



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 26 | Number 3 | Issue 101/102, Spring/
Summer

Article 13

4-15-2008

Six Characters in Search of Shakespeare: Neil Gaiman's Sandman and Shakespearian Mythos

John Pendergast

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Abstract

Looks at episodes from Neil Gaiman's Sandman comics dealing with two of Shakespeare's most fantastic plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pendergast, John (2008) "Six Characters in Search of Shakespeare: Neil Gaiman's Sandman and Shakespearian Mythos," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 26 : No. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol26/iss3/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF SHAKESPEARE:
NEIL GAIMAN'S SANDMAN
AND SHAKESPEARIAN MYTHOS

JOHN PENDERGAST

WHAT IS THE BEST MODERN ANALOGY for understanding the nature of Shakespeare's theater—is it television, with its democratic appeal and focus on popular entertainment? Or is it film, which shares with theater a marriage of sound and vision, but which sometimes rises to the level of art which television rarely does? Or, nostalgically, is it radio, which necessitates that listeners use their imagination to visualize what is not presented in the same manner as Shakespeare's theater asks viewers to imagine they are in Greece or Italy or Agincourt? I would like to suggest a fourth alternative: What about comic books? As with television and film, in comics there is a union of visual and verbal representation, but what is importantly missing is photographic realism, leaving much to the imagination and inviting the reader or viewer to participate in the creation of illusion. As one artist wrote, "Comics can actually be seen as falling somewhere between novels and films." A comic is static in that it can only provide "selected details of a scene" and forces the imagination to fill in the rest (Bender 5). These similarities are again described by the comic book artist Michael Zulli, who states that "[c]omics are often compared to film, but I see them as being more like theater, another medium that can't physically show everything and so must rely upon suggestion supported by a few perfectly chosen details" (qtd. in Bender 57). The result is a more intimate experience, which, unlike film but like theater, enables the audience to participate by using their imagination to cross the boundary between what is real and what is unreal, or what is shown and what cannot be. More importantly, the limitations of both mediums are defining characteristics of what makes the two art forms unique aesthetic experiences. In comic books, it is the very fact that the reader must participate which makes them most effective; the imagination is responsible for the creation of illusion in that, as Scott McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics*, it "takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). McCloud continues: "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar" (67). Closure resides in the imagination of the reader: "I may have drawn an axe being raised [...], but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who

screamed, or why" (68). Rather, we, as readers, are equal partners in the crime.

The movement across this boundary between the represented and the fanciful unrepresented is important to understanding the role of imagination in the works under consideration here: Neil Gaiman's series *The Sandman*, particularly issues 19 and 75, respectively, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. I draw this comparison between comics and Renaissance drama as a way of suggesting that comics and theater, especially Shakespeare's theater, share certain key characteristics and that Gaiman uses these volumes to examine the relationship between the real and the imagined in ways which emphasize the shared aesthetic qualities of comics and theater, characteristics which raise important questions concerning the material conditions of artistic production. In turn, these aesthetic characteristics serve as meta-commentaries on art and artistic creation: throughout the *Sandman* series, myth is thematically treated as a dynamic and active collaboration between artist and audience, and between the artist and the artist's larger cultural tradition. Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* both explore many of these same issues, namely through the Rude Mechanicals, whose attempts at staging a play call to mind the limitations of the medium of theater as well as the importance of audience participation in order for theater to function as effective entertainment, and through Prospero's "rough magic" which Shakespeare carefully equates with the theatrical experience; likewise, both plays bridge the gap between what is real and what is imagined by calling attention to the material realities of myth, that is, their existence as "shaping fantasies" for the Renaissance dramatist.

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series is arguably the most praised comic series ever written, and his issue 19, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the most praised issue. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the only monthly comic to win a literary award, the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story. Putting aside the irony of a comic book winning an award designed for a primarily print media (the following year the rules committee changed the rules so that only pure text-based "literature" could be nominated [Lancaster 71]), this award highlights the unique depth and complexity of the issue's focus on the imagination and fantasy. What is of interest to me as a Shakespearian scholar is the fact that Gaiman chose to work with two Shakespeare plays for which Shakespeare is almost solely responsible for the plot (the only other two being *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*); these two plays, as Gaiman suggests in his scripts, are created from a matrix of myth and imagination. And more importantly, they are both works in which Shakespeare foregrounds the process of artistic creation, via Prospero in *The Tempest* and the Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, themes equally important to Gaiman's concerns throughout the *Sandman* series.

