

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Astronomy, Alchemy, and Archetypes (Chapter 5)

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Astronomy, Alchemy, and Archetypes:

An Integrated View of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Katherine Bartol Perrault

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Chapter 5: Conclusions The process of psychological integration interpreted through medieval alchemical imagery in *Midsummer* is a unifying force encoded through Shakespeare's poetic vision. Emerging from the collective unconscious, the mythological imagery of astronomy, alchemy and archetypes in *Midsummer* opens it to an equivalent, contemporary psychological understanding that leads to the application of these insights in the production of the play. Jung contends that archetypes, which rise from the collective unconscious, are universal, whether viewed as ancient or modern. The psychological ideas or forces that we take for granted today were just as potent in Shakespeare's time: there simply was not as yet any scientific understanding or terminology for them. Jung asserts that the work of the alchemists embodied their own psychic projections of unconscious material upon their chemical experiments, which resulted in a highly complex, mystical process or opus—that was psychological and spiritual in nature, but defined only through natural, chemical language (*Psychology and Alchemy* 245). That the process of the *coniunctio* was not merely an elemental chemical operation but was connected to the soul, was seen in the alchemists' appropriation of Gnostic and Neo-Platonic symbols and language in describing it (357). The symbolism of the *coniunctio* is in essence a transcendent, ideal view of the world. In *Midsummer*, it marries the natural with the spiritual (as well as pagan [i.e. Dionysian rites] and Christian [i.e., marriage rites]), integrating the physical microcosm and macrocosm, as well as the inner and outer psyche in a tenuous, synergistic balance of opposites. The alchemical practice of veiled meaning, derived from multiple approaches to the opus magnum, leads to fluid interpretations of alchemical symbolism based on the personal projections of the individual architect of the opus at a particular time. Because of its subjective nature, alchemical symbolism affords a wealth of new imagery and ideas for staging *Midsummer*. Such multiplicity of interpretation is inherent in the psychological nature of the alchemical symbol, as Jung states, We should not begrudge the alchemists their secret language: deeper insight into the problems of psychic development soon teaches us how much better it is to reserve judgment instead of prematurely announcing to all and sundry what's what. Of course we all have an understandable desire for crystal clarity, but we are apt to forget that in psychic matters we are dealing with processes of experience, that is, with transformations which should never be given hard and fast names if their living movement is not to petrify into something static. The protean mythologem and the shimmering symbol express the processes of the psyche far more trenchantly and, in the end, far more clearly than the clearest concept; for the symbol not only conveys a visualization of the process but—and this is perhaps just as important—it also brings a re-experiencing of it, of that twilight which we can learn to understand only through inoffensive empathy, but which too much clarity only dispels. (*Alchemical Studies*, 162-3) Because poetic language is a vehicle of imagination—the bridge between the material world and the unconscious world—the theatrical or visual artist (such as Marc Chagall, Figure 5.1) may give corporeal form to ideas heretofore expressed ethereally. In giving form to the transcendent symbol, the theatrical artist is able to "persuade the spectator that the set of bodies and other-worldly signs presented to him do indeed embody, for the duration of the spectacle, the properties of another sphere" (Elam 165). This is the transformation that the theatre engenders, when what has been imagined in word is translated into deed upon the stage.

Figure 5.1: *Midsummer Night's Dream*. According to Werner Haftmann, Chagall was "very fond of it [*Midsummer*] and read it again and again" (92). We see in this painting the winged Hermes/Mercurius/Puck presenting the bride and groom. The color of the sky is the bright yellow of a new day, signaling the nearing completion of the opus, as does the bride's white gown and Mercurius's red color. Is the groom ass or bull? Perhaps he is a mixture of both, referring to the lesser *coniunctio* of Bottom and Titania, as well as the greater *coniunctio* of Theseus and Hippolyta. Note the clown just behind the groom, a reference perhaps to Mercurial Bottom—in opposition to the winged Hermes/Mercurius/Puck. The tree reminds us of the enchanted wood. Marc Chagall, 1939. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. The issue of translation/interpretation, however, can be slippery. For example, most critics acknowledge that *Midsummer* is a play about transformation or metamorphosis. However, the basic premise underlying alchemy is that its transforming process is one that results in integration of the opposites, versus polarization. As we have seen, in *Midsummer* the primary opposites appear gendered: masculine/feminine. In many twentieth-century interpretations of the play, there has been a tendency to view *Midsummer* as another play in the patriarchal canon that colonizes women, relegating them once again to stereotypical roles as wives and mothers, submissive to dominating husbands/fathers. When viewing *Midsummer* from the alchemical/psychological perspective, however, the opposites of masculine/feminine may be seen as basic elements of every personality in which a balance of both must occur in order to achieve wholeness. In this way, gendered characters in the play may be seen as symbols of the balanced personality. True, Shakespeare has couched these psychological ideas in cultural constructs of his day. Yet, even so, the critic should remember that in the alchemical process, both man and woman (masculine and feminine) symbolically work together to achieve the reconciliation, or integration, of the opposites, and in so doing transcend stereotypical gender barriers. Crossing the boundaries of gender in the dissolution and renovatio of the process of individuation is just as significant for males as it is for females, and is inherent in Dionysian theatre in which the rigidly defined male personality is allowed to plunge [into] every form of 'otherness.' Escaping its own boundaries, the male body verges on the feminine either

