among the lovers Lysander-Hermia and Demetrius-Helena; the argument between the Fairy King and Queen, Oberon and Titania (who wants to keep an Indian boy that Oberon desires); and the Athenian workers who practice and put on a poorly performed play for Theseus's upcoming wedding.

In Gaiman's story—a work richly layered with a plethora of meaning on art, beauty, family, and otherworldliness—he provides a parallel meta-commentary on the action and plot of Shakespeare's play and his personal life. It opens with a troupe of actors, including Shakespeare and his eight-year-old son, Hamnet, traveling along the rolling countryside of England on June 23, 1593. We see an energetic and curious Hamnet asking his father where they will be performing "the new play tonight," "if not at an inn?" His father annoyingly replies that he has "no idea" and tells his son to "keep your eyes on the road ahead" ("Midsummer" 1).

As his son is about to ask him another question, one of his actors, Will Kemp, requests that Shakespeare consider allowing him to put in a new bit of stage business in the play. As Shakespeare refuses this request, Hamnet notices a figure standing on a hill: "Look. Will he be our audience?" Shakespeare asks Hamnet to "go and wait with Condell and the other boys" as he goes alone and speaks with this mysterious figure. In the second panel on page two, we see a close-up of a sad and dejected Hamnet in the foreground as his father, in the background, walks away, his back to Hamnet—a telling image that connects the reader to Hamnet's plight, and concretely conveys the theme of Gaiman's story.

As Shakespeare talks to the Dream Lord, the players and Hamnet get ready to put on their play, which will be performed "on the downs of Sussex" (Gaiman 3). For the audience, Morpheus has invited the *real* fairies depicted in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to watch the first performance of that play. Gaiman intercuts between the fairies watching and commenting on the performance, the performance itself (which draws on text from Shakespeare's play), and the actors backstage. For example, one of the fey

spectators, comments: "What's this? What means this prancing, chattering mortal flesh? Methinks perhaps the Dream-Lord brought us here to feed?" Another larger fairy, looking like a blue potato-head figure, humorously replies: "Nar. Issa Wossname. You know. Thingie. A play. They're pretending things. . . . Issa love story. Not dinner" (8).

One of the backstage scenes reveal a quaking actor (playing Hermia), talking to Shakespeare (who plays Theseus): "But Master Will, they are not human! I saw boggarts, and trolls, and, and nixies, and things of every manner and kind"—to which Shakespeare replies: "Aye, and they are also our audience, Tommy. Calm yourself" (9). Gaiman's tale focuses on several characters, such as the comic-relief faeries, the Dream Lord's conversation with the "real" Queen Titania and King Auberon (as Gaiman spells the name of this character), as well as Auberon's interactions with the "real" Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck: "Ohh. . . . How I do ache to make sport of them" (9).

In a telling moment, we see a conversation between Titania and the Dream Lord. As she watches the play, she notices Hamnet, who happens to be playing the orphaned Indian boy. This is the character that Oberon wants from Titania: "I do beg a little changeling boy/To be my henchman" (2.1.123-24). To which Titania replies: "[The mother], being mortal, of that boy did die,/And for her sake I rear up her boy/And for her sake I will not part with him" (140-42). In Shakespeare's text, the Indian boy never appears as a part in the play. However, Gaiman weaves the character in as a device to parallel the desire between the "fictional" Titania of the play and the "real" one watching the performance: "That child—the one playing the Indian boy. Who is he?" The Dream Lord replies, "He is the son of Will Shekespear,[3] the author of this play." Titania: "A beautiful child. Most pleasant. Will I meet him?" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 11). And in these lines, we see the regard the Fairy Queen gives the boy, which contrasts with Shakespeare's unwillingness to give any attention to Hamnet.

Just before Titania meets Hamnet, we see a backstage conversation between Hamnet and Tommy (the actor afraid of the fairies). In this conversation, we see the history of the strained relationship between a father and his son, through Hamnet's eyes. In fact, we learn that "Mother ordered him to have me for this summer. It's the first time I've seen him for more than a week at a time" (Gaiman 13). The scene opens with Tommy stating, "You must be very proud of your father, Hamnet" (13). But Hamnet complains that his father is "very distant, Tommy. He doesn't seem like he's really there any more. . . . I'm less real to him than any of the characters in his plays. Mother says he's changed in the last five years. . . . All that matters is the stories" (13). And here we see how Gaiman wields dialogue with a brevity that yields deep characterizations. According to writer Joe Straczynski (the creator of the television series, *Babylon 5*), Gaiman, who wrote an episode of the series, "does things with words, simple yet elegant tricks that can explain an entire character in a few carefully selected words" (Straczynski, "Introduction" v). With these lines from Hamnet, "All that matters is the stories," we begin to see the Faustian cost Shakespeare has paid in attaining his dream.

