THESEUS AND THE LABYRINTH: MYTHICAL SPACE IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

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Abstract: *This essay explores the concept of "mythical space" (Tuan 85) in Shakespeare's* A Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly through the character of Theseus, drawing on cultural geographer's Y-Fu Tuan's ideas about mythical space, which refers to areas of imperfect knowledge and localized values. I argue that Shakespeare subverts the traditional heroic image of Theseus, highlighting his treachery and duplicity. The play distorts classical mythology to create a dream-like theatrical experience, using the forest as a symbolic labyrinth that mirrors the complexities of human relationships and emotions. Theseus's character is contrasted with his classical portrayal as a just ruler, showing him instead as a figure associated with betrayal and infidelity. The interplay between Athens and the enchanted forest creates a dynamic contrast that drives the dramatic action. Rather than being a mere reflection of the mythological figure of Theseus, Shakespeare's play creates mythical spaces related to other classical figures to subvert the traditional image of Theseus as a founder of cities and suggest an emotional space of betrayal and dissension.*

Keywords: *labyrinth;* A Midsummer Night's Dream*; mythical space; theatrical experience; Theseus;*

The concept of "mythical space" (Tuan 85) has been developed by cultural geographer Y-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977). According to Tuan, "Myth is often contrasted with reality. Myths flourish in the absence of precise knowledge. Thus, in the past, Western man believed in the existence of the Isles of the Blest,[1] Paradise,[2] the Northwest

[1] The Isles of the Blest is a notion rooted in ancient Greek mythology. This concept of an afterlife paradise was reserved for the souls of heroes and the virtuous who led exemplary lives. Lush, verdant landscapes, tranquil waters, and eternal contentment imagine a celestial Eden for those who achieved greatness. The Isles of the Blest can be seen as an archetype of the ultimate utopia, a reflection of human aspirations for perfection and eternal happiness.

[2] The concept of Paradise as a metaphoric place has been a powerful symbol throughout various cultures. Paradise is often depicted as an idealized space of perfection, bliss, and harmony, unattainable in mundane reality but achievable in the afterlife or through spiritual transcendence.

Passage,[3] and Terra Australis.[4] Now he no longer does. Myths are not, however, a thing of the past, for human understanding remains limited" (85). Tuan refers to geographical myths, inspired from the classical, biblical, and Renaissance tradition of geographic mobility. Tuan considers that such geographic knowledge is "collective" (85) and it is "embedded in the great encyclopedias and in the works of geography" (85). Tuan distinguishes between two areas of mythical space: one that is "a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known" (86), and another as "the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities" (86). Tuan explains the persistence of these mythical spaces because "there will always be areas of the hazily known and of the unknown" (86).

Indeed, as I see it, the concept of "mythical space" can be applied to Shakespeare's representations of classical mythology, when referring not only to actual ancient spaces represented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also to figures from classical mythology related to these spaces, such as Theseus. The novelty of this approach lies in the dramatic perception and creation of space in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the fairy forest as labyrinth, the distant space of India, the Amazons' space in ancient Scythia, ancient Greece, Crete and the labyrinth, the island of Naxos through Ariadne's story, as well as the watery elements, brook, river, sea, fountain); all these spaces are dramatically summoned through the figure of Theseus. I argue that the heroic figure of Theseus in Shakespeare's comedy is radically subverted, foregrounding the classical hero's treachery and duplicity, rather than the image of a progenitor of empire and culture, the founder of cities and the impartial ruler. In this way, the play distances itself from other representations of the classical figure of Theseus, which were quite prominent in Shakespeare's time, such as paintings, poems and classical narratives. Through the mythical space of the labyrinth—paradoxically associated with the rational figure of Theseus in the comedy—Shakespeare displaces the

[3] The Northwest Passage is a sea route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the Arctic Ocean, along the northern coast of North America. Historically, it was sought by explorers as a potential trade route that could shorten the journey between Europe and Asia. The quest for the Northwest Passage has been fraught with challenges because of the harsh Arctic climate and ice-covered waters. Despite the dangers, many explorers embarked on perilous journeys in search of this elusive route.

