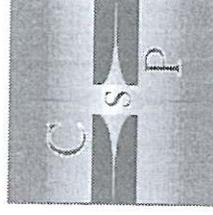


Sub/versions:  
Cultural Status, Genre and Critique

Edited by

Pauline MacPherson, Christopher Murray,  
Gordon Spark and Kevin Corstorphine



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-84718-372-7, ISBN (13): 9781847183729

## SUBVERTING SHAKESPEARE? THE SANDMAN #19 “A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM”

JULIA ROUND

William is new to comics, but we think he did a fantastic job helping Neil with our play-within-a-play’s dialogue. We would ordinarily predict great things ahead for this hot British talent, but, unfortunately, he died over three centuries ago. Too bad; he might have written the definitive Batman story. Tom Peyer, Assistant Editor of *The Sandman* (Gaiman 1990b, p.25).

Neil Gaiman’s comic series *The Sandman* tells the story of Morpheus (the Sandman, also known as Dream of the Endless), an elder sibling in a dysfunctional family of immortals. They are the Endless, a family of deities older than gods, who represent the functions of Death, Destiny, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium (who used to be Delight). On one level Gaiman is telling the story of Morpheus; whose presence touches countless lives (both mortal and immortal), and whose own humanisation underlies the series. But on another the comic is simply one about tales and their telling: like dreaming itself, a vehicle for serious fantasy stories. This epic mythic series was the flagship title used to launch DC’s Vertigo imprint and ran for seventy-five issues, winning numerous industry awards and sparking multiple spin-off titles.

*The Sandman* #19 “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (written by Gaiman and illustrated by Charles Vess) was published in September 1990. In 1991 it became the first (and only) comic to win the Word Fantasy Award for Best Short Story (since the rules were subsequently changed to exclude comics from this category). It tells the story of the first performance of *Dream* by William Shakespeare and his acting company to a fairy audience that includes many of the play’s characters. Despite their misgivings, Shakespeare’s troupe perform for their strange audience—but during the course of the play Titania steals Shakespeare’s son Hamnet; the mischievous Puck takes over his role from the actor Dick Cowley; and the

actors wake the next day with no more than dead leaves (rather than fairy gold) for their troubles.

Gaiman’s rewritten characters often contrast sharply with their Shakespearean counterparts and so, on the surface, the comic appears to subvert many of the themes of *Dream*. The comic also incorporates a backstory (told in *Sandman* #13) where the character of Shakespeare, depicted as a failing writer, makes a Faustian bargain with Morpheus “To give men dreams, that would live on long after I am dead” (1990a, p.12.3).<sup>1</sup> In this way it may even be said to subvert the idea of Shakespeare himself: showing his peers and audience mocking his early work (p.11.7; p.12.5) and redefining the man as a poor writer bartering for his talent, rather than a natural literary genius. This attitude also pervades the comic at an extratextual level (for example as shown by Tom Peyer’s ironic sublimation of Shakespeare to Gaiman in the introductory quotation above), and stands in stark contrast to modern “bardolatry”.

Prior to its comic book treatment, *Dream* has been presented in many mediums and the differences between these versions demonstrate the changing presentation of the play. Early productions foreground delicacy and daintiness: for example by using a real woodland setting and female cast (Vitagraph 1909), or a multitude of gauzy balletic fairies in an excess of visual spectacle (Warner Brothers 1935). These early films oppose many subsequent versions that have come to emphasise the play’s more savage and sinister elements. These have varied wildly from the ethereal stereotype by departing from realist staging and costuming, and have also explored *Dream* in more depth, for example, by using various frames to present the play’s metafictional dimensions.

All these interpretations exist in accumulation as a “performance legacy” that is impossible to separate from the original work. Theorists such as Judith Buchanan have noted that this history has relevance even when new interpreters may not consciously be able to identify the origin of a particular interpretative idea (Buchanan 2005, p.121). As such, *Dream* exists not in isolation as a canonical text, but in multiplicity, as a tradition created through a process of constant reworking and revision for each version or performance.

