

The Benign Comic: Understanding Bottom's Growth and Appeal in *a Midsummer Night's Dream*

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ABSTRACT

Nick Bottom from Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an egotistical weaver who induces a lot of laughter in the play. Based on a close reading of the text, this essay analyzes four crucial scenes in Bottom's character arc and seeks to understand his growth as a dynamic character as well as his true appeal to the audience. Incorporating both original insights and scholarly interpretations, this essay eventually reaches the conclusion that Bottom - despite his foolish exterior - is one of the most complex characters in *Midsummer*. His fluid identity, divinity, multiple paradoxes, and symbolic behavior all suggest things much more profound than his appearance. Bottom embodies both the human and the animal, the natural and the civilized, the carnal and the spiritual.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Nick Bottom, Character analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the best comical characters that Shakespeare has ever created. To say that Bottom steals every scene he's in is an understatement. One only needs to imagine the scene in which Bottom sleeps next to Titania - an ass-headed brute in the delicate arms of a Fairy Queen - to realize how lasting his image is. Literary critic Harold Bloom once commented on Bottom, saying that he is "Shakespeare's most engaging character before Falstaff" [1]. Just like Falstaff from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays, Bottom possesses the kind of personal charisma that maximizes the comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Unfortunately, the function of Nick Bottom is too often reduced to mere comic relief, making him a flat, one-dimensional character created for the sole purpose of entertainment. Although Bottom is undeniably loud and egotistic - which generates a lot of humor - there is something about his character, beneath this facade, that is more complex and subtle. Through a close analysis of four crucial scenes in Bottom's sub-plot (each representing a different stage in his character development), this essay seeks to show that Bottom is a complicated, dynamic character and that this hidden complexity is what makes the audience not only delight in his presence but also irresistibly love him. The significance of this essay lies in the potential

implications that can be drawn from this nuanced reading of Bottom. He might be the "key" to "unlock" the ultimate meaning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

2. BOTTOM'S GROWTH AND ITS APPEAL

When Bottom wakes up from his dream in Act 4 Scene 1, having returned to his original human form, this previously talkative figure suddenly becomes very inarticulate [2]. He repeats the phrase "Methought I was" three times in a row, but is unable to put his supernatural encounter into words. This is perhaps, the most drastic change in personality among all the characters in the play. Bottom, whose whole identity is based on being loud and confident, now becomes doubtful of himself. While the audience does recognize this crucial and overt change, what is often overlooked is the fact that Bottom displays a slightly different aspect of his character in every scene, making his change a gradual one, instead of a sudden one. This frequently analyzed monologue of Bottom's waking is only the end of his character arc.

Based on the progression of events in Bottom's adventure, his growth can be divided into three stages: Bottom the egotist; Bottom the ass; and Bottom the man. At each stage of his development, Bottom shows - either explicitly or implicitly - some qualities that are inherently appealing to human nature, thereby making his actions and demeanor greatly resonate with the

audience. I shall also argue that Bottom is a “benign comic” - one that was created by Shakespeare to show a wide range of genuine and familiar human qualities, without any real contempt or sarcasm. By the end of his development, Bottom has even offered some unexpected wisdom that encourages the audience to reflect on some of the central thematic ideas in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, including art and love, dream and reality.

2.1. Bottom the Egotist

Bottom makes his first appearance in Act 1 Scene 2, which shows the casting of Pyramus and Thisbe, and is established as someone overly confident - the very trait he is known for. Almost all of his speeches in this scene can reflect his arrogance and lack of self-awareness. Among them, the most important ones are those in which Bottom shows his passion for every role in the play and his belief that he can successfully portray each one (despite his actual lack of skills). When Peter Quince assigns him the role of Pyramus, who is “a lover that kills himself most gallant for love” (1.2.22), Bottom responds:

Bottom

That will ask 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 humor is for a tyrant. I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split... (1.2.23-28)

Two things make this speech, and many others by Bottom, so hilarious. One is the heightened language - exaggerated images such as “[moving] storms” and “tear a cat” are accurate representations of his inaccurate self-perception.

Secondly, the sudden shift of thought, signaled by the dash after “To the rest”, represents the start of his never-ending boast. He believes he could play whatever role that is assigned to him: that of a tyrant, a lover, or a lion - either gentle or fierce. Some critics have argued that, based on these braggadocios speeches, Bottom is megalomania. Although Bottom is undeniably an egotist, calling him megalomaniac - a word that implies extreme delusion - is an overstatement. As critic John A. Allen points out, “[Bottom’s] ‘megalomania’ differs only in degree from the self-adulation that is endemic in mankind” [4], Bottom’s arrogance is indeed a benign and universal one - something that all humans have either hidden or publicly shown. To put it simply, Bottom is confident despite his shortcomings, and, in some ways, that is a very relatable and admirable quality [5].