[4] Terra Australis, also known as Terra Australis Incognita, is a hypothetical continent that appeared on European maps from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The term "Terra Australis" means "Southern Land" in Latin. It was believed to exist in the southern hemisphere as a massive landmass balancing the known continents in the northern hemisphere. The idea of Terra Australis originated from ancient Greek philosophers and geographers, who theorized that there must be a large landmass in the southern hemisphere to balance the northern continents. This concept persisted for centuries and fuelled many exploratory missions.

traditional myth by replacing it with a mock-heroic retelling of Theseus's mythological character, suitable for a comedy. Moreover, the mythical space summoned in the minds of the audience through the association of Theseus with the labyrinth of the mind is one of disorder and confusion, rather than order and rationality. In this way, the comedy creates a distorted mythical space of irrationality and fear by alluding to a classical hero who is traditionally connected to rationality and social order.

Spaces and figures inspired from classical mythology are radically distorted in Shakespeare's comedy in order to suggest mythical space, the vicissitudes of perception from various perspectives, and the dream-like quality of theatrical performance. In "*A Midsummer Night's Dream:* Anamorphism and Theseus' Dream" (1991), James L. Calderwood applies the concept of anamorphism from Renaissance painting to Shakespeare's representation of the figure of Theseus, observing that

> We don't have to change seats during a performance to find the proper anamorphic angle; Shakespeare does our moving for us by making the 'seen'—that is, the scene—change, in effect presenting us with a painting in three panels. First, he gives us a straight-on look at Athens, then shifts our perspective by obliging us to consider the forest, then brings Athens back in the third panel and says, 'Look again.' (410)

As Calderwood continues, "The anamorphic effect arises from the fact that the forest world, though not exactly a grinning skull lying at the base of Theseus' palace, is a kind of crazed mirror of the Athenian world" (410). Indeed, the space of the woods and the space of Athens look as if they were viewed through the perspective of a distorted mirror, so that figures from classical mythology are radically malformed.

Space is perceived differently in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as the play creates images that appear altered or unrecognizable from most vantage points, but come into focus when reflected in a specific surface, such as the curved mirror or lens of different perceptions and interpretations. The curved lens is the crystalline lens of classical mythology, which helps audiences see figures of ancient heroes—such as Theseus—at once distorted and rightly configured in the context of the play. Moreover, the chaotic fairyland place has the property of further distorting the rational space of Athens in the play to the point that it becomes unrecognizable from what audiences might know from ancient and Renaissance texts of classical mythology and history.

A counterpart of Theseus's mythological figure might be Bottom, with his monstrous asinine transformation, inspired from another classical source, Apuleius's *Golden Ass*. In the essay entitled "Asinine Heroism and the Mediation of Empire in Chaucer, Marlowe, and Shakespeare" (2020), Lauren Cressler reframes the debate concerning which classical sources Shakespeare consulted and argues that Shakespeare's allusions to classical heroes (Theseus and Aeneas) are inspired from vernacular literature rather than classical texts. As Cressler observes, Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and Shakespeare's

A Midsummer Night's Dream "portray the classical hero model as entirely faithless and even asinine, using allusions to Chaucer to foreground the damage wrought by colonial imperatives embodied in Theseus and Aeneas, the mythic founders of Athens and Rome" (323). As Cressler further explains, "Shakespeare extricates the dramaturgy of the epic from its ideology and suggests that asinine heroism might repair the damage done by classical heroes" (323). As Cressler notes, "By selecting micronarratives … that characterize Theseus unfavorably, *MND* follows vernacular sources to suggest a version of the Athenian duke that contradicts his presumed heroism" (322-323). From this critical perspective, it is easier to understand the dramatic function of the asinine figure of Nick Bottom, who interprets a classical hero (Pyramus) in Shakespeare's play, but who fails lamentably in a tragedy that looks like a comedy in the hands of the mechanicals troupe of amateur actors.

In ancient mythology and history, Theseus is known as a lawgiver and equitable founder and ruler of Athens. For example, in Plutarch's "Life of Theseus," from *The Liues of the noble Grecians and Romaines* (1603),[5] translated by Thomas North, the author compares Theseus to Romulus, the founder of Rome: "The one of them built Rome, and the other the citie of Athens, two of the most noble cities of the world" (Plutarch 2). Plutarch also associates Theseus to Hercules, saying that the Athenian hero was a great admirer of Hercules: "The wonderfull admiration which Theseus had for Hercules courage made him in the night that he neuer dreamed but of his noble actes and doings, and in the daytime, pricked forwards with emulation and enuie of his glory, he determined with himselfe one day to do the like" (Plutarch 4). The Greek historiographer associates Theseus with the great heroes of the classical world, whose actions are exemplary deeds of bravery, justice, and constitutional government.