In history, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway when he was eighteen, after she became pregnant, and, according to biographer Park Honan, Shakespeare's "mother, no doubt, wished him to acquit himself well," and Shakespeare "had no choice *but* to take on abrupt responsibility—to be a husband, a father" (Honan 82). Gaiman seems to tease out the fact that Shakespeare sacrificed his entire family for the dream of attaining immortality through his plays: "I'd bargain like your Faustus for that boon," is the desire Shakespeare expresses to Marlowe in Gaiman's "Men of Good Fortune" (12). By having Titania speak to the Dream Lord about the "beautiful child," Gaiman sets up a two-edged tension of subtle horror in the reader: the cost accrued to Shakespeare in attaining "a wonderful play, . . Most enchanting and fine," as Titania exclaims to the Dream Lord ("Midsummer" 19); and the consequences of letting this happen. We know that Hamnet dies when he is eleven, and, within the fictional setting of Gaiman's story, we see the Fairy Queen—who in Shakespeare's tale takes an orphaned Indian boy—play out the desire to take Hamnet for herself, giving him the attention that Shakespeare neglects, who, in a sense, orphaned[4] his son to her charms.

So, when the "real" Titania speaks to Hamnet during the intermission, it is through the wonder of a surrogate father's full attention—an attention Shakespeare sacrifices in order to create plays "that would live on long after I am dead" (Gaiman, "Men" 12). For Hamnet desires only the attention of his father, and the Fairy Queen, Titania, supplies this hope through a surrogate promise, holding out a fairy wish through a seduction of the young Hamnet: "and bonny dragons that will come when you do call them and fly you through the honeyed amber skies. There is no night in my land, pretty boy, and it is forever summer's twilight" (16). What eight year-old boy

would not want to attain such a dream,[5] where he can become a dragon-rider (all dragon-like fears tamed and attaining more wonders than his father could ever give him) in a land without darkness, death, or night—just the warm evening air of "summer's twilight," a forever Bradburian *Dandelion Wine*, a summer of "June dawns, July noons, August evenings" (Bradbury 239)?

The childhood desire for summer's twilight is also seen in Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924). Here, the fairy twilight represents the past, the wonders and magic of lost childhood memories. The mortal Alveric wins the hand of the Elf King's daughter, Lirazel. However, after giving birth to their child, Orion, she misses her immortal home, and returns to her father. When that occurs, the Elf king, not wanting Alveric to pursue Lirazel, pulls the borders of Elfland away from Earth, leaving behind a desolate rocky plain in places where the two borders previously met. Alveric, on his quest to find his wife, comes across these abandoned fields that once caressed Elfland. While there, he finds an old toy of his, cast aside when he grew up. He "saw again and again those little forsaken things that had been lost from his childhood. . . . Old tunes, old songs, old voices, hummed there too, growing fainter and fainter" (68). Unlike Alveric, Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, in Gaiman's story, has yet to create any significant memories with his father, other than observing him work: "I'm less real to him than any of the characters in his plays. . . . I don't remember him any other way" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 13). And thus it is Titania's promise of the creation of such memories that enamors Hamnet so. By making that seduction occur through a fairy-tale type setting, Gaiman ironically and metatextually juxtaposes Hamnet's desire against Shakespeare's concerns for his own stories.

For example, during the intermission, the "real" Puck has caused Dick Cowley, the actor portraying Puck, to fall asleep. He steals the actor's mask and Puck portrays Puck onstage. Shakespeare, watching who he thinks is the actor in a scene between Puck and Oberon, comments almost to himself: "Dick Cowley acts well tonight. I have never seen him feign a finer Puck. He seems almost two-thirds hobgoblin" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 17). As he muses in wonder, Hamnet approaches: "Father?" Shakespeare replies: "Not now, child. I must see this." Shakespeare's character, Puck, amazes him more than his son—which is the danger of the fey—luring mortals to pursue desires that they would normally fear. And as Shakespeare looks at the events unfolding on stage, we see Hamnet, sad of face, talk quietly to his father, who ignores him: "She was such a pretty lady, father, and she said such things to me" (17). Shakespeare doesn't realize the danger, and his ignorance furthers the subtle horror, when we discover Hamnet's early death linked with Titania's seductive promise.