Furthermore, in the writing of these speeches, Shakespeare seems to be more concerned with Bottom’s passion for theatre, instead of his delusions. Throughout this scene, Bottom is the one most excited about the play - always eager to get things started. Although Peter Quince is the director and supposed leader of this group, Bottom is the one calling the shots. His frequent use of imperative sentences, starting with “say what”, “then read”, “call forth”, and “name what” (1.2.8,9,15,18), shows his overwhelming enthusiasm for acting, which is also directly reinforced by his response “a very good piece of work” (1.2.14) after Peter Quince introduces Pyramus and Thisbe. We know from his later question “What is Pyramus - a lover or a tyrant?” (1.2.21) that he does not know what the story is about. Therefore, to Bottom, the content of the play does not matter, as long as he can act, he feels exhilarated, which shows a kind of consistent energy not only admired by his peers but also generally appreciated in the theater.

Bottom’s confidence in mastering every role and reluctance in aligning himself to one specific identity - as seen in his disappointment after Quince informs him “[he] can play no part but Pyramus” (1.2.81) - can also be read metaphorically. Some critics assert that such reluctance reflects Bottom’s fluid ontology - a state in which one’s identity constantly changes. Bottom is an Everyman or the so-called “undifferentiated man”, a natural and somewhat primal stage of being, allowing him to embrace all the available roles in the mortal world, including that of man, woman, beasts, and everything else [6]. One could even further the argument by saying that Bottom resembles the figure of Adam in the Bible, who, being at the pinnacle of Creation, is not sure what he is supposed to be doing [6]. This biblical interpretation of Bottom’s character is bold yet supportable because he is the only character in the play who has seen both the world of mortals and the realm of fairies - suggesting a hidden power that no other character possesses. Still, even without acknowledging this aspect of divinity, it is undeniable that he, symbolically speaking, is a human being open to all possibilities - an embodiment of an idealistic innocence that is often desired, but not attained, as we live under all sorts of fixed social constraints and obligations. As Oscar Wilde once said, “If you want to be a grocer, or a general, or a politician, or a judge, you will invariably become it; that is your punishment...if each day you are unsure of who you are and what you know, you will never become anything, and that is your reward.” Bottom’s actions and demeanor, appealing to our innate desire of being free and dynamic, is a symbol of that particular reward.

Besides being passionate, dynamic, and undifferentiated, Bottom, as the play moves onto the first half of Act 3 Scene 1, also takes on the role of a creator. After he raises the concern of possibly scaring the female audience with the plot of “Pyramus [drawing]

a sword to kill himself" (3.1.10-11), he proposes a solution that doesn't involve abridging the play:

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. (3.1.16-22)

There are various interpretations of this idea: writing an additional prologue to explain the differences between art and reality. Critic Ronald F. Miller argues that this scene shows Bottom as a simpleton who "acts as if image does not exist at all" [7]. However, it can also be read as Bottom attempting at the role of a creator - one who makes something out of nothing. This idea is reinforced by Bottom's other creative acts later in this scene: when Quince and Snout wonder how they should present the wall in Pyramus and Thisbe, Bottom says "some man or other must present Wall. And let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some roughcast about him to signify wall" (3.1.66-68). Though it may not be the smartest way to represent a wall on stage, it does show - in contrast to Miller's argument - exactly how Bottom utilizes his imagination in the creation of art. Extending Ramos' argument on Bottom being Adam, one could potentially argue that, here, Bottom takes on the role of God. His imperative diction such as "Let him" and "Write me" - as seen in Act 1 Scene 2 as well - calls to mind God, the Creator of the world, and his famous words fiat lux, meaning "let there be light" [6].

To briefly conclude this section, it can be concluded that Bottom is, first and foremost, an egotist who does not know the boundaries of his abilities and his world. However, his true appeal lies in his confidence, passion, fluid identity, and arguably - divinity. Based on the "fluid ontology" argument, it is only reasonable that Bottom is prone to change, instead of being limited to a simple label of an egotist - a title that is gradually disappearing as he, under the influence of magic, loses his human features and becomes an ass.