Before looking at these characteristics in more detail, there is yet another way in which similarities between comics and Shakespeare's theater make this

comparison relevant. Neil Gaiman tells an anecdote which reflects the particular cultural status of comic books. At a party, Gaiman was introduced to the editor of a literary review of a major newspaper. Upon being asked what he did for a living, Gaiman replied, "I write comic books." The editor, whose interest almost instantly drained away, asked, politely, "What comics do you write?" Gaiman named some, eventually mentioning Sandman. The stranger replied, "My God, man, you don't write comics [...]. You write graphic novels!" (Bender 4). This anecdote suggests that this same presumption could be germane to the cultural appropriation of Shakespeare as a writer of dramas, not plays, or, of literature but not public theatrical entertainment. In Gaiman's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Tempest*, he interrogates much of the mythology which surrounds Shakespeare and the artistic impulse in general when he reveals the *work* or labor of writing popular plays, and the corresponding lack of acceptance of plays as real art by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes eloquently of the labor and material conditions of artistic creation; in writing of the "attachment" of fiction to "life at all four comers," (41) Woolf notes that in Shakespeare's plays, the attachment is often barely perceivable: "Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (41-42). She continues: "Generally material circumstances are against it [the creation of art]. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down" (51). Whether they are comic books or graphic novels, dramatic literature or theatrical entertainment, works of art and their ensuing acceptance by a consuming public are the result of a unique amalgamation of labor and life.

Gaiman foregrounds these circumstances well; in the last issue of Sandman, for example, Gaiman presents Shakespeare as toiling at home on his final play, *The Tempest* (not likely actually Shakespeare's final play, a fact acknowledged by Gaiman in an interview with Hy Bender).¹ The first panel depicts the dramatic storm at sea which the play represents through stage directions, given by Gaiman as bubbles, "A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard" (147). We see in the next panel that all of this exists in the imagination of Shakespeare, whom we now see seated at his desk, working by candlelight as first his daughter and then, two pages later, his wife question him as to his newest play. While his daughter is seen as taking an interest in his work, his wife merely nags him: "You know the trouble with you, Will? You live in words, not in the real world. You think too much. You dream too much"

¹ Quoted in Bender, *The Sandman Companion*, 224.

(166). In the epistemology of the panel, the work of writing the play is more “real” than the illustrated representation of his written words.

A bit later we also see Shakespeare at an inn to which he escapes from his wife’s nagging, only to be sarcastically accused by a customer of causing the plague: “The cause of plague is sin. The cause of sin is plays. Thus plays cause plagues. Ergo those who cause plays, well, they are veriest plague-crows . . .” (152). In these scenes Gaiman has done a superb job of demonstrating how Shakespeare’s plays may have been originally received, at least by some elements of society. Perhaps this is a comparison Gaiman wanted to suggest; like Renaissance plays, comics are often not accepted as art, but as childish distractions (at best) or, as they were accused of being in the infamous 1954 congressional hearings, destructive of the very fabric of society. Furthermore, Gaiman equates the circumstances of a work’s reception with that of its material creation. In the case of Gaiman’s Shakespeare, this equation has the added benefit of demystifying Shakespeare’s creative process: we are often shown Shakespeare as a professional writer, toiling alone to produce plays for public consumption.

Acknowledging that Shakespeare’s plays do not “hang there complete by themselves” is, in essence, what both Gaiman does in his retelling of the play and what Shakespeare’s Rude Mechanicals do in their performance, and in doing so both undermine many of the critical assumptions about the “cause” of art. For both Gaiman and Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a fitting play for considering the dual roles of artifice and the imagination since the origin of the play is itself shrouded in myth: as the story is often told, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was originally written for a royal, or at least aristocratic, wedding. The play was written to celebrate three marriages and fittingly closes with a promise to consummate the marriages: “Sweet friends, to bed.” Presumably the evening’s most important celebrant, Queen Elizabeth, took great delight in the play-within-a-play, the “Tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisby; very tragical mirth.” This is a great myth which seems to make sense of the play’s artifice and celebration of heterosexual union, but for one nagging reality: there is absolutely no evidence to support it. In fact, if the title page of the First Quarto is to be trusted, the play was performed “sundry times” on a public stage by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Further, the common myth of the play’s production stands in stark contrast to the later 17th century opinion of Samuel Pepys who called it “the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life” (qtd. in Greenblatt 805). Nonetheless, the myth has held; for example, Harold Bloom perpetuates it in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. But why? What is so appealing about this story to cause such blind adherence in the absence of any supporting evidence? It could be the play’s emphasis on aristocratic pastimes such as hunting and ridiculing the lower classes, or the play’s emphasis on celebration, socially suitable marriage