through direct impersonation of women,—as in Flute's impersonation of Thisbe in *Midsummer*; or through mimesis of female pathos,—as in Theseus's assimilation of his anima; while physical and ideological confines and constructions of the male world are questioned or renegotiated. (Lada-Richards 8) —as in the reversal of Theseus's judgment upon Hermia's paternal disobedience in IV.i.178. On a psychological basis, Jung admittedly has described the process of individuation from the masculine point of view. However, this does not preclude one from approaching it from a feminine point of view. Jung states that, while alchemy was mainly a masculine preoccupation and in consequence of this its formulations are for the most part masculine in character, [. . .] we should not overlook the fact that the feminine element in alchemy is not so inconsiderable since, even at the time of its beginnings in Alexandria, we have authentic proof of female philosophers like Theosebeia, the soror mystica of Zosimos, and Paphnutia and Maria Prophetissa. (Transference 134) Jung also notes alchemical pairs who worked and studied together such as Nicolas Flamel and his wife Peronelle, or Thomas South and his daughter, Mrs. Atwood. Jung quotes in length a letter of John Pordage (1607-1681) to his soror mystica Jane Leade, giving her "spiritual instruction concerning the opus" (135). Jung also gives much credit to the role of feminine psychology in the alchemical process: Unfortunately we possess no original treatises that can with any certainty be ascribed to a woman author. Consequently we do not know what kind of alchemical symbolism a woman's view would have produced. Nevertheless, modern medical practice tells us that the feminine unconscious produces a symbolism which, by and large, is compensatory to the masculine. In that case, [. . .] the leitmotiv [symbol] would not be gentle Venus but fiery Mars, not Sophia but Hecate, Demeter, and Persephone, or the matriarchal Kali of southern India in her brighter and darker aspects. (140) As we have seen, when one studies the archetypes of *Midsummer*, one sees that the images of Hecate, Demeter, and Persephone (Kore) are all present within the scope of the play, so a psychologically feminine reading of this play, foregrounding these aspects, is possible as well as practicable. Jung continues the discussion of feminine psychology by referring to the pictures of the arbor philosophica from the 14th century Codex Ashburnham, showing Adam struck by an arrow with the tree growing out of his genitals (Figure 5.2), and Eve with the tree growing out of her head—with her hand covering her genitals (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2: Male aspect of the prima materia (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* 256). "Miscellanea d'alchimia," Codex Ashburnham. 14th century.