2.2. Bottom the Ass

After Robin transforms Bottom into a donkey, or an "ass-head" as the stage direction suggests, the comedy surrounding him becomes more overt than ever. Shakespeare maximizes the effect of dramatic irony by constantly emphasizing that Bottom does not know his physical changes, thus making the audience breathlessly laugh at his lack of self-awareness. When Quince, upon

seeing Bottom the ass, shouts "Thou art translated!" (3.1.120-121), a perplexed Bottom tries to make sense of his friends leaving him: "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could" (3.1.122-123).

The delight - from the audience's perspective - in seeing Bottom turned into an animal is multifold, for there are many layers of unconventional reversals in these scenes (the second half of Act 3 Scene 1). An obvious reversal of traditional roles happens between Bottom and Titania. The physical ugliness of Bottom should make him the pursuer in a relationship, not the one being pursued. However, under the effects of the magical love potion, Titania - a figure of divine beauty - dotes on Bottom, saying that her eyes are "enthralled to [Bottom's] shape" and her ear "much enamoured of [his] note" (3.1.140-141). It is in our human nature, as critic John A. Allen points out, that we naturally enjoy "the grotesque contrast between amorous beauty and oblivious earthiness, refinement and grossness of taste, fancy and blunt fact" [4], which explains why the image of Bottom is as entertaining as it is.

Another somewhat obscure reversal is established between the traditional image of an ass and that of men. In our common perceptions, an ass is supposed to be unrefined, blunt, and - above all - uncivilized, as we so often believe that it is the human civilization that separates the human from the animal. This distinction is the reason why we humans are rational beings - superior to mere beasts. However, Shakespeare subverts these common conceptions through the complex characterization of Bottom, obliquely mocking the irrational self-importance of mankind. A close reading of the text would reveal: Bottom, who has always been an arrogant "ass" even before he is transformed, is somehow less "ass-like" after he actually becomes one. The previous Bottom is garrulous and rough-mannered. The current Bottom is, ironically, courteous and kind. He neither boasts about himself ceaselessly nor attempts at assuming control over his environment and peers (which he does in Act 1). In reaction to Titania's overwhelming praise, Bottom, instead of indulging in her compliments as one would expect him to, tells her that "[she] should have little reason for that" - a sign of self-awareness. Furthermore, Bottom even expresses his interest in simply going home, which stands in direct contrast to his previous openness. When Titania says "Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful" (3.1.150), Bottom timidly denies:

Bottom

Not so neither; but if I had wit enough to get

out of this wood, I have enough to serve mine own

turn. (3.1.151-153)

His desire to simply go home can be read as a defense mechanism against a foreign world. The previous Bottom is confident and comfortable, but only within a world he is familiar with. Upon entering the realm of magic, his established view of the world is crumbling - this is a place he has no control over. Though he is not conscious of this inner change, this moment is significant, for it is the first time he exhibits doubt and uncertainty. It can be argued that this scene is an essential intermediate stage leading towards Bottom's final epiphany, the point where he is fully conscious of his limitations as a human being.

Shakespeare then makes clear the power dynamic in this scene with the dominant Titania saying "thou shalt remain here whether thou wilt or not" (3.1.155), forcing Bottom to stay. Knowing there's no chance to escape now, Bottom does not resist (just like his dispassionate acceptance of the role of Pyramus) and tries his best to adapt. He starts to observe and learn, interacting with Titania's fairy servants - Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed. Surprisingly, his attitude towards these otherworldly creatures, as they take turns to introduce themselves, is poised and amiable, which is - in itself - strangely appealing. For example, after each fairy states their names, Bottom repeats the phrase "I shall desire you of more acquaintance" (3.1.188, 194-195, 202), displaying a sense of earnestness and politeness. He even says "I cry your Worships mercy, heartily", which roughly means "Sirs, I beg your pardon", in a well-mannered tone. His gentlemanly elegance starkly contrasts with his physical asininity, and in some ways, this juxtaposition is no less powerful than that between fairy-like refinement and "mortal grossness" - as shown in his relationship with Titania. Furthermore, when compared to the Athenian youths (Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia, and Helena), Bottom appears to be much more unruffled in love; meanwhile, the four lovers have completely lost themselves in jealousy, passion, and violence.

As a result, irony is created on multiple levels. The supposed uncivilized ass is not only courteous but also more composed than us - irrational humans who deem ourselves to be "rational". Though the play-within-the-play Pyramus and Thisbe is often recognized as Shakespeare's commentary on young love, it is overlooked that his criticism towards our universal self-delusions - as this scene suggests - is within the characterization of Bottom himself, thus indicating the presence of the author's voice throughout the entirety of the play and not just in Act 5.