and romantic love. It is just as likely that the answer is a bit more nefarious: according to some critics, Shakespeare is "special," cut off from "the practice of everyday life that other works of popular culture seem to enjoy" (Lancaster 70). Certainly this could be Harold Bloom's impetus for believing the myth.²

For one critic, Kurt Lancaster, in his essay "Neil Gaiman's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream': Shakespeare Integrated into Popular Culture," the real modern "myth" portrayed by Gaiman is a familial one, the sacrifice of families for work (74), and this modern myth re-appropriates Shakespeare into popular culture. Although I would agree with Lancaster that Gaiman uses Shakespeare to mythic ends in order to make him more relevant to modern society, or perhaps to appropriate Shakespeare's relevance for a new medium, the real "myth" which Gaiman is interested in is not limited to sacrifices of the family, but emphasizes the necessity of work and labor in the creation of art. This myth is just as subversive in its own way as the emphasis on familial sacrifice, but serves to better illustrate the relevance of Shakespeare's two plays, *MND* and *The Tempest*.

It is to Gaiman's credit that he did not yield to the temptation of perpetuating this myth of *MND*'s first performance; in fact, he carefully undermines it. In his script for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Gaiman imagines Shakespeare's play as both inspired by and performed for the Lord Shaper of Dreams and an audience of mythic characters, including a "real" Peaseblossom, Puck, and Titania, and he places the entire performance in the "Green World" of Sussex Downs, England. Interestingly, Gaiman takes his cue for this locale from Shakespeare's *Rude Mechanicals*, the under-educated laborers who set out to perform the "Tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisby"; Shakespeare opens the rehearsal with Bottom asking, "Are we all met?", to which Quince the carpenter replies, "Pat, pat; and here's a marvail's convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house [...]" (III.i.1-4). By entering the supra-natural forest, the *Rude Mechanicals* enter into the world of myth, and it is here that they will create their performance;

² In the final section of Alan Moore's 2007 *Black Dossier*, Moore creates his own Shakespearean origin myth which likewise stresses the blending of myth and aristocracy. Moore gives us an excerpt of a lost play of Shakespeare's, *Faerie's Fortunes Founded*, a play which reveals that Shakespeare's "true" queen and patron was Gloriana (apparently the same Gloriana who is central to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*). *Faerie's Fortune's Founded* was truly Shakespeare's final work, begun in the year of his death and never completed. In the novel's concluding section, Prospero addresses his audience in blank verse, stating, "If we mere insubstantial fancies be . . . how more so thee, who from us substance stole?" Moore's act of linguistic ventriloquism is accentuated by the fact that Prospero is drawn to resemble Moore, thus serving not only to give Moore the final word, but to likewise announce his own withdrawal from the world of fiction and myth.

by comparing the “green plot” to a “stage” and a “hawthorn brake” to a tiring house, Shakespeare suggests that the Rude Mechanicals’ production shares much in common with his theater, and that both are made of the same materials, mythology. Gaiman highlights this comparison by placing his production of *MND* in the green world. It is also worth noting that Shakespeare’s so-called “romantic comedies” often used the green world as idealized locations removed from the confines and laws of the city and which served as an impetus for the imagination and for falling in love. By placing the performance of the entire play in the wild, among nature and the spirits, Gaiman does not suggest simply that Shakespeare’s theater is an escape from the realities of social convention and norms, but, like dreams, it is a product of the interaction of social conventions and norms with myth. Importantly for Gaiman, such an escape also represents the victory of the imagination over reason and the law, a theme which runs throughout the Sandman series.