Furthermore, many critics (including Roland Barthes, Harold Bloom, Graham Allen and Julie Sanders) now view the text as an “intertext” whose meaning exists only with reference to “all the other texts to which it refers and relates” (Allen 2000, p.1). This view aligns with the modernist

<sup>1</sup> References from comics are given in the above form (where p.12.3 corresponds to page 12, panel 3). When quoting from comics I have used “/” to indicate divisions between speech balloons or narrative boxes.

perception of Shakespeare as being infinitely adaptable rather than universal (Sanders 2001, p.13). The relevance of other literary works, as well as extratextual sources such as folklore and legend, should therefore also be borne in mind.

I intend to examine the relationship the *Sandman* comic has with the Shakespearean text and its performance legacy by considering themes such as reality/illusion, transformation and the use of metafiction and intertextuality (whether this is related to fiction or fact).<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I define "subversion" as the intentional manipulation of textual elements so as to go against the generally accepted meaning of the source text. By examining the same I hope to interrogate many of the assumptions that underlie modern interpretations of *Dream*, and to conclude as to whether Gaiman's *Dream* supports or subverts the Shakespearean text.

### Ethereality and scary fairies

At first glance, it seems that *The Sandman* subverts *Dream*, rewriting its characters and themes into a postmodern and metafictional fairytale. One of the most obvious examples of this is in its visual representation of the fey. Titania and Oberon have the expected air of ethereality; subtly conveyed by the sidelong perspective and angular lines Vess uses to elongate their profiles and further emphasised by Oberon's horns. Titania's long hair and jewelled headdress, and their extended ears and eyebrows (see fig. 4; also 1990b, p.6.2-3; p.8.2).<sup>3</sup> Even the bestial Puck, whose hairy skin, red eyes and dominant teeth hint at the demonic (p.23.4), has an air of the insubstantial as his head wisps off into nothingness (see fig. 5; also p.6.3). However, many elements of these characters' depiction (such as their height) stand in contrast to the accepted view of fairies as tiny, winged beings and, in general, the fey are presented in dizzying variety and colour (see fig. 6). They range from the diminutive to the monstrous (p.14.2), may have tails and horns (p.9.6), red eyes (p.8.3), and insectile or bat-like wings (p.7.1).

<sup>2</sup> As Gaiman's *Dream*, being a comic, falls within the boundaries of both visual mediums and popular culture I have limited my survey to similar formats, that is, theatre, film, and television, as well as the original written text (a complete list of versions referenced may be found at the end of this article).

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of clarity I shall retain the spelling Gaiman uses for his Oberon (as opposed to Shakespeare's Oberon). It is also worth noting that, for Gaiman, "faerie" is the abode/adjective only, although the characters themselves are also known as the fey.



Fig. 4 Oberon and Titania. *The Sandman* #19. © DC Comics 1990. Neil Gaiman (writer) and Charles Vess (artist), p.21, panels 4-5



Fig. 5 Puck versus Puck. *The Sandman* #19. © DC Comics 1990. Neil Gaiman (writer) and Charles Vess (artist), p.10, panels



Fig. 6 Fairy entrance. *The Sandman* #19. © DC Comics 1990. Neil Gaiman (writer) and Charles Vess (artist), p.5

This depiction mirrors elements of Gregory Doran's 2005 theatrical production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, in which the fairies wear ragged gothic attire and affect eerie, high-pitched voices. Further, Doran's dark interpretation of the play in fact draws many of its visual idiosyncrasies directly from the language of the original text, as the fairy actors use shadow puppetry, dolls, and tea-light candles to represent their shifts of size. This not only references lines such as "king of shadows" (III.ii.347) and "we shadows" (V.i.414), but also emphasises some of the play's more sinister scenes—Oberon's silhouette, projected onto the back screen of the set, looms over the sleeping Titania in a manner more reminiscent of Nosferatu than Cupid as he administers the love juice (II.ii.33-40).