There's another layer of irony here: humans, who are supposed to be "superior" to animals, have no access to the world of immortality in this story, whereas Bottom the weaver - an uneducated working-class man - becomes a metaphorical "weaver" of the two worlds after he turns into an animal. The one who seems least

fit to experience divinity is the only one who actually does. Critic Thomas B. Stroup has brilliantly explained this reversal, stating that Bottom "has become for a time a character in that infinite world" simply because he is "more literal-minded, more innocent, less questioning, and less doubtful than any other mortal" in the play [8]. Perhaps, Shakespeare, through the creation of this character Bottom, wishes to show us the simple beauty of innocence - something fundamental, natural, and extremely precious in a world full of affectations.

Last but not least, in this stage of development, Bottom also shows a kind of simple, matter-of-fact realism, adding to his already irresistible charm. Notice how he reacts to the fairies' peculiar names in this scene. When he hears "Peaseblossom", he mentally associates it with "squash" and "peascod" - commonplace vegetables in his life. As for the fairy named Cobweb, he says that "[he] shall make bold with [him]" if he cuts his finger, thereby relating the name to practical use (3.1.189-190). Towards the third fairy named Mustardseed, Bottom humorously remarks that mustard is often served as a condiment with beef. All of these associations have one thing in common - they are elements in Bottom's day-to-day life. Although slightly defensive upon entering this unfamiliar environment, Bottom does not consider it fundamentally different from the mortal world. His simple and realistic nature has, in a way, helped him quickly and successfully fit in - as seen in Act 4 Scene 1. In that scene, Bottom has become perfectly comfortable in the company of fairy servants, but his needs and requirements have not changed into anything extravagant. He is still the Bottom we know, and all he wants to do is enjoy a "honey-bag" and "some good dry oats" (4.1.13,33). His pleasures remain on a physical level, reinforcing the idea that he is the epitome of the so-called "natural man" - people who are only concerned with the gratification of bodily needs. But here's another twist: whereas the natural man is often considered unqualified for spiritual life, Bottom is - as previously explained - the only man in contact with the spiritual world. This suggests the simple pleasure and significance in the satisfaction of hunger, thirst, and physical comfort. In contrast, those intellectual or spiritual achievements for humans are, perhaps, not that much nobler after all.

2.3. Bottom the Man

After his temporary yet eventful life as an ass, Bottom eventually returns to his older self, but only in terms of physical appearance. His character has changed, his memories confuse him, and his knowledge has increased. In short, Bottom is far from his former version, and the impact of that change is condensed into this frequently studied monologue at the end of Act 4 Scene 1 - Bottom's most important speech in the whole play.

In terms of character development, this speech marks the point where Bottom has, finally, become humble and self-aware. Waking from a dream-like experience, Bottom says:

Bottom

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 to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. 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. (4.1.214-224)

He does recall all the excitement he just had - his consorting with the Fairy Queen Titania and reveling with her fairy servants - but then refuses to say them out loud. He refrains from boasting, which is not what the audience expects, and his sense of self-doubt becomes stronger than ever. This monologue consists of incomplete sentences, constantly interrupted by dashes and “but”s, and a kind of self-deprecation that evokes a sense of helplessness. There is something particularly relatable - and satisfying - in Bottom’s lack of control and confidence, for it represents a positive change and a sign of maturing. When we were children, we all used to think that there’s nothing in the world we can’t do; as we gradually grow older, we face more constraints in life and realize our limited abilities as individuals, and the process of acknowledging our incompetence, ignorance, and faults is what we call “growing up”. Bottom, who has always been somewhat naive since the beginning of the play, has finally, well, matured. He has discarded his arrogance by rationally reflecting on past events, considering whether or not they are too good to be true. It can be argued that, here, Bottom finally accepts the role of an ordinary man, and that his previous identities - an egotist, an ass - all fade away after they have each served their purposes. The bottom is now a familiar face to the audience - a friendly representation of all working men in the world who are trying to navigate a way out of life’s obstacles and confusions.