The panel following immediately this image of Shakespeare ignoring his son once again reveals Puck playing Puck, stating Shakespeare's lines from the play: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 17). Through montage, Gaiman's scene juxtaposes with Shakespeare's, and a new meaning arises. Puck's lines now represent a comment on the foolishness of Shakespeare for failing to give attention to his son who needs the dreams of a father before the dreams of the fey. So, Hamnet's dreams—as portrayed through the regard Titania pays to Hamnet, parallels the Titania of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which we hear about her "rescue" of a motherless child from mortality. Because of this, the question naturally arises: Will Gaiman's Titania take Hamnet away from Shakespeare?

Gaiman seems to carry this concern a step further when he depicts the Dream Lord wondering if he had done the right thing in allowing Shakespeare to make this kind of sacrifice: "his words will echo down through time. It is what he wanted. But he did not understand the price. Mortals never do. They only see the prize, their heart's desire, their dream. . . . But the price of getting what you want, is getting what you once wanted" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 19). In this instance, the Dream Lord—as an anthropomorphic representation of the dreams of humanity, becomes Shakespeare's conscience. The desire of the poet's dream, however, wins out over familial responsibility. For Shakespeare's words live on, and Hamnet's memory of his relationship to his father is forever lost,[6] only to be depicted through a historical mythology within Gaiman's story—a far more powerful tale than the Academy Award winning film, *Shakespeare in Love*. We see this crisis represented when Hamnet watches his father perform Theseus in the famous monologue about the similarity between lovers, madmen, and poets—"and, as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown the poet's pen turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." In an image drawn by artist Charles Vess and colored by Steve Oliff, we see young Hamnet looking on with adoration, a heart-rending image more powerful than text only could convey (20).

The actors finish their play and the fairies return to their world and the Dream Lord exits, with a

promise from Shakespeare that he will give him one more tale "celebrating dreams" at the end of his career (which becomes "The Tempest" in Gaiman's final work of his opus fifty-six issues later in issue number seventy-five). Only Robin Goodfellow, Puck, has stayed behind to "confusticate and vex" mortals (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 22). The day dawns and the troupe wakes up from a disturbed slumber. Hamnet entreats his father: "I had such a strange dream. There was a great lady, who wanted me to go with her to a distant land." Shakespeare, still not appreciating the dream-memories of his son, behaves as a typical father not wanting to be disturbed and rebukes him: "Foolish fancies, boy. On the cart today, you must practice your handwriting. Perhaps you could write a letter to your mother, or to Judith" (24). Shakespeare is too busy to give his son the attention he needs, and the words of actor Richard Burbage stirs on the work ethic of the creative Shakespeare: "Come on, you vagabonds! Stir yourselves! We can be in Lewes by late afternoon, and there's an inn I know will be glad of a troupe of actors with a new comedy to show" (24). The final panel, colored in the honeyed amber color of fairy twilight contains the following words: "Hamnet Shakespeare died in 1596, aged eleven. Robin Goodfellow's present whereabouts are unknown." Here, through a semiotic code of color, fairy-dreams and death intermix, capping the story with gaunt sorrow and the realization that dreams—the magic of the fey—has a price beyond mortal understanding.

As a side note, Gaiman thematically ties this story with his work, "The Tempest," in which he tells the story of Shakespeare writing his final play (solo) in 1610, while his twenty-five year old daughter, Judith—Hamnet's twin sister—looks on. Shakespeare pays attention to her, perhaps repentant for not giving Hamnet similar affections: "And will you read it to me, father, when it is done? And make the voices also?" Her father replies, "Aye. When 'tis done" (Gaiman, "Tempest" 2-3). Later in the story, Judith tells her father how envious she was when Hamnet "went with you that summer. He wrote letters home, and mother, or Susanne, would read to me what he said, and I would weep, for I could not be there with you. And mother also would weep. Mother wept most of all. Did you not think? Did you not care?" Her father replies: "I . . . followed a dream. I did as I saw best, at the time" (18). Although Gaiman's "The Tempest" deserves a fuller analysis, it can be said in this space how Gaiman ties his two stories together, bringing closure to the familial myth of belonging and sharing.