As in Doran's production, the dangerous side of Gaiman's fey is not only indicated visually, but also explicitly referenced (see fig. 7), as when his Peaseblossom (drawn by Vess as an ugly, angular mass of twigs) comments of the Puck: "I am that merry wanderer of the night? I am that giggling-dangerous-totally-bloody-psychotic-menace-to-life-and-limb, more like it" (p.10.4). In this way Vess's artistic depiction of the fey as scary creatures is paralleled by Gaiman's literary descriptions of their unpleasant natures.

Critics such as Marina Warner have argued that "the names of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [also] convey their entomological character and small scale" (Warner 2000, p.173), and that other plays further reference their small size (for example Mercutio's "Queen Mab" speech (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.iv.51-93)). However, Peter Holland comments that descriptions of their size shift unpredictably (Holland 1994, p.23) and concludes that in fact the fey may have been played by the same actors as the mechanicals (p.24).

The play's performance legacy has approached this issue in a variety of ways. The opening bedroom scene of Adrian Noble's 1996 film includes a shot of a toy theatre that, after the introduction of the wood, becomes the setting for various scenes—for example Oberon and Puck observe the mechanicals' rehearsal as on a miniature stage. Actors appear both within the theatre and observe it in miniature form without, effectively conveying size fluctuation while allowing the actors to retain their original forms. In this way notions of character size (and reality) become blurred and inconstant. It can also be argued that the abstract and minimalist staging of productions such as Peter Brook's similarly prevents any understanding of character size. In addition, more literal methods have also been used to represent the same, and Doran's use of tea-light candles finds a parallel in Michael Hoffman's 1999 Hollywood movie of *Dream*,

where special effects create tiny, animated "tinkerbell" type lights that are also used to represent the fairy actors.



Fig. 7 Scary fairies, *The Sandman* #19, © DC Comics 1990, Neil Gaiman (writer) and Charles Vess (artist), p.8, panels 2-5

This view of *Dream*'s fairies as substantial and even sinister beings, rather than ethereal ballerinas, is most obvious in Brook and Doran's productions, but also seems supported by the original text, as for example in the Puck's exchange with Oberon:

**PUCK** My fairy lord, this must be done with haste.  
For night's swift dragons cut the clouds full fast,  
And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger:  
At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there,  
Troop home to churchyards: damned spirits all,  
That in crossways and floods have burial,  
Already to their wormy beds are gone:

For fear lest day should look their shames upon,  
They willfully themselves exile from light  
And must for aye consort with black-brow'd night.  
**OBBERON** But we are spirits of another sort  
(*Dream*, III.ii.378-388)

Despite Oberon's denial of the fairies' association with evil, the shared term "spirits" and ghostly imagery allow for a more menacing interpretation of *Dream*. Whereas twentieth-century public expectations of the play demand child-sized fairies fluttering around elaborately constructed woodland scenery, it has been said that these images owe more "to the imagination of a Victorian children's illustrator than they do to the Elizabethan mind" (McCullough 1991, p.108) and are further belied by traditional descriptions of the Puck and other domestic spirits. From this point of view today's stereotypes of fairies are considered to be a result of Christian meddling in pre-Christian myths. While other literary sources have depicted Oberon as a tiny king (Holland 1994, p.31), Vess draws him as over two metres tall (p.15.1) and as such accords more readily with older folklore, which describes the Sidhe of Celtic legend (the source of the fairy Queen Maeve, a facet of Titania, and therefore relevant to Oberon) as tall and noble. Other legend has also described the fey as bizarre and ugly, although with the warning that to call them so would result in a curse, hence providing an explanation for their ethereal depiction (Morrow 1993). Gaiman in fact supports both views in creating a magical glamour that is customarily worn by his fairy folk to disguise their true forms (see Gaiman 1992, part 8, p.14.3-4; 1996, part 10, p.11.1-6) and, in so doing, references the folkloric tradition that is the source material for *Dream*.