Besides offering a satisfactory conclusion to Bottom’s character arc, this monologue also makes an insightful comment on the nature of art and its relationship with dreams and reality. After Bottom gives up the task of explaining his “dream”, he devises yet another creative solution (which can be read as Bottom

reprising his “creator” role) to his frustration. He says he “will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream” and that “he will sing it in the latter end of a play” (4.1.224-225, 226-227). This surprisingly wise line suggests art as the key towards solving the universal dilemma between experience and expression [9], for we - as humans - have all felt moments when we have the strong urge to express but are hindered by the lack of suitable words or the fear that others will fail to understand without having experienced themselves. To solve this problem, Bottom suggests art, which in some ways, is indeed the best solution. Humans write sonnets, compose songs, create paintings, carve statues, which are all attempts at capturing the mysteries of experience - that abstract feeling or subtle emotion that just cannot be put into everyday language. Therefore, this could also be read as a “meta” refers to the play itself - *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* - which Shakespeare uses the dramatic art form to present a dream of lovers and fairies, just like Bottom who intends to use “a ballad” for his.

Another implication of art being the expressive force is that the purpose of Bottom’s performance as Pyramus has changed. Previously, Bottom sees the role as a means of showcasing his acting. Now, Bottom has a higher goal to achieve - expressing his ineffable dream. This shift in motive indicates his pursuing a more intellectual and spiritual life, instead of just a carnal one (as mentioned in the previous section). Critic Harold Goddard has commented that Bottom’s waking is “the awakening of a spiritual life in the animal man” [10]. While the latter does have a natural innocence and beauty in it, intellectual life is also worth living, especially after one’s fundamental needs have been fulfilled. Therefore, in the creation of Bottom, Shakespeare presents two sides of human experience by showing that both the physical and the intellectual are important and that it’s the combination of both that makes one truly complete.

Now, finally, onto the biblical allusions. As almost every existing analysis of this monologue has noticed, Bottom’s speech, especially the section on men’s faculties being incompetent (“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.”) is a distorted version of a passage from The First Epistle to the Corinthians (often simplified as 1 Corinthians). The original passage goes like this:

“The things which eye hathe not sene, nether eare hath heard, nether came into man's heart, are, which God hathe prepared for them that love him. But God hathe reveiled them unto us by

*his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all
things, yea, the deepe things of God.”*
(1 Corinthians 2.9-10)

Even though Bottom’s version of this speech is fully garbled (the five senses are mismatched with their supposed functions), the scriptural element here does - to some extent - reinforce the previously argued divinity in Bottom’s character. Critics have argued that it is his “glimpse into a genuine extra-physical order”, while others have gone as far as asserting that it is more than just a glimpse, for “Bottom as discovered the Bottom of God’s secrets” (Stroup 81). This interesting argument is associated with another biblical allusion - a passage in William Tyndale’s translation of the Bible, which Shakespeare had probably read before writing the play. In one passage, the phrase “the Bottom of Goddes secretes” is mentioned - a very likely source of the name “Bottom” itself. If Shakespeare did draw inspiration from the Tyndale Bible, then Bottom’s seemingly casual comment “it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’ because it has no bottom” (4.1.225-226) might actually be a direct reference to God’s bottomless dreams and secrets. This connection suggests that Bottom might, in fact, have the greatest spiritual power among all the characters in the play, though he is not aware himself. Once again, the irony between his literal-minded nature and the complexity of God himself seems to suggest that child-like innocence and purity can bring us closer to a higher existence. There’s power in simplicity.

3. CONCLUSION

The initial purpose of this essay is to refute the idea that Nick Bottom is created solely for comic relief, for he is appealing in a very complex way, and not just because he is “funny” (which, of course, is still his main attribute). The main argument of this essay should be well-supported with both textual evidences from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as well as scholarly opinions. However, this essay does not intend to be an exhaustive or comprehensive character study of Nick Bottom. There are many other textual details and inter-textual aspects to be further explored, including his relationship with other Shakespearean comics or fools (such as Falstaff), and the study of which might bring us a deeper understanding of where Bottom fits in Shakespeare’s whole body of work. Bottom can also be explored in terms of his interactions with other intriguing characters in the play, especially Puck. Both Puck and Bottom have symbolic implications that can be read in detail, which might be a very rewarding area for future research. The fact that there is still much more to be explored simply shows how complicated yet fascinating this character is. Bottom is a walking contradiction - vulgarity and courtesy, carnality and

divinity all influence this man at the same time. Bottom never stays the same by taking on multiple roles, either consciously or unconsciously. Bottom is a weaver of two drastically different worlds and a connector of the two plot-lines in *Midsummer*. This seemingly foolish man is arguably the most important, charming, and profound person in the play, and his power as both a character and a symbol should not be underestimated. Hopefully, the conclusions reached in this essay could provide inspiration for excitingly new directions in the study of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

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