By emphasizing the labor involved with the production of art and the everyday material and economic condition of Elizabethan theatrical business, Gaiman counters the attempt by some Shakespearian critics such as Harold Bloom to perpetuate elaborate origin myths for Shakespeare’s plays which de-emphasize their role as popular entertainment. However, Gaiman also gives us a romanticized view of Shakespeare in his first reference to Shakespeare in issue 13, “Men of Good Fortune,” where we see Shakespeare talking to his contemporary Christopher Marlowe, telling him “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” (126). The Dream Lord overhears this conversation and makes a deal with him to produce two plays, the first of which, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we see in issue 19, and the second, later in the last issue, *The Tempest*. Initially it would seem that Gaiman has fallen into the trap of seeing Shakespeare as the inspired, lonely genius working through divine inspiration. However, it is when Gaiman turns his attention to the actual works that he begins to question such myths. The new myth which is created is one that deflates the image of Shakespeare as somehow “above” popular culture and everyday life, and instead emphasizes Shakespeare as a professional writer working with his mythic materials within the sometimes constraining conventions of theater and against the wishes and, in some cases, financial well-being of his family. Indeed, money must be made.

Gaiman’s Shakespeare does not simply create his plots from the fabric of mythology, but instead is inspired by the Sandman (or Lord of Dreams), who is himself a conduit as well as a source of myths. However, by issue 19 (*MND*), Gaiman’s Shakespeare has come under the patronage of the Lord of Dreams. This is an important change for Gaiman, who in that issue is careful to show one of Shakespeare’s actors asking for money for their performance: “My Lord, I am the,

uh, leader of these, Lord Strange's Men. And though it is a joy for us to perform, we also need to pay our way through the countryside" (Gaiman, *MND* 15). In the final issue, Gaiman complicates the picture by having the Sandman remind Shakespeare that he is responsible for Shakespeare's gift for creating "dreams that would live on," and that without his intervention, Shakespeare would have "written a handful of other plays, in quality no better than, say, '*The Merry Devil of Edmonton*,' and then you would have come home to Stratford. You would have taught school, saved a little money. You would have bought a house, let it out, and bought another. You would have made your money in bricks and mortar—enough for your family's coat of arms, enough to make them forget your father's setbacks" (179). Making money by "bricks and mortar" is, in fact, what Shakespeare did: his biography is filled with references to land deals and other financial transactions, only some of which involved the theater. Ironically, even at this moment we are given a Shakespeare who is intrinsically a part of the world of mythology (he is having a glass of wine with the Lord of Dreams in the supernatural world of dreams). Gaiman is careful to note that without the Sandman, Shakespeare would still have written plays, albeit mediocre ones, and would still have had the same financial successes that he did, in fact, have. He would have used his imagination to create plays, but they would have looked a lot more like *Pyramus and Thisby* than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For Gaiman and Shakespeare, mythology and the work of the imagination are inextricably a part of each other, and they are both commodities.

In order to emphasize the dynamic relationship between the imagination and work, Gaiman chose to de-emphasize the main plot of the *MND*, the courtship of Helena, Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius, and instead focuses on the Rude Mechanicals, who, as I noted above, illustrate the work which goes into putting on a play: even though they do so quite badly, the rude mechanicals are portrayed, as their name would suggest, as laborers who work hard to write and perform their play. Likewise, Gaiman's actors are portrayed as selfish, wise-cracking and prone to over-acting (at one point Shakespeare must remind one of his actors that he portrays a Queen, not a strumpet). What Gaiman has created is a meta-commentary on not only Shakespeare's play, but on the labor of producing art. In Luigi Pirandello's 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*), Pirandello creates six characters who search for a play in which they can "act out" their lives; once they find a company willing to flesh out their rather melodramatic lives, they are unhappy with the results, complaining that theater falsifies "reality." As in Pirandello's play, Gaiman's characters are watching a performance in which they appear, and as a result are able to critique what they see in terms of its adherence to "reality." In this way, Shakespeare's Rude Mechanicals and Gaiman's theater troupe strip back the pretensions of art to reveal its inner workings, and in so doing, create a

commentary on drama akin to Pirandello's meta-drama. "Fittingly," writes Stephen Greenblatt, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "devotes much of its last act to a parody of a theatrical performance, as if its most enduring concern were not the fate of the lovers but the possibility of performing plays" (Greenblatt 809).