Therefore, while *The Sandman*'s fairy characters may initially seem to subvert the Shakespearean notion in terms of size, nature, and appearance, Gaiman's interpretation in fact finds parallels in *Dream*'s source material, the language of the original play, and its contemporary performance legacy.

### Reality/illusion and transformation

Gaiman's treatment can also be linked to the wider themes of the Shakespearean text. The most obvious of these is *Dream*'s reality/illusion dichotomy (see fig. 1), as summarised by Hippolyta and Theseus at the opening of Act V (see Girard 1979 for a full discussion):

**HIPPOLYTA** 'Tis strange my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.

**THESEUS** More strange than true. I never may believe  
These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.

[...]

Such tricks hath strong imagination  
That if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,

How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

**HIPPOLYTA** But all the story of the night told over,

And all their minds transfigured so together,

More witnesseth than fancy's images,

And grows to something of great constancy;

But, howsoever, strange and admirable.

(*Dream*, V.i.1-27)

While Theseus dismisses the lovers' tale of their adventures in the wood, Hippolyta alone notes its significance as more than "fancy's images". Even the play's characters cannot agree on whether its events are real or fantastic and, in their disagreement, draw attention to this dichotomy.

The divide between reality and illusion is also emphasised by the play-within-play motif.<sup>4</sup> This device emphasises the boundaries of reality and illusion, for example by invoking Roland Barthes's notion of the pleasure principle, which identifies the need for the audience to be complicit in order for fiction to work (Barthes 1975, p.47). The frame of a fairy audience that Gaiman gives *Dream* recreates this Shakespearean motif, as *Dream* itself becomes the play-within-play, and is discussed by its observers in much the same manner as its characters discuss the Pyramus and Thisbe play it itself contains.

In its constant switching between audience discussion and the drama onstage, Gaiman's interpretation mirrors Act V of the original text. However, his fictional audience blurs the lines between reality and illusion still further, by being obviously fantastic, and by doubling the characters in the play they observe. As a consequence, the fiction with which Gaiman surrounds the Shakespearean play begins to collapse into it as characters, events and structure are doubled. The outdoor setting for Gaiman's production (p.3.6) replicates the mechanicals' rehearsals (*Dream*, III.i.1-11), just as the actor Will Kemp's enthusiasm mirrors that of his character,

<sup>4</sup> The play-within-play motif illustrates the self-conscious creation of illusion, exposing fiction's need for make-believe in both actor and spectator. It is found throughout Shakespeare's plays, whether it is presented overtly (as in *Hamlet* and similar) or obliquely (in the form of masquerade, play-acting, or disguise).

Bottom—for example as demonstrated when Bottom wants to play the parts of Pyramus, Thisbe and Lion (*Dream*, I.ii.66-9; Gaiman, 1990b, p.1.3-4). Similarly, Gaiman's Auberon enters fully armoured (fig. 2). This creates a parallel with Theseus, whose introduction as a conqueror (*Dream*, I.i.16-17) means the character is often similarly attired (as for example in Doran's 2005 production). This link is relevant since these two parts have often been played by a single actor.

The play's events are also doubled: the Shakespearean Puck's comment "I'll be an auditor—/An actor too, perhaps, if I see cause" (*Dream*, III.i.72-3) anticipates his dual role in Gaiman's setting (where he leaves the audience to take over his part of the play from the actor Dick Cowley) (p.15.6). Likewise, Morpheus's comment "It is a fool's prerogative to utter truths that no one else will speak" (p.6.4) applies as much to the function of the Shakespearean fool as it does to Gaiman's Puck, its referent. Other linguistic quirks are similarly replicated by Gaiman—for example his Puck's statement "I had forgotten me, these centuries in faerie, what rare creatures mortals could be... / ... and what rare fun" (p.9.5) recalls the Shakespearean character's famous "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III.i.115).

