

The Hobbit *and* A Midsummer Night's Dream

by Lisa Hopkins

One of the distinguishing features of *The Hobbit* is its distinctive and strongly marked quality of Englishness. This is obviously due partly to the names of people and places who make up the Shire - Bilbo Baggins and Hobbiton, for instance - but it may also be reinforced in the minds of the book's readers by its sustained pattern of reference to one of the most famous plays in the English dramatic tradition, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a work which, like *The Hobbit*, is nominally set in distant lands (the action of the play is supposed to take place in Athens), but which nevertheless owes its atmosphere and inspiration very clearly to the spirit of an English wood, with its Robin Goodfellow playing tricks on country housewives and the references it seems to contain to the famous festivities at Kenilworth in 1575, when Queen Elizabeth was entertained by the Earl of Leicester.¹

A Midsummer Night's Dream is evoked at a very early stage in the story, when Bilbo reminisces to Gandalf about those 'peculiarly excellent fireworks' which Old Took used to have on Midsummer's Eve, which 'used to go up like great lilies and snapdragons and laburnums of fire and hang in the twilight all evening!'² This is quite an important passage for creating the character of Bilbo and for making credible the adventures which he is later to have - as the narrator comments, 'You will notice already that Mr. Baggins was not quite so prosy as he liked to believe, also that he was very fond of flowers' - and it also serves a third purpose, that of establishing the mood of the story. For however difficult and dangerous Bilbo's position may at times appear to him, and despite the elegiac note sounded at the end of the book by the deaths of Thorin, Fili and Kill, this is predominantly a safe, happy tale, where the characters are neither playing for such great stakes as in *The Lord of the*

Rings nor are in such deadly peril. For much of the time Bilbo and his dwarvish companions are being watched over by benevolent, magical figures like Beorn and Gandalf, just as the young Athenian lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however confused they may feel, are actually under the benign and powerful guardianship of Oberon. It is appropriate, then, that Bilbo should at such an early stage of his adventures evoke the world of benevolent fairytale, with his memories of Gandalf as 'the fellow who used to tell such wonderful tales at parties, about dragons and goblins and giants and the rescue of princesses and the luck of widows' sons', and with his reference to the magical time of midsummer.³

The exciting but ultimately safe and controlled world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is further evoked by the Hobbit's and the dwarves' encounter with the trolls. This is potentially a very unpleasant situation; Gandalf has disappeared, apparently leaving them in the lurch, and trolls are by no means renowned for the pleasantness of their habits. Just when things appear most difficult, however, and all the dwarves are packed up in sacks waiting to be killed and eaten, they are saved in the nick of time by the unexpected return and timely intervention of Gandalf. The plan which Gandalf adopts for their release is both simple and ingenious: by imitating the voices of the trolls, he will stir up a quarrel amongst them, and then prolong the argument until dawn arrives to turn them to stone. The trolls fall for it completely and the plan is a complete success. But however laudable Gandalf's scheme may be, it is not an original one. It is, in fact, the same scheme adopted by Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to mislead and confuse the quarrelling lovers, as can be seen in the following extract from the play:

LYSANDER

Where art thou, proud Demetrius? Speak thou now.

PUCK (in Demetrius' voice)

Here, villain, drawn and ready! Where art thou?

LYSANDER

I will be with thee straight.

PUCK (in Demetrius' voice)

Follow me then

To plainer ground.

(Exit Lysander. Enter Demetrius)

DEMETRIUS

Lysander, speak again.

Thou runaway, thou coward, art thou fled?

Speak. In some bush? Where dost thou hide thy head?

PUCK (in Lysander's voice)

Thou coward, art thou bragging to the stars,

Telling the bushes that thou lookst for wars,

And wilt not come? Come, recreant. Come, thou child,

I'll whip thee with a rod. He is defiled

That draws a sword on thee.

DEMETRIUS

Yea, art thou there?

PUCK (in Lysander's voice)

Follow my voice. We'll try no manhood here.

(Exeunt Puck and Demetrius)

(III.2.401-412)

Although Puck's purpose here is actually rather different from Gandalf's - he is in fact trying to prevent the two from quarrelling by misleading each of them about the whereabouts of the other - his technique is exactly similar. Once again, therefore, a passage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* informs a passage in *The Hobbit*, adding resonance and force.