Figure 5.3: Female aspect of the prima materia (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* 268). "Miscellanea d'alchimia," Codex Ashburnham. 14th century. Jung states, Plainly this is a hint that the man's opus is concerned with the erotic aspect of the anima, while the woman's is concerned with the animus, which is a "function of the head." The prima materia, i.e., the unconscious, is represented in man by the "unconscious" anima [eros], and in woman by the "unconscious" animus [reason]. Out of the prima materia grows the philosophical tree, the unfolding opus. In their symbolical sense, too, the pictures are in accord with the findings of psychology, since Adam would then stand for the woman's animus who generates "philosophical" ideas with his member, and Eve for the man's anima who, as Sapiencia or Sophia, produces out of her head the intellectual content of the work. (Transference 141) Even in this example, we can see how the debate between Reason and Imagination in Act V of *Midsummer* embodies the struggle between the opposites of masculine and feminine, not so that one may subdue the other, but that both may coexist in the fragile balance of the integrated personality. Jung asserts, "Venerabilis natura does not halt at the opposites; she uses them to create, out of opposition, a new birth" (Transference 143). This new creation is the individuated personality, the self. In *Midsummer*, this coniunctio results in the cultural construct of marriage, a physical union, which, for the time being, is "blessed." This does not preclude further marital strife, however, as the play *Pyramus and Thisbe* serves as warning enough that not all love ends in marital bliss. The paradigm for marital bliss as well as individuation is integration, the reconciliation of opposites, which is an ongoing, lifetime process (much like marriage). In *Midsummer*, the alchemical imagery of the coniunctio and the archetypes embodied in the mythology of the characters through the astronomy of the play afford vast possibilities for new approaches to its staging. The transcendent symbolism of Sol and Luna would be interesting figures upon which to base an archetypal production of the play that transcends gender. I have already offered a possible floor plan that mirrors the early summer sky. Using this schema, the director may actually stage the movements (entrances and exits of the characters) according to their psychic makeup and/or placement during the play. Because the inherent oppositions of the play are manifested in its design, this floor plan becomes an organic catalyst for movement by the characters within the play that is consistent with the motives of the text. For example, the constellated points of Ophiuchus and Virgo on the stage may serve as the thrones for Theseus and Hippolyta, or Oberon and Titania. Draco, upstage center, may serve as Titania's bower, where the lesser coniunctio occurs with Bottom. The lovers move deeper into the woods, stage left, while Oberon and Puck observe and maneuver them from the Summer Triangle, stage right. Hermia awakens from her serpent's dream at the point of Serpens cauda or caput. There are also color progressions in the alchemical process, the primary one consisting of four colors (corresponding to the four elements), of black to white to yellow (or gold) to red. Often when designing a show, color symbolism is utilized to show the development of the plot as well as the characters. A costume or scene or lighting designer could make wonderful use of the alchemical color progression to indicate visually/scenically what is occurring in the transforming operation of the play. The mythology of the characters of the play affords other imagery to apply to characterization as well as conceptualization, i.e., conceiving of Puck as a satyr, a representation of Hermes, or even played by two characters (one male, one female) to suggest Mercurius's hermaphroditic nature are all possible options. Representing the women in the play as different aspects of the moon goddess with their contemporary counterparts—Persephone/teenage virgin (ideally), Demeter/mother, and Hecate/witch, is also possible. An alchemical reading of the play makes sense of including the changeling child in the play as physical evidence of the power struggle, along with its resolution, between the masculine and feminine. So also does restoring the hunting scene as a turning point in the play that significantly marks the change in Theseus towards Hippolyta, and foregrounds the affirmation and assimilation of the feminine, the anima. A fuller understanding of the debate between Reason and Imagination also serves to clarify the necessity of the masculine for the feminine versus the domination of

one at the expense of the other, allowing for a transcendent view of the ideal androgynous, balanced relationship. Other applications of an alchemical understanding of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might be to use art works such as Marc Chagall's (Figure 5.4), which embody the alchemical elements of Shakespeare's metaphors and intuitively portray the psychic aspects of the play, to aid in design concepts for lighting and stage design as well as costuming. Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is so ripe with the content of the collective unconscious, it will always be able to be interpreted from the psychological perspective of its current director/cast/production team. This is how unconscious material works in the interpretive process: it brings to surface in the receptor that for which the receptor's conscious has need for expression or conscious recognition and assimilation. In other words, as a psychological, visionary play, images from the collective unconscious inherent in the archetypes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will break through to the consciousness of one's reading or interpretation of the play, according to what resonates with her/his collective unconscious. The alchemical imagery of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens up new avenues of discourse and interpretation to its contemporary audience, and as such continues to affirm the greatness of Shakespeare's collaborative genius. I have only revealed the proverbial tip of the iceberg of alchemical symbolism in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in this treatise (indeed, an interpretation of the play based on the *Rosarium* illustrations is even possible). With the wealth of alchemical imagery available to the director, dramaturg, and production team, its application to production is limited only to their imagination. Thus, this research is not intended to define a new way or the approach to staging Shakespeare's play, but to offer refreshing possibilities for staging the play in harmony with Shakespeare's text. An alchemical, Jungian reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers innovative ways to interpret the play that may facilitate equivalent, contemporary readings and performances of Shakespeare's Elizabethan work. As such, this work further demonstrates how Shakespeare's works (including his 'fairy play'), are "not of an age, but for all time."

Figure 5.4: *The Wedding Candles*. Chagall's painting is a wonderful illustration of the alchemical themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: as Sol sets over the village, the wedding feast commences by candlelight and the players strike up the cosmic wedding dance; yet the shadowy world of the unconscious is ever present, lingering on the dark fringe of night: the lovers at bottom left next to the cock in passionate embrace; the winged goat (reminiscent of the Thesean minotaur), left, drinking the Dionysian cup of the ritual passage; the ethereal being, top, sounding the trumpet of the mystical conjunction. Marc Chagall, 1945. © 2001 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

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