The image of the just ruler, however, is drastically distorted in Shakespeare's comedy. In "Equity and the Problem of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Or, the Ancient Constitution in Ancient Athens" (2014), Peter C. Herman demonstrates that the problem of law and equity participates in a web of disturbing resonances that reinforce each other and further trouble the play's performance of comic closure. As Herman observes,

> Shakespeare situates the play in ancient Athens, a city commonly associated almost as much as ancient Rome in the early modern political imaginary with republicanism, which implies a polity governed by law rather than the ruler's will. Theseus is not just the city's leader; as we will see, he founded the city using explicitly constitutionalist principles. (Herman 5)

[5] All references to Plutarch's *The Liues of the noble Grecians and Romaines* are to the 1603 edition translated by Thomas North. Page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

However, Shakespeare does not necessarily make the play historically accurate. For example, there are no dukes in ancient Athens, and Theseus bends the law at the end of the play, when he allows Hermia to marry Lysander, against her father's will and the law of Athens.

A summary of Theseus's myth[6] would help negotiate the close relationship between history, archaeology, poetry, and the visual dimension in the delineation of the mythical components of Theseus's story. Theseus was the son of Aegeus, the king of Athens, and Aethra. Aegeus left a pair of sandals and a sword under a huge rock for Theseus to retrieve once he grew strong enough. This act symbolized his future claim to the throne of Athens. Upon reaching adolescence and retrieving the items left by his father, Theseus embarked on a perilous journey to Athens. The road was fraught with danger, with notorious bandits like Procrustes, Sciron, and others, whom he defeated, showcasing his bravery and strength. One of Theseus' most famous exploits was his journey to Crete to slay the Minotaur, a monstrous creature, half-man, half-bull, residing in the Labyrinth constructed by Daedalus. With the help of Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, who gave him a ball of thread to navigate the maze, Theseus managed to slay the Minotaur and lead the Athenian youths to safety. Eventually Theseus became the king of Athens, bringing reforms and establishing the city as a significant power in Greece. His leadership was marked by wisdom and courage. Despite his heroic deeds, Theseus' life was marked by tragedy and misfortunes in his later years. He suffered personal losses and, in some versions of the myth, met an untimely death.

Theseus' main achievement in classical mythology is connected with the defeat of the Minotaur and finding his way out of the labyrinth, with the help of Ariadne. According to the *Handbook of Classical Mythology* (2004), King Minos' labyrinth in Crete was "a maze in which it was impossible for a person, once he had entered it, to find the exit" (Hansen 300). The labyrinth in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not a literal one but serves as a metaphor for the complex and intertwined relationships and events in the play, as well as a spatial metaphor for the labyrinth of the mind. The forest where much of the action takes place acts as a symbolic maze, where characters are lost, confused, and find themselves in bewildering situations. It represents the journey of self-discovery and the chaotic, often unpredictable nature of love and dreams. In this magical setting of the forest/maze, the characters navigate

[6] In *Greek Myth* (2021), classical scholar Lowell Edmunds considers the use of vase painting and sculpture in the Athenian appropriation of Theseus as their national hero and compares the evidence for the visual media with the evidence for Theseus in verse to conclude that "[t]he truism concerning the priority of poetry to art does not hold up in the case of Theseus" (14). Edmunds refers to classical poetry and drama (Homer, Ovid, Euripides, etc.), but my interpretation of Theseus's myth in Shakespeare's play also proves this point, because the theatre is also visual art, combined with poetry, so both forms of media are present in the representation of this controversial mythological character.

their emotions, desires, and misunderstandings, ultimately finding resolution and harmony. Thus, the labyrinth of the forest, like Dedalus' labyrinth, helps underscore themes of transformation, enchantment, and the thin line between reality and fantasy, through which audiences can explore the complexities of human relationships.

The maze of the mind and imagination is described by Titania in a long speech (2.1.84-120),[7] when she illustrates the disorder of nature generated by the quarrel of the fairy couple. As Titania and Oberon are Athenian counterparts of Hippolyta and Theseus in the fairy world, and the space of the woods near Athens is the imaginary world of illusion, as opposed to the rational city of Athens, the disorder in nature described by Titania in her speech represents the turmoil of the mind when there is no harmony in the couple. Titania accuses Oberon of infidelity, describing how he had "stolen away from Fairyland / And in the shape of Corin sat all day / Playing on pipes of corn and versing love / To amorous Phillida" (2.1.67-70). It seems that the Fairyland and the metaphoric space of Greek mythology are spatial environments to and from which the play's characters can move freely by means of the communicative capacity of imagination.[8] Moreover, Oberon took the shape of Corin, which means that he played the role of the shepherd with whom Phillida was in love. This underscores the metatheatrical aspect of Shakespeare's play.

