William Shakespeare,  
*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c. 1595/1596)

Early Modern Drama, the Play-within-the Play and Dramatic Communication
Introduction

Our text: William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1595/96)

- Romantic comedy
- First published as Q1 in 1601
- First Folio 1623
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Characters

Athens

Theseus, Duke of Athens
Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, betrothed to Theseus
Egeus, father of Hermia
Lysander, in love with Hermia
Demetrius, preferred as match for Hermia by Egeus
Hermia, in love with Lysander
Helena, in love with Demetrius
Philostrate, Master of the Revels at Theseus‘ court
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Characters

Fairies

Oberon, King of the Fairies
Titania, Queen of the Fairies
Puck / Robin Goodfellow, Oberon’s jester and attendant
Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed, Fairies attending Titania
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Characters

Peter Quince, carpenter (Prologue)
Nick Bottom, weaver (Pyramus)
Francis Flute, bellows-mender (Thisbe)
Tom Snout, tinker (Wall)
Robin Starveling, tailor (Moonshine)
Snug, joiner (Lion)
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Sources

various; from antiquity, middle ages, and contemporary

Apuleius, The Golden Ass
Ovid’s Metamorphoses (Pyramus and Thisbe)
Geoffrey Chaucer, The Knight’s Tale
John Lyly’s Galathea (?1585; printed 1592)
...

Folklore: Puck/Hobgoblin
Contents of today’s lecture:

→ Early modern theatre / the early modern stage

→ Dramatic genres

→ The Play-within-the-Play

→ Dramatic communication
1. Early Modern Drama

1.1 Early Modern Theatre(s)

Shakespeare’s Globe and London

Theatres in the 16th and 17th century
1. Early Modern Drama

1.2 Stage Forms

Greek Theatre:

Medieval Stage:
1. Early Modern Drama

1.2 Stage Forms

Shakespeare’s Theatre:

Picture-Frame Stage:

- upstage
- downstage
- center stage
- forestage
- audience
- ramp
- pit
- curtain
1. Early Modern Drama

1.2 Stage Forms

Word Scenery / Implicit Stage Directions

Quince. [...] I am to entreat you [...] to con them [the lines of the play] by tomorrow night, and meet me in the palace wood, a mile without the town, by moonlight.

(MND 1.2.78-81)
1. Early Modern Drama

1.3 Dramatic Genres

→ Aristotle’s *Poetics*

**Comedy:**
- realm of the ordinary, not elevated life
- more ‘realistic’ than tragedy, a mirror of manners
- main subjects: not existential questions or the fate of man, but everyday problems and human frailty and vices
- didactic intent
- good ending is typical for the comedy (often as poetic justice, i.e. the rewarding of good and the punishing of bad characters)
1. Early Modern Drama

1.3 Dramatic Genres

→ Aristotle’s *Poetics*

“Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete, and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions. (By ‘language made pleasurable’ I mean that which possesses rhythm and melody, i.e. song. By the separation of species I mean that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song.)”

1. Early Modern Drama

1.3 Dramatic Genres

→ Aristotle’s *Poetics*: Tragedy

- emphasis on **effects** of the audience:
  - **catharsis** (= purgation)

- **eleos & phobos** (= pity & fear), caused by the fate of the tragic hero (and his **hamartia**= tragic flaw)
1. Early Modern Drama

1.3 Dramatic Genres

**Tragicomedy**

Guarini: *Il Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1601); Fletcher’s adaptation of Guarini’s *Il Pastor Fido* to the English stage (1609-10)

A tragie-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie.

(Fletcher, Preface)
1. Early Modern Drama

1.3 Dramatic Genres

→ Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (1612)

“Tragedies and Comedies, saith Donatus, had their beginning à rebus diuinis, from diuine sacrifices, they differ thus: In Comedies, *turbulenta prima, tranquilla ultima*, In Tragedyes, *tranquilla prima, turbulenta ultima*, Comedies begin in trouble, and end in peace; tragedies begin in calmes, and end in tempest. [...] Cicero saith, a Comedy is the imitation of life, the glasse of custome, and the image of truth [...]”