Prospero, in the epilogue of *The Tempest*, complicates the divide between fiction and reality, illusion and reason:

Now 'tis true
I must be here confined by you
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got,
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.
[. . .]
Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.
(Epilogue 3-20)

Prospero is not only commenting on the nature of theatrical performances as a type of "magic" (and the stage as an "island," or fictional location), but he is putting the imaginative responsibility for the play in the (literal) hands of the spectators. As a result, Prospero erases the lines of demarcation between stage and audience, between the world of myth and the world of "reality." *The Tempest* is arguably Shakespeare's most theatrical play; the opening storm which likewise opens Gaiman's "Tempest" is one good example, but the play also features an abundance of music, a masque, and most of the technical trappings the Renaissance theater was capable of utilizing. But in the end, the play relies upon the "Spirits to enforce, [and] art to enchant." *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's most theatrically indulgent play; perhaps it is significant that in only one other play, *A Comedy of Errors*, does Shakespeare make any attempt to adhere to the Aristotelian unities.

Just as Pirandello's characters do not find the "play" they are watching about themselves to be realistic or convincing, many in the audience for Gaiman's *MND* do not appreciate Shakespeare's masterpiece (in the same way the lords and

ladies do not find the Rude Mechanical's presentation dramatically satisfying). One of Gaiman's faeries asks, "What's this? What means this prancing, chattering mortal flesh? Methinks perhaps the Dream-Lord brought us here to feed?" He is corrected by another faerie who states: "Nar. Issa Wosname. You know. Thingie. A play. They're pretending things. [...] issa love story. Not dinner" (8). The play is literally a "thing"; when viewed from the perspective of beings from the spirit or imaginary realm, Shakespeare's drama looks suspiciously "real." Both Shakespeare's *MND* and *The Tempest* portray the overlapping terrains of illusion and reality, the very theme which dominates Gaiman's Sandman series. As Stephen Greenblatt notes in his introduction to *MND* in the *Norton Shakespeare*, "There is nothing really out there, their performance implies, except what the audience dreams is there" (Greenblatt 811). But as Prospero's final words in *The Tempest* suggest, there *is* something there, something very real and material, something uniquely and essentially theatrical.

With Gaiman's portrayal we are far from the myth of a royal marriage, albeit equally far from the Globe audience with its cross section of Elizabethan society. In the case of Gaiman's *MND*, the audience reflects the rich cultural tradition of faeries and "semipagan folklore" (Greenblatt 807). Faeries and spirits were an important part of Renaissance England's agrarian tradition. For example, although Shakespeare presents Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, as a relatively harmless spirit, albeit one who delights in playing mischievous tricks on unsuspecting rural sorts, according to Elizabethan popular belief, many fairies were "threatening and dangerous" (Greenblatt 808). Gaiman seems aware of this contrast—the "real" Peaseblossom, i.e. the Peaseblossom who watches his fellow faerie Puck being performed by one of Shakespeare's actors, comments upon the play's description of him as "the merry wanderer of the night": "I am that giggling-dangerous-totally-bloody-psychotic-menace-to-life-and-limb, more like it" (10). What the "real" Puck is responding to is what Greenblatt notes as the play's "translation" of myths to the theatrical stage: "Folk customs, the revels of power, the classical tradition as taught in schools, are all displaced from their points of origin, their enabling institutions and assumptions, and brought into a new space, the space of the Shakespearian stage" (809). Whereas Shakespeare populates his audience for the Rude Mechanical's performance with Theseus and Hippolyta, the only Queen present in Gaiman's audience is the "real" Queen of the Faeries, Titania. And whereas the worst Shakespeare can imagine for his audience's reaction is that the upper class will ridicule the performance, Gaiman sees the possibility of death; in fact, the world of dreams and imagination is quite dangerous: the "real" Puck knocks unconscious the actor playing him and takes on the role himself.

For both Gaiman and Shakespeare, it is the play-within-the-play which highlights the importance of the imagination. By surrounding the inept

"Pyramus and Thisby" with the more "artful" *MND*, Shakespeare manages to make a distinction between good "plays" and bad "drama." As Stephen Greenblatt notes in his introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare*, "whatever its [Pyramus and Thisby] meaning, its existence is closely linked to the nature of the theater itself" (809). As a meta-commentary on the nature of drama or theater, transformation, wonder, fantasy, and the willful suspension of disbelief via the imagination, the "Tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisby" illustrates that above all else the imagination is the most necessary component for theater; the Rude Mechanicals lack this understanding, and assume that their audience likewise lacks any imagination whatsoever and so are unable to comprehend a "pretend" lion or sword. Similarly, some of Gaiman's faeries cannot appreciate the important distinction between the real and the unreal. Both Gaiman's faeries and Shakespeare's Rude Mechanicals are unable to fully and unquestionably participate in the creation of illusion and realization of the work of art, a skill necessary for the full appreciation of theater and comic books. As these examples show, the imagination is not only a source for the dramatist/comic book writer, but is the basic material of both mediums.