In the article entitled "'How easy is a bush supposed a bear?': Differentiating Imaginative Production in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2015), Adam Rzepka discusses Theseus' account of the tricks of imagination (5.1.18), suggesting that

> For Theseus, this comprehensive dismissal of imaginative apprehension is an act of sovereignty over both the psychological faculties of his wayward subjects and, because it folds in the poet with the lover and the madman, the production of poetic images. (308)

[7] References to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are keyed to the Folger Digital Texts, edited by Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, Shakespeare's works | Folger Shakespeare Library.

[8] In the introduction to *Phantasmatic Shakespeare: Imagination in the Age of Early Modern Science* (2018), Suparna Roychoudhury explores Shakespeare's representations of imagination within the context of early modern science and psychology, explaining how Shakespeare's plays reflect the cognitive processes of mental representation, particularly imagination. Roychoudhury highlights a passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where Theseus and Hippolyta discuss imagination, illustrating Shakespeare's nuanced understanding of the concept. As Roychoudhury observes, "Theseus's intuitions about imagination are mottled and diffuse, concerned not just with poetic expression but with a wide range of questions about knowledge and nature" (4). Indeed, by giving Theseus a rather unimaginative and confused perception of reality, Shakespeare creates a reversed mythical space of uncertainty and confusion related to the figure of Theseus in the play.

Indeed, as I see it, Theseus's function in the play is to highlight the repetitive poetic renditions of mythological characters, which create mythical spaces in the audiences' imagination. From this perspective, the figures from Greek mythology invoked by Titania (Corin and Phillida, from pastoral poetry) re-create a world of imagination and classical learning in the minds of the audience, who are indirectly invited to rememorate mythological love stories.

Corin and Phillida are characters from Elizabethan pastoral literature, such as, for instance, "Harpelus' Complaint" from *Totell's Miscellany* (1557).[9] The love story tells about Phyllida, a fair maid, and Harpelus, a herdsman, who courted her; yet, Phyllida loved Corin, who spurned her. The pastoral allusion reflects themes of love, nature, and rural life, which were common in pastoral poetry of that time. In these elegiac poems, the lover (generally a shepherd) laments his unrequited love for a shepherdess; or the poems explore idealized rural landscapes, contrasting urban life with idyllic pastoral settings. In the context of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, it is Titania, the Queen of Fairies, who complains about Oberon's supposed infidelity. According to Titania, Oberon comes "from the farthest steep of India" (2.1.71) to bless the wedding of Theseus to Hippolyta, who is described by Titania as "the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskined mistress and your warrior love" (2.1.72-73). The paradoxical epithet "bouncing Amazon" (2.1.72) associates the ancient race of warrior women from Scythia, in the north of the Black Sea, with someone who is vigorous, lively, and spirited, which reflects the qualities attributed to Hippolyta. However, Titania's epithet referring to Hippolyta seems rather ironic, considering that the Queen of Fairies believes that Hippolyta was Oberon's mistress. The pastoral atmosphere suggested by the forest's natural environment in the play is blended with the distant space of India and the Amazons' space (in ancient Scythia) to create an exotic mythical space in which imagination has a primary role.

In reply to Titania's accusations of infidelity to Oberon, which suggest a pastoral and exotic atmosphere of unrequited love mixed with aggressivity and conquest, the king of fairies has his own reproof to Titania, accusing her of having had an affair with Theseus, thus causing the latter to leave other women. As Oberon wonders, was not Theseus led by Titania "through the glimmering Night" (2.1.80) and taken away "From Perigouna, whom he ravishèd, / And make him with fair Aegles break his faith, / With Ariadne and Antiopa?" (2.1.81-83) Oberon's rhetorical question might also imply that he

[9] The full title of the anonymous pastoral poem entitled "Harpelus' Complaint," first published in *Songs and Sonnets* from *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557), is "Harpelus complaynt of Phillidaes loue bestowed on Corin, who loued her not and denied him, that loued her" (Anonymous 60). Corin is a shepherd character in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, loyal to the shepherd Silvius. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Corin speaks about the simplicity and contentment of a shepherd's life and offers practical advice to the young and idealistic characters in the play.

is not so sure of Titania's infidelity, but Theseus' long list of deserted women is registered according to classical myth. In *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by Thomas North (1595), Plutarch writes about Sinnis, whom Theseus killed, and who "had a goodlie faire daughter called *Perigouna*" (5). When she saw her father dead, the girl flew away and hid in a bush, but Theseus lured her out, telling her he would "use her gently" (Plutarch 5). After she was seduced by Theseus, Perigouna had a boy called Menalipus, and afterwards "Theseus married her unto one *Deioneus*" (Plutarch 5).