Throughout his tale, Gaiman blends the imaginary universe of his mythology with that of the Shakespearean imaginary universe of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a historical mythology of Shakespeare's life. By means of this, Gaiman is able to posit the same themes as Shakespeare does, who essentially asks, "What desires do we dream?" However, Gaiman carries the question one step further: "What is the cost of attaining that desire?" And Gaiman's answer—presented in the prophecy of the Dream Lord speaking to Titania—contains as sharp a truth as that of any written by Shakespeare: "The price of getting what you want, is getting what you once wanted" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 19). In Shakespeare's play, we never discover the consequences of attaining the love that the lovers desire: the creation of children and the responsibilities that go with it.

In this way, Gaiman, through his mythic tale, creates anew what scholar Joseph Campbell says has been lost in the classical myths, which used to be "in the minds of people,"[7] allowing them to "see its relevance to something happening in [their] life," giving them a sense of "perspective" on what is occurring in their lives (Campbell 2). Campbell identifies four functions of myth:

- mystical—"realizing what a wonder the universe is, and what a wonder you are, and experiencing awe before this mystery";
- cosmological—science "showing you what the shape of the universe is";
- sociological—"supporting and validating a certain social order"; and the
- pedagogical—"how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances"

(Campbell 38-39)

Gaiman layers this story with these four functions of myth by revolving them around four layers of fiction that continually shift through the work: the mystical is represented as the otherworldliness of European Fairy and Gaiman's own mythology through the character of the Dream Lord; the cosmological is represented through the historical world of Shakespeare, his contemporaries and Hamnet; the sociological is found in the European world-view as projected through the Athenian characters in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and the pedagogical weaves itself throughout the themes of love conveyed in both stories.

In fact, Gaiman provides the reader a new kind of myth for the Western European and American con-

temporary, one that attempts to reveal and, perhaps, challenge how many people today sacrifice their families for work-day life (a system needed to generate money in order for many to survive)—and not, as in Shakespeare's case, for a work of art that will live on for ages of humanity. Gaiman's tale provides—in a popular mode—the artistic depth and mythic function which "high art" cannot instill, for, if Shakespeare, for example, remains ensconced away in "cultural institutions"—cut off from everyday practice—where audiences are, instead, "taught to observe" Shakespeare "with reverent, informed, disciplined seriousness" (Levine 229-30), then such an aesthetic placement of art can never provide for a people what art is supposed to instill: an integration of the visionary ideals of an artist into a person's everyday life.

Scholar Daniel Mackay contends that, like Greek myths, the medieval Christian church provided an integrated social and cultural praxis where a unified belief system structured not only the daily praxis of its followers, but even their art and entertainment were an extension of that unified belief system. Art and culture, he notes, were "wedded" to a "religious/efficacious mythology" (146). But, beginning with the Renaissance, Mackay believes, there was a "divorce of the self-evident *presence* of a single, collective, cultural imagination from the daily lives, practices, and structures of people" (145). In other words, if art is to be found only within the cultural elite's narrow definition and delineation of where and how to experience art, then people could never experience what both Campbell and Mackay believe has been lost in contemporary society—the mythic function of art, which requires integration into a daily praxis.

Instead, as anthropologist Victor Turner has noted, theater is, today, "set in the liminoid time of leisure between the role-playing times of 'work.' It is, in a way, 'play' or 'entertainment,'" (114). However, as Turner correctly ascertains, theater "is one of the abstractions from the original pansocietal 'ritual' which was part of the 'work' as well as the 'play' of the whole society before the division of labor and specialization split that great ensemble or gestalt into special professions and vocations" (114). So, when theater was integrated into the social fabric—and not institutionalized as the cultural elite did to Shakespeare in America by the end of the nineteenth century—it had the power to resolve "crises affecting everyone," Turner contends, and assigned "*meaning*" to "events following personal or social conflicts" (114)—a lived practice that many audience members experienced with Shakespeare's works during the first half of the nineteenth century in America.