Structurally, too, the breakdown of order that Gaiman's fairy audience create in his production ("That is not Cowley! What's happening? Where are they going?" (p.22.5)) mirrors the role of Shakespeare's fairies within the fiction of his play. In the concluding pages of the comic, the events both within and without the play merge. After showing Theseus' closing speech and the Puck's recital of the fairy blessing from Act V (*Dream*, V.i.374-378; Gaiman 1990b, p.22.2), Gaiman's Auberon then speaks (instead of Shakespeare's), summoning the fey to leave the mortal plane (p.22.3). The blurring of semantic story levels in this way blends notions of reality and illusion completely. The next page, showing a solitary Puck giving his epilogue, may as a result be read either as sheer reality or sheer illusion—as befits this type of Shakespearean epilogue, where the actor both remains in character (in referring to himself as "an honest Puck" (V.i.421)) and also steps outside it (in acknowledging the play's fiction and asking for applause (V.i.428)). As such, Gaiman's interpretation successfully maintains this Shakespearean tradition.

Overall, Gaiman's frame is structurally consistent with *Dream*. The comic shows actors entertaining an elite audience, which overtly recalls the function of the Shakespearean mechanicals in Act V. The nature of Gaiman's audience may also reference the subtext of *Dream* as, while the mechanicals provide the lovers' entertainment, the lovers are in turn providing the fairies with their entertainment. In this context, the

commentary of Gaiman's fairies reminds one of Shakespeare's courtiers observing his mechanicals. The performance legacy of productions such as Peter Brook's is of import here, as the Act V play-within-play has sometimes been presented as an inversion, where the mechanicals become audience to the courtiers' jests (see for example V.i.235-254).

As Brook commented in rehearsal: "They are playing Shakespeare to the mechanicals [...] They are forcing the mechanicals to admire their courtly acting" (Selbourne 1982, p.163). Gaiman also uses this strategy as his actors are just as interested in observing their fantastic audience as the fairy folk are in watching the play ("I saw Boggarts, and trolls, and, and Nixies, and things of every manner and kind" (p.9.2)). In this way Gaiman's doubling and inversion of events foregrounds the play's theme of reality versus illusion.

The play's theme of transformation is also touched by Gaiman's frame, in which Titania steals away Shakespeare's son Hamnet (who is acting the part of the Indian Boy) during the course of the performance (p.16.7; p.17.5; p.20.3; p.24.5). This echoes Adrian Noble's film, in which a boy dreams the events of the play. By making the play a literal dream Noble maintains *Dream's* transforming structure as the ending of his film implies the boy has joined the fairies as a changeling, as after drinking water given him by Oberon he takes the Puck's hand (in response to the invitation in the epilogue) and poses with them in the final tableau.

Noble's use of this extratextual character to replace the Indian Boy is, in many senses, recreated by Gaiman's use of the child Hamnet. However, Gaiman takes his rewriting a step further by reversing the gender bias of *Dream's* original text and allowing Titania to keep her prize, and her new pageboy later appears in a different comic, *The Books of Magic* #3 (Gaiman 1991, p.35.3), drawn in identical fashion by Charles Vess and named as Hamnet. Although this outcome subverts the whole Indian Boy quarrel that *Dream* revolves around, it also enables Gaiman to use Hamnet as a motif of transformation, in much the same way as the character of Bottom serves the original text.

### Intertextuality, (meta)fiction and faction

Just as intertextual reference to other fiction (*The Books of Magic*) informs understanding of the comic, Hamnet's abduction is also used by Gaiman to enter the world of faction, as he fictionalises the creation of Shakespeare's most famous tragedy by tying it to the historically documented death of his son in 1596. Again, this may be considered a subversive act as *Hamlet* is popularly considered to be rewritten from

various classical and literary sources, one of which is the *Ur-Hamlet*, allegedly written by Thomas Kyd. However, there is also a theory that this play is simply a draft of Shakespeare's, and some scholars have theorised the play may have autobiographical links, for example with reference to marriage and infidelity.