The importance of the imagination as a material reality, as a fundamental tool, i.e. a material condition for the creation of art (one of Woolf's "grossly material things"), is a theme which Gaiman often deals with in his series; two issues prior to his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, in the story entitled "Calliope," Gaiman imagines a writer who must imprison the mythic muse in order to find the inspiration to write, and once he is granted that inspiration by the Dream Lord, he loses his mind, unable to stop the constant stream of images and story ideas. In the end, it is his imagination which does him in. Gaiman has taken a fundamental component of comic books, the reader's imagination, and reversed it, turning it against the artist.

This is essentially the driving point behind Gaiman's Sandman series, which is one reason why it functions as a commentary on art: implied throughout the series is the primacy of the imagination and the uncertainty as to which is more real, the waking state or the dream state. As Mercutio points out in *Romeo and Juliet*, dreams are insubstantial and "begot of nothing":

True. I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air,
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,
Turning his face to the dew-dropping south. (I.4.96-103)

As R.W. Dent, in his article "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" notes, the imagination was seen during the Renaissance as insubstantial, irrational, distorting, emotional, unstable and lying (128), the same traits Mercutio attributes to dreams. Ironically, this is the same argument used by a number of the anti-theater tract writers of Shakespeare's time. For example, Stephen Gosson, in his second tract entitled *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) writes that plays lie about and distort reality: "Plays are no Images of trueth, because sometime they handle such thinges as never were, sometime they runne upon trueths, but make them seeme longer, or shorter, or greater, or lesse than they were, according as the Poet blowes them up with his quill, for aspiring heades; or minceth them smaller, for weaker stomakes" (D5-D5v).³ However, as Shakespeare and other writers knew, the imagination, when controlled, was the wellspring of art and artifice. The same holds true of dreams, as Bottom notes in his report of his dream: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about t'expound this dream. [...] The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (IV.1.199-207). Bottom's malapropisms aside, man is able to hear, see, taste and conceive of dreams through the active use of the imagination (an ability Bottom and his fellow players, ironically, lack). As the Sandman shows us through the series, dreams are substantial, largely because, while created via the imagination, they are realized via the senses. Likewise, dreams are not insubstantial, because, as Oberon notes when he accuses Titania of having an affair with a mortal, the world of dreams overlaps with the world of mortals:

How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?
Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigenia, whom he ravished,
And make him with fair Aegles break his faith,
With Ariadne and Antiopa? (II.i.74-80)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the world of the faeries overlaps with the mortal world; likewise throughout the Sandman series, Gaiman consistently shows that dreams and myths, although not of this world, are nonetheless "real" in the sense that they influence the action of mortals; moreover, the dream world is consistently influenced by the needs, requests, and occasional

³ For an insightful discussion of Renaissance Antitheatrical tracts, see Jean Howard's "Renaissance Antitheatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*."

demands of the material world. One of the traits which gives the series much of its imaginative power is that the Sandman alternately exists in two realms. Likewise, much of *MND*'s power comes from Shakespeare's seemingly effortless combination of spiritual and "mortal" realms, the combination of which in the imagination creates the illusion necessary for theater, art, and literature.