1. Early Modern Drama: 
All the World’s a Stage – *Theatrum mundi*

*Duke Senior.* Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy. 
This wide and universal theatre 
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene 
Wherein we play in.  
*Jaques.* All the world’s a stage, 
And all the men and women merely players. 
They have their exists and their entrances, 
And one man in his time plays many parts, 
His acts being seven ages. […]

*(As You Like It 2.7.137-44)*
2. The Play-within-the-Play

Quince. Is all our company here?
Bottom. You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip.
Quince. Here is the scroll of every man’s name which is thought fit through all Athens to play in our interlude before the Duke and the Duchess on his wedding day at night.
Bottom. First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors; and so grow to a point.
Quince. Marry, our play is ‘The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe.’
Bottom. A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry. Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll. Masters, spread yourselves.

(1.2.1-13)
Quince. Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver?
Bottom. Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.
Quince. You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.
Bottom. What is Pyramus? A lover or a tyrant?
Quince. A lover that kills himself, most gallant, for love.
Bottom. That will as some tears in the true performing of it. If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes: I will move storms, I will condole, in some measure. To the rest – yet my chief humour is for a tyrant. […]
Quince. Francis Flute, the bellows-mender? […] Flute, you must take Thisbe on you.
Flute. What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?
Quince. It is the lady that Pyramus must love.
Flute. Nay, faith, let not me play a woman: I have a beard coming.
Quince. That’s all one: you shall play it in a mask, and you may speak as small as you will.

(1.2.14-41)
Bottom. And I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe, too. I’ll speak in a monstrous little voice: ‘Thisne, Thisne!’ – ‘Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear; thy Thisbe dear, and lady dear. […]

Snug. Have you the lion’s part written? Pray you, if it be, give it me; for I am slow of study.

Quince. You may do it extempore; for it is nothing but roaring.

Bottom. Let me play the lion too. I will roar that I will do any man’s heart good to hear me. I will roar that I will make the Duke say ‘Let him roar again, let him roar again!’

Quince. And you should do it too terribly, you would fright the Duchess and the ladies that they would shrink; and that were enough to hang us all. […]

Bottom. I grant you, friends, if you should fright the ladies out of their wits they would have no more discretion but to hang us; but I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you and ’twere any nightingale.

(1.2.42-67)
2. The Play-within-the-Play: Continued (3.1)

Bottom. Are we all met?
Quince. Pat, pat; and here’s a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring house, and we will do it in action as we will before the Duke.
Bottom. Peter Quince!
Quince. What sayest thou, bully Bottom?
Bottom. There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself, which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?
Snout. By'r larkin, a parlous fear!
Snarveling. I believe we must leave the killing out, when all is done.
Bottom. Not a whit; I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver: this will put them out of fear.
Snout. Will not the ladies be afeard of the lion?
Starveling. I fear it, I promise you.
Bottom. Masters, you ought to consider with yourself, to bring in (God shield us!) a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing; for there is not a more fearful wildfowl than your lion living; and we ought to look to’t.
Snout. Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion. […]
Quince. Well, it shall be so. But there is two hard things: that is, to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for, you know, Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight.
Snug. Doth the moon shine that night we play our play?
Bottom. A calendar, a calendar! Look in the almanac – find out moonshine, find out moonshine!
Quince. Yes, it doth shine that night.
Bottom. Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we ply, open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.
Quince. Ay; or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present the person of Moonshine. […]
Bottom. Thisbe, the flowers of odious savours sweet–
Quince. Odours – ‘odorous’!
[...]
Flute. [...]
I’ll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny’s tomb –
Quince. ‘Ninus’ tomb,’ man! (3.1.65-80)
2. The Play-within-the-Play: The Performance (5.1)

Quince. If we offend, it is with our good will. 
That you should think, we come not to offend,
But with good will. To show our simple skill,
That is the true beginning of our end.
Consider then, we come but in despite.
We do not come as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight,
We are not here. That you should here repent you,
The actors are at hand; and by their show
You shall know all that you are like to know.