Theseus's mistreatment of Perigouna is reversely mirrored in the image of Demetrius, who tells Helena, in the woods of Athens, that "I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes, / And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts" (2.1.227–228). Instead of gentle Perigouna hiding in the bushes, it is Demetrius who hides from his pursuing lady lover, Helena, demonstrating the same heard-heartedness and cynicism that Theseus shows towards Perigouna. The parodic technique used by Shakespeare to represent the conflated male images of Theseus/ Demetrius/ Lysander reconfigures a mythical space of betrayal and dissension, different from expectations of masculine bravery and gallantry usually associated with classical heroes.

The mythological story told by Plutarch (as the ancient Greek author was among Shakespeare's favourite readings) is not too flattering for Theseus' character, because the Athenian hero is famed for having seduced many women and then left them. As classical scholar Lauren Cressler observes, "Shakespeare's Athenian duke appears initially benevolent, but his benevolence is undone through consistent allusion to Theseus's falsity" (Cressler 335). However, Plutarch's detail about Theseus having married off his former mistress (Perigouna) to another man casts doubt about the relationship between the play's Hippolyta and Theseus. Just like Theseus married off Perigouna to Deioneus, so Hippolyta may have been married off to Theseus, after she had been Oberon's mistress, according to Titania. The reversed classical allusion creates not only a sense of déjà vu in the minds of the audiences, but it also generates a mythical space in which betrayed love is a common feature of great heroes and lovers, as well as of kings of fairies. Conflated spaces of Athens, India, ancient Greece, ancient Scythia (the land of the Amazons), and the fairy forest create an ambivalent mythical space of desire and uncertainty, where classical characters meet the Elizabethan fairy world in a wonderland space of imagination.

Another woman whom Theseus is considered to have loved and deserted, according to Oberon, is "Aegles" (2.1.82). When referring to this passage, in "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur" (1979), classical scholar Mary Ellen Lamb observes: "Theseus' broken vows demonstrate the irrationality of love central to this forest-

labyrinth" (481-482). Theseus, too, had been led through the maze, just as Puck leads the lovers in the play through the amazing world of illusion produced by the magic flower. Like Theseus's previous infidelities, the lovers' infidelities in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are transitory, as they emerge from the forest-labyrinth trying to make sense of their confusion; and their broken vows highlight by contrast the evident happy stability of the marriages at the end of the play. It is to Theseus, the apparently reformed heartbreaker, more than to Theseus the good and just prince, that the underlying myth of the play directs the audience, but only to lead them further into the labyrinth of the forest, classical mythology, and betrayed love.

Theseus's mythological reputation for infidelity draws its force from his abandonment of "Ariadne" (2.1.83), according to Oberon. Ariadne's complaint at her desertion by Theseus is movingly presented in Ovid's *Heroides*, and can be found in several sources well known in the Renaissance, such as Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Arthur Golding's translation, and Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* translated by Thomas North. The manner of Theseus's desertion of Ariadne in Shakespeare's play is recalled by Lysander's desertion of Hermia, or even Demetrius's desertion of Helena. Like Theseus and Ariadne, Lysander and Hermia are fleeing a forbidding father; like Theseus, Lysander has vowed eternal love to Hermia, only suddenly to vow love to another woman (Helena); and, perhaps most striking, both Hermia and Ariadne are abandoned while sleeping. The moment of sleeping and dreaming—when the mind is in deep state of unconsciousness—is the most suitable for creating fantasies of imagination. The mythical space of the woods near Athens in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is intricately intertwined with spaces suggested by mythological characters (exotic India, ancient Greece, ancient Scythia, Crete and the labyrinth, plus the island of Naxos, through Ariadne's story) to form conflated mythical spaces in the audiences' imagination, where time and space no longer count because they are contained in a multifocal spatiotemporal continuum.