Perhaps the spirit of the play becomes strongest of all, however, after the *Hobbit* and the dwarves have encountered Beorn and begin to turn their faces towards the terrible prospect of Mirkwood. The young lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all flee from the ordered, rational city-state of Athens, where law, personified by the patriarchal Theseus and Egeus, reigns supreme, and take refuge in the wood, where the logical daylight world they have so far inhabited gives place to something very different, darkness, magic, and emotional and physical transformations: Demetrius falls out of love with Hermia and back in love with Helena; Bottom acquires an

ass's head instead of his own; and even the cool, logical Theseus - he who later in the play says that he does not believe in 'antique fables, nor these fairy toys' (V.1.3) - undergoes a kind of transformation, for the limited number of actors in Shakespeare's own day, and directorial choice since, has created a strong theatrical tradition of the same actor playing Theseus and Oberon, while the same actress doubles Hippolyta and Titania.

There are transformations too in *The Hobbit* - literal in the case of the shape-shifting Beorn, who, like the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one thing by day and quite another by night; and less outwardly obvious, but quite as marked, in the character of Bilbo, who enters Mirkwood as a frightened follower and emerges from it as a decisive and resourceful leader. If the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be read as a potent symbol of the irrational and subconscious, the dream-world where problems are resolved and the deepest levels of the personality come into play, then surely Mirkwood, too, functions on such a symbolic level. And just as the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* positions its aristocratic lovers in the middle of three levels of characters - the lowly mechanicals, who are beneath them, and the powerful fairies, who are above them - so too Bilbo finds himself surrounded by creatures of a lower order of intelligence and morality, the spiders, and by the elves, who, like the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are certainly prone to some very human-seeming failings, but are also possessed of powers and strength considerably exceeding his own.⁴ Thus in both works the glamour of contact with the more-than-natural is briefly allowed to touch on ordinary life, but the value and attraction of ordinariness are also powerfully felt.

That ordinariness is powerfully reasserted when, at the end of the story, Bilbo returns to his hobbit-hole just in time to abort the auction of his possessions which is about to take place. Before the final close of his adventures, however, he has had one more peep at the fairytale world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when, on his arrival in Rivendell, the elves sing him a lullaby:

...Lullaby! Lullaby! Alder and Willow!
Sigh no more Pine, till the wind of the
morn!

Fall Moon! Dark be the land!
Hush! Hush! Oak, Ash and Thorn!
Hushed be all water, till dawn is at hand!
(p.273)

In something of the same way, the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sing to their mistress Titania 'So good night, with lullaby'(II.2.19), and, at the end of the play, sing prophecies of a happy future to the sleeping mortal couples - another small similarity to pull still closer together these two works which bring into such close conjunction the world of the magical with the world of the normal.⁵

NOTES

1. At II.II.148-154 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon tells Puck:
Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music?
[*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Stanley Wells (Penguin, 1967), from which all future quotations from this play will be taken].

This is taken by scholars to be a description of certain features of the Kenilworth entertainments, and a compliment to Queen Elizabeth is therefore seen in the lines with which Oberon continues:
That very time I saw - but thou couldst not -
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his loveshaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed on
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
(II.I.156-184)

2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Allen & Unwin, 1937; 2nd ed. reprinted 1968), p.5. All future quotations from *The Hobbit* will be from this edition.

3. As well as the time of year - Midsummer's Eve, a time of high magic in Celtic and other religious traditions - this reference of Bilbo's to Old Took's parties might also call up for those acquainted with the details of the Kenilworth festivities thoughts of the splendid firework displays which formed an

integral part of them, and thus serve further to strengthen the association between this passage and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

4. Another link between the worlds of the two woods is also provided by the fact that the mortals in one, and the elves in the other, both hunt (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV.II.102-128; *The Hobbit*, p.134). It may also be relevant here to remember that in C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* it is a wood that gives access to different worlds and experiences; and if Beorn's shape-shifting seems faintly reminiscent of Bottom's transformation, there is a much stronger and more definite parallel in Lewis's *A Horse and His Boy*, where Rabadash too finds himself turned into a donkey as a punishment for his ridiculousness. Thus references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be detected in the work of more than one of the Inklings.

5. There are also occasional reminiscences in *The Hobbit* of another Shakespeare play, *The Tempest*. Certainly Bilbo's reflection on the dwarves' introduction to Beorn, that 'the interruptions had really made Beorn more interested in the story' (p.114), is strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare's technique in having Prospero's long narrative explanation to Miranda repeatedly interrupted in order to sharpen the audience's interest, while Gandalf himself is not unlike Prospero in powers of illusion, and there is also a strong similarity between Caliban's famous 'when I waked / I cried to dream again' (III.2.143-4) and Bumbur weeping from his disappointment at waking from the beautiful dream he was having after he fell into the enchanted stream in Mirkwood (p.138). Ariel, too, manifests himself as an invisible voice to various of the visitors to the island, just as Bilbo is experienced by the spiders in Mirkwood as a disembodied voice. These references to another of Shakespeare's plays further enhance the atmosphere of magic and illusion.