(5.1.108-18)
Quince (as Prologue). Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show,  
But wonder on, till truth make all things plain.  
This man is Pyramus, if you would know;  
This beauteous lady Thisbe is, certain.  
This man with lime and rough-cast doth present  
Wall, that vile wall which did these lovers sunder;  
And through Wall’s chink, poor souls, they are content  
To whisper – at the which let no man wonder.  
This man with lanthorn, dog, and bush of thorn,  
Presenteth Moonshine; for, if you will know,  
By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn  
To meet at Ninus’ tomb, there, there to woo.  
This grisly beast, which Lion hight by name,  
Thy trustly Thisbe, coming first by night,  
Did scare away, or rather did affright;
And as she fled, her mantle did she fall,
Which Lion vile with bloody mouth did stain.
Anon comes Pyramus, sweet youth and tall,
And finds his trusty Thisbe’s mantle slain;
Whereat with blade, with bloody, blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast;
And Thisbe, tarrying in mulberry shade,
His dagger drew, and died. For all the rest,
Let Lion, Moonshine, Wall, and lovers twain,
At large discourse, where here they do remain.

(5.1.126-50)
3. Dramatic Communication

Levels of Communication

**internal**: communication within the play, between the actors on the stage → monologue / soliloquy, dialogue
- monologue: spoken by one character
- soliloquy: spoken by one character who is alone on stage
- dialogue: spoken by at least two characters who communicate with each other

**external**: between author and audience → e.g. dramatic irony

“Epic” elements of dramatic communication:
- prologue, epilogue, report and aside
3. Dramatic Communication

Internal communication:

Egeus. Happy be Theseus, our renownèd Duke!
Theseus. Thanks good Egeus. What’s the news with thee?
Egeus. Full of vexation come I, with complaint
Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
Stand forth, Demetrius! – My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry her.
Stand forth, Lysander! – And my gracious Duke,
This man hath bewitched the bosom of my child.
[...]
Theseus. What say you, Hermia? Be advised, fair maid. To you your father should be as a god, One that composed your beauties; yea, and one To whom you are but as a form in wax By him imprinted, and within his power To leave the figure, or disfigure it. Demetrius is a worthy gentleman. Hermia. So is Lysander. Theseus. In himself he is; But in this kind, wanting your father's voice, The other must be held the worthier. Hermia. I would my father looked but with my eyes. (1.1.20-56)
3. Dramatic Communication

External communication level:

Quince. Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated!
Bottom. I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could; […]

(3.1.98-100)

→ dramatic irony
3. Dramatic Communication

External communication level:

Oberon. [...]  
Then crush this herb into Lysander’s eye,  
Whose liquor hath this virtuous property,  
To take from thence all error with his might,  
And make his eyeballs roll with wonted sight.  
When they next wake, all this derision  
Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision,  
[...]  

(3.2.366-71)
3. Dramatic Communication

Prologue:
- at the beginning of a play
- most often spoken as a monologue

Aside:
- monological: character voices a thought, only audience understands;
- dialogical: characters converse in whispers, unnoticed by other characters;
- aside ad spectatores: comment directly addressed to audience
3. Dramatic Communication

Epilogue:
- an “afterspeech”
- mostly spoken by one of the characters (more rare: several characters)
- addressed to the audience
- concludes the play and can contain an apology, a final remark, a summary, the request for applause, thanks to the audience for coming, thanks to those who supported the audience, a prayer for the queen (in Elizabethan drama).
3. Dramatic Communication: Puck’s Epilogue

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended:
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear;
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend;
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to ’scape the serpent’s tongue
We will make amends ere long,
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.  (5.1.401-16)
Conclusion

- early modern theatre is based on theatrical conventions and a stage that are different from the one we commonly know today. The apron stage allows for much more interaction with the audience than the picture-frame stage;

- the play-within-the-play reminds us of the fact that all theatre is illusion but also of the differences in quality of acting; moreover, it can function as a mirror of the action and/or a self-reflexive, metatheatrical comment;

- in Early Modern theatre, women were not allowed on stage, a fact which Shakespeare exploited for comic effects in role-play;

- dramatic communication is not restricted to monologue and dialogue, but various levels of communication interact with each other, and dramatic irony as well as asides and other epic elements (i.e. the communication with the audience) take place on a level that does not concern the communication of the actors that are onstage.