In Ovid's *Heroides* X, Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete, writes to Theseus after he abandons her on the island of Naxos. In her letter, Ariadne expresses her anguish, betrayal, and lingering love for Theseus. As Ariadne writes, "The words you now are reading, Theseus, I send you from that shore from which the sails bore off your ship without me, the shore on which my slumber, and you, so wretchedly betrayed me—you, who wickedly plotted against me as I slept" (Ovid, *Heroides* X, 2-6, p. 121).[10] The imaginary landscape of the island of Naxos is similar to the one in *A Midsummer Night's*

[10] References to Ovid's *Heroides* are to the Loeb classical edition, translated by Grant Showerman (2014).

Dream, as "the moon was shining" (Ovid, *Heroides* X, 25-27, p. 123) and there was a mountain and a hanging cliff above the waves (Ovid, *Heroides* X, 17, p. 123). Ariadne recounts her sacrifice and laments Theseus's ungratefulness, weaving a poignant narrative of love and loss. As Ovid implies, Ariadne's slumber betrayed her just as hard as Theseus did, because she was in a state of unconsciousness and could not defend herself. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander deserts Hermia as she sleeps, because of Puck's mistaken intervention in applying the love juice on Lysander's eyes.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Minos's daughter Ariadne helps Theseus to escape the labyrinth by giving him a golden thread to follow back to the entrance. Theseus exits the labyrinth, kidnaps Ariadne, and escapes to Naxos where he then abandons the Cretan princess. Ovid describes how Ariadne helped Theseus: "Ariadne, / For Theseus' sake, supplied the clue, the thread / Of gold, to unwind the maze which no one ever / Had entered and left" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8, 172-175, p. 187).[11] Theseus's desertion of Ariadne is associated with an ironic commentary concerning Theseus's ingratitude: "Theseus took her with him, / Spreading his sails for Dia,[12] and there he left her, / Fine thanks for her devotion" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8, 175-177, p. 187). In the same Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the labyrinth of Crete is described as "A labyrinth built by Daedalus, an artist / Famous in building, who could set in stone / Confusion and conflict, and deceive the eye / With devious aisles and passages" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8, 161-164, p. 187). Just as Daedalus set in stone confusion and conflict, Shakespeare's pen set on stage the lovers' confusion and the happy resolution of conflict through marriage. Moreover, the perplexing passages of the labyrinth built by Dedalus can be associated with the circumvolutions of the brain, with its labyrinthine[13] ways of making connections and associations.

[11] References to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are to the edition translated by Rolfe Humphries (1955).

[12] Dia was another name for the ancient island of Naxos.

[13] In *Media, Myth, and Society* (2013), Arthur Asa Berger discusses psychoanalytic interpretations of the meanings of labyrinths. Berger summarizes the myth of Theseus and observes: "When we are in labyrinths, we experience a certain amount of anxiety since we cannot be sure how to get out of them. Labyrinths may symbolize the complexities of human consciousness, which flits about from here to there, always seeking some kind of focus and way to escape from the randomness of consciousness. The disorientation people experience in labyrinths and mazes suggests that these constructions have a profound significance to our psyches. They may symbolize our complicated lives, as we wander here and there as we seek direction towards whatever goal we are seeking" (103). Indeed, as I see it, from a psychological point of view, the labyrinth becomes a visual metaphor for people's wandering through an endless succession of options and possibilities in life. The labyrinth of the mind in drama is related to the visual metaphoric representation of various possibilities of interpretation.

It appears that Theseus provides a foundational and rational presence in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's* Dream, as seen from the spatial perspective, but this presence is radically distorted throughout the play. Factoring in the concepts of change and mythical space, we can see that Shakespeare's characters drawing on classical mythology and history are similar but also different from their classical counterparts. As Jeong U. Jang observes in "Modified Mythological Figures, Theseus' Character, and Patriarchal Power in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2018), "not only does he [Shakespeare] skillfully use the mythological characters as they are, he also craftily creates his theatrical characters by changing the specific features of the original mythological figures" (510). Jang analyses "Theseus's changed attitude and behavior in relation to patriarchal power" (510) and concludes that the character displays a high degree of authority. Therefore, Theseus himself represents order and authority of Athens, often acting as a foil to the wild, magical elements of the forest. This contrast highlights the play's themes of love, power, and the tension between reason and imagination.