Shakespeare was not just popular culture for many nineteenth century Americans—he was mythology. His art provided ideals that were socially and culturally integrated into everyday life.[8] Today, however, as Levine contends, we can only find the mythic function of art within works of popular culture. And when we see the "high art" of Shakespeare brought down to the level of popular culture, then Shakespeare, once again (as in the nineteenth century), has the potential to be seen and practiced as he was *really* meant to be—his artistic ideals breathing through the daily praxis of everyday life. For example, in an October 19, 1999, newspaper clipping we find a sports article comparing game five of the 1999 National League baseball play-off series between The New York Mets and Atlanta Braves at Shea Stadium to "the soggy battlefield of Agincourt in Shakespeare's *Henry V*" (Bruinius). During the fifteen-inning game (spanning five hours and forty-six minutes)—aside from the "steady drizzle"—Robin Ventura of the New York Mets hit a grand slam in the fifteenth inning. However, as he neared second base, his fellow players "mobbed" him, so he never reached home plate and his grand slam was "ruled a single" by the technically-minded referees. Bruinius, marking the game "legendary," closed the newspaper story with an altered line from *Henry V* (similar to how nineteenth century Americans shaped Shakespeare to fit their own needs), including a "politically correct" re-phrasing of the masculine article: "will gentlemen and women, now a-bed, think themselves accurs'd they were not here, when Ventura's slam became a single?" (Bruinius). The year 1999 also saw the publication of *Shakespeare on Management* (HarperBusiness) and *Shakespeare in Charge: The Bard's Guide to Leading and Succeeding on the Business Stage* (Hyperion), works which are marketed to business managers.

Similarly, in Gaiman's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," we find Shakespeare palpably integrated into a popular medium for today's fiction, a work that instills Shakespearean themes by evoking wonder not because it is popular—which just means that a work is widely disseminated and appreciated—but because the artist has tapped into contemporary concerns and metaphorically provides answers to deep mythological questions still haunting the lives of humanity: What does it mean to love? How do we attain it? And what are the consequences of attaining it? The search for answers to such questions discloses the mythic function of art that needs to be practiced in everyday life.

As Straczynski wrote in the television series *Babylon 5* (1993-1998), truth is a three-edged sword:

your side, my side, and the truth. As resolved through the high art and low art debate, we have on one side the elite high art world of Shakespeare; on the other side lies the popular/low art world of Gaiman's comic books; and on the third side is edged the truth an artist creates (as revealed in both Gaiman and Shakespeare), who write from their own perspectives on life in the medium that affords them the best tools to create artistic truth irrespective of what other people may think. For, like Puck, the truth behind the theme of love and how this theme is played out in art and culture continues to confusticate and vex mortals. Thus, in that last panel of Gaiman's story, the dreams of Hamnet get encapsulated in a dry text recording his death set against the promise of a "forever summer's twilight" of a "honeyed amber sky" in the otherworldliness of fey, a mythological promise for the eternal paradise of childhood innocence sacrificed for the eternal words of the mighty Bard.

Notes

[1]Shakespeare "wrote all about America," Sellars contends, because he "wrote about a country that was a world power that was in charge of commerce and that the grip was slipping. . . . America is the adolescent that Elizabethan England was." Sellars believes that many of Shakespeare's plays were "addressed to a nation to provoke the question of, How do you want to grow up, now?" (Moyers 1990).

[2]On the bottom page of the last work of this series, "The Tempest," Gaiman indicates that he wrote *The Sandman* between October 1987 and January 1996 (38).

[3]Reflecting, perhaps, the historical record of the many versions of how Shakespeare spelled his name, Gaiman uses both Shaxberd in "Men of Good Fortune" (13) and Shekespear, here.

[4]The idea that Shakespeare orphaned his son came from one of my students, Dara Jeffries, in my MIT Shakespeare class on October 27, 1999.

[5]Thanks to my friend, Earl Cookson, for this insight during a conversation on October 27, 1999.

[6]Hamnet mentions how his sister Judith told him, that, if Hamnet died, his father would "just write a play about it. 'Hamnet'" (Gaiman, "Midsummer" 13), yet *Hamlet* is not the memory of Hamnet.

[7]For example, in the plays and tales of ancient Greece, the stories of Odysseus, Hercules, and the Greek gods were so integrated into daily life that they became mythologies—ideas structuring, defining, and unifying, within the minds of a people, a cultural and social polis.

[8]This kind of integration into the daily practice of nineteenth century Americans included Jim Bridger, an illiterate Rocky Mountain explorer, "hiring someone to read the plays to him" so he could "recite long passages from Shakespeare." Further, the teen-ager William Dean Howells "memorized great chunks of Shakespeare while working as an apprentice printer in his father's newspaper office." And steamboat pilot George Ealer would spend hours reading Shakespeare to his apprentice, Mark Twain, who noted that Ealer "did not use the book, and did not need to." Further, politicians would quote Shakespeare as a part of "political discourse" (Levine 18, 36, 37).

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