Like Puck and Ariel, art is real but also imaginative, formal but also insubstantial; this is an essential contradiction of art, and one of the profound truths of the play and Gaiman's series. The creation of art also involves hard work; tellingly, *MND* ends with an image of the faerie Puck sweeping out the house. Although I noted earlier that *MND* and *The Tempest* were noteworthy choices because of their lack of sources, both plays, *MND* in particular, are the result of a complex weaving of various myths, which in the case of *MND* include Greek myths, Ovidian myths and traditional English fables and myths. (Is it an accident that Bottom is weaver by trade? And Snug a "joiner"?) By these acts of weaving and joining together various myths, of treating them as material, and then by bringing them alive on stage, these two plays represent the act of representation which is the "work" of all good theater. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains a compendium of mythic/fictional characters taken from the world of the imagination and which influence the waking "real" world; much as Pirandello used theater to negotiate between the real and the imagined, with the stage itself becoming a symbol for this negotiation, Shakespeare reminds us that *all* the world, both the corporeal and the spiritual, is a stage. In addition to the Sandman series, comics roughly contemporary to it such as *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* revitalized older myths and stories from the D.C. Universe, among other sources, and placed them in new, more "realistic" settings. In all of these examples, myths create myths—the origin of literature and Gaiman's Sandman is as unsubstantial as a dream, yet behind them is the controlling hand of the artist which gives them the substance and "reality" necessary for artistic creation. Comics "materialize" myth through the reappropriation of those myths and through the combination of words and pictures. As Theseus notes near the end of *MND*, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" (V.1.7-8). As *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* show, Shakespeare's greatest legacy is his ability to bring his illusions, dreams, and art back to reality, and to bring reality back to illusions, dreams, and art. As Giuseppe Mazzotta notes of Prospero's closing words in the epilogue of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare "sees unreality lying at the heart of making and as the outcome of making. If we are chameleons who become all we touch, then, we may really be nothing of our own" (74).

WORKS CITED

- Bender, Hy. *The Sandman Companion*. New York: Vertigo, 1999.
- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Dent, Robert. "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.2 (1964): 115-29.
- Gaiman, Neil. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *The Sandman: Dream Country*. New York: DC Comics, 1991. (s.p.; page references interpolated for this section)
- . "Men of Good Fortune." *The Sandman: The Doll's House*. New York: DC Comics, 1995. 115-138.
- . "*The Tempest*." *The Sandman: The Wake*. New York: DC Comics, 1996. 147-184.
- Gosson, Stephen. *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*. New York: Johnson Reprint Company, Reprinted 1972.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. [Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*]. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997. 805-813.
- Howard, Jean. "Renaissance Antitheatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*. Ed. Jean Howard and Marion O'Connor. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Lancaster, Kurt. "Neil Gaiman's '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*': Shakespeare Integrated into Popular Culture." *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23.3 (2000) Fall: 69-77 .
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. *Cosmopoiesis: The Renaissance Experiment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993.
- Montrose, Louis Adrian. "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture." *Representations* 2 (1983): 61-94.
- Moore, Alan. *Black Dossier*. La Jolla: America's Best Comics, 2008.
- Pirandello, Luigi. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. New York: Signet, 1998.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans et. al. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 256-283.
- . *Romeo and Juliet*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans et. al. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1104-1145.
- . *The Tempest*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans et. al. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1661-1688.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957.



Mythopoeic Society Membership & Subscription Form

The Mythopoeic Society is a non-profit international literary and educational organization for the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantasy and mythic literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. The word "mythopoeic" (myth-oh-PAY-ik or myth-oh-PEE-ic), meaning "mythmaking" or "productive of myth", fits well the fictional and mythic works of the three authors, who were prominent members of an informal Oxford literary circle (1930s-1950s) known as the Inklings. Members of the Mythopoeic Society include scholars, writers, and readers of mythic and fantasy literature, scattered across the United States and around the world. The Society sponsors the annual Mythopoeic Conferences (Mythcons), Discussion Groups and Special Interest Groups, the Mythopoeic Awards, The Mythopoeic Press, and three periodical publications. See our web site at <http://www.mythsoc.org/>.

Membership in the Society entitles the member to:

- subscribe to any of the Society's periodical publications at member rates
- member rates on Mythcon registration
- a copy of the annual report and of the Society directory, *Mything Persons*
- an attractive membership card

Membership/Address Information

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State/Province: _____

Country: _____

Zip + 4: _____

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Other information: _____

_____ Mythopoeic Society membership (\$10/year)

_____ Additional members at same address (\$5/year each)

_____ **TOTAL**

(see other order forms in this issue for *Mythprint* and *Mythlore* subscriptions)

Check Money Order Discover® Card (enter info below)

Note: A phone # is required above for credit card orders in case of problems

Discover® Card # _____ Expiration Date: _____

Signature (for Discover® Card Only): _____

Send to: The Mythopoeic Society Orders Department

920 N. Atlantic Blvd. #E
Alhambra, CA 91801, USA