However, even this perspective on Theseus's character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is delicately subverted through other mythological allusions, such as the allusions to women allegedly deserted by Theseus at various stages of his life, especially the story of Ariadne and the labyrinth. As if to reinforce the theme of betrayal, during the conflict between Titania and Oberon, Titania creates an image of disrupted natural order caused by Oberon's "jealousy" (2.1.84). The almost apocalyptic image of natural disaster created by Titania evokes the couple's tempestuous meetings "on hill, in dale, forest, or mead, / By pavèd fountain or by rushy brook, / Or in the beachèd margent of the sea" (2.1.86-88). The watery elements of nature (brook, river, sea), as well as those of human architecture (fountain), plus the "winds" (2.1.91) and "contagious fogs" (2.1.93) are disturbed by the conflicting encounters between the king and queen of fairies. Titania continues with the image of an agricultural landscape undermined by rotten corn, empty fields and diseased cows. On top of all, as Titania describes, "The nine-men's-morris[14] is filled up with mud, / And the quaint mazes in the wanton green, / For lack of tread, are undistinguishable" (2.1.101-103). Titania laments the effects of human neglect and nature's decline, reminding how human actions, or inactions, as well as conflicts, can impact the surrounding world. In this context of disorder and confusion, the "quaint mazes" (2.1.102) in the grass are illustrative images of dissolution and natural/moral disaster, like being lost

[14] Nine Men's Morris is a classic board game that dates back to the Roman Empire. The game is played on a special board with three squares, one inside the other, connected by lines. It is a game of strategy, patience, and skill that has been enjoyed for centuries. Shakespeare transfers the three-square image of the ancient game to the agricultural realm, and the graphic image is that of a labyrinth drawn on land.

in a labyrinth. Titania creates an image of a world where everything is in confusion because of the dissension between two supernatural beings. Since the labyrinth is connected to the image of Theseus, disorder in nature reflects the confusion of the human mind, when faced with imminent natural or emotional disaster.

The labyrinth of the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like the mythical labyrinth created by Dedalus, and the labyrinth of the human mind, generates confusion and amazement in other characters involved in the mythical space of the woods in the play. When she is deserted by Lysander but cannot believe it, and when she hears Helena's reproaching allusions to Hermia's wickedness as a child, Hermia exclaims, "I am amazèd at your words. / I scorn you not. It seems that you scorn me" (3.2.225-226). Further, during her conflict with Helena, Hermia says, "I am amazed and know not what to say" (3.2.365). Lack of dialogue engenders amazement and misunderstanding, and the play's world of confusion is witnessed by the two young women, Hermia and Helena.

Similarly, when Lysander wakes up from the dream in the magic forest, he cannot remember anything, and replies to Theseus's wonder about "this gentle concord in the world" (4.1.149) with the vaguely conciliatory words, "My lord, I shall reply amazèdly, / Half sleep, half waking. But as yet, I swear, / I cannot truly say how I came here" (4.1.152-154). It seems that both Hermia and Lysander are amazed—lost in the labyrinth of their own emotions and fears, while the rational Theseus wonders about the conciliatory scenes developing before their eyes. Demetrius's mind is also confused, as in a labyrinth, when he says, "These things seem small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turnèd into clouds" (4.1.194-195). The spatial metaphor suggests a fuzzy landscape of emotion, which forces the mind to transform reality into fantastic shapes.

The concept of "mythical space" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, represented particularly through the character of Theseus and the spatial symbol of the labyrinth, can take several forms in Shakespeare's comedy, according to the characters involved in the dramatic interaction and the classical spaces they summon to the audience. Shakespeare subverts the traditional heroic image of Theseus, highlighting his treachery and duplicity instead, through the female figures of classical mythology that Theseus is famed to have seduced, betrayed, and deserted (Perigouna, Aegles, Ariadne, Antiopa). Through the space of the forest near Athens and the mythical spaces summoned by classical allusions, the play distorts established mythological traditions to create a dream-like, mythical space that reflects the complexities of human relationships and the interplay between reality and imagination. The forest in the play serves as a metaphorical labyrinth, representing confusion and transformation, while Theseus's character embodies the tension between

order and chaos. Other characters evolve in the maze of their own illusions, unsure whether they live in a dream or in a kind of fictional reality created during the metamorphic theatrical performance. Shakespeare's portrayal of Theseus contrasts with the classical depiction of the mythological character, emphasizing themes of betrayal and the fluidity of mythical spaces, when represented through volatile and imaginary dramatic characters.

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