A similar extratextual comment may be found in Gaiman's inclusion of the real setting of Wendel's Mound, a chalk figure located near the village of Wilmington in East Sussex, the site of which forms a natural amphitheatre. Historians to this day remain undecided as to the exact nature of the figure, which is commonly perceived to be holding two staffs—although it has been suggested that there is overlooked detail at the tops of these that is depicted accurately by Vess (see panel 1 of fig. 2). This has been interpreted as either the crosspiece of a gate, or perhaps as the tops of scythes or similar tools. Although the earliest known record of the Wilmington Giant is 1710 it is believed to be much older, and details of the site note it provides a natural amphitheatre: all of which lend credence to Gaiman's setting.

The date of 23 June 1593 also appears historically accurate, particularly as it is known the company would have been engaged in country tours during this time due to the outbreak of plague in London. Although it is believed that *Dream* was written c.1595 there is no conclusive evidence as to the exact date, and all that can be certain is that it was being worked on at the same time as *Romeo and Juliet*. Both references are picked up in the Gaiman text where Richard Burbage anticipates his next role as "A lover most tragical" (p.3.3) on their return to London and various other members of the company complain about "These provincial tours" (p.4.1). Burbage and the other actors making up Shakespeare's company (Dick Cowley, Henry Condell, Thomas Pope, Robert Armin and the clown Will Kemp) are also taken from history.

Again fact is incorporated into the fiction as it is not only likely that Kemp would have played Bottom in the original production, but also believed that Kemp's departure from the company in 1599 was due to his chronic improvising. This is thought to have been satirised by Shakespeare himself (*Hamlet* III.ii.37-8; *Dream* I.ii.1-103) and is similarly referenced by Gaiman (1990b, p.1.3-4; p.6.5). In this-light, the factional elements of Gaiman's frame may not be completely antithetical to Shakespearean scholarship, while his incorporation of fairytale motifs such as changelings and portals tie his frame still closer to the focus of *Dream*.

Further, I'd like to propose that, as well as replicating many of the semantic and structural elements of the original text and performance legacy of *Dream*, and using faction to give these a metafictional

dimension, Gaiman's comic also incorporates a level of meta-fiction in its references to the Shakespearean history of doubt. In *Sandman* #13, "Men of Good Fortune", Gaiman fictionalises a relationship between Shakespeare, Marlowe and Morpheus to include a bargain that practically makes Shakespeare into a Marlowe character. In this issue, Morpheus overhears Shakespeare and Marlowe discussing his *Dr Faustus*, the theme of which Shakespeare describes as "That for one's art and for one's dreams one may consort and bargain with the darkest powers" (1990a, p.9.3) and proceeds to make such a bargain with Shakespeare. In exchange, Shakespeare agrees to write two plays for Morpheus: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.<sup>5</sup>

Involving Marlowe in this re-evaluation of Shakespeare's genius means that in a sense the comic can also be read as part of the long history of doubt surrounding Shakespeare's work. This dates from 1728 and includes both factual and fictional works.<sup>6</sup> Although time does not permit a detailed discussion of these theories, they contain some credible arguments that include the educational limitations of the man from Stratford and his family, the dates ascribed to his named publications, his entry in the deaths register as merely a "gent" and the lack of elegies, memorials or any literary possessions at this time. Although many identities have been suggested, the Hoffman (or Marlovian) theory is one of the most striking as it accredits Shakespeare's work to an exiled (rather than murdered) Kit Marlowe.<sup>7</sup>

While appearing to support bardolatry in his homage to Shakespeare (whose work appeals not just to humans but to the fey also), it may also be said that Gaiman subverts it by providing a source for the two plays most commonly cited as original to Shakespeare. The reference to Marlowe may therefore be an implicit nod to the Hoffman theory, an observation that is emphasised both by Marlowe's presence at the time of their initial deal (1990a, p.12.1-6), and the alignment of the bargain with the themes of his play.

<sup>5</sup> This last is also the title and subject of the final issue (#75) of *The Sandman*.

<sup>6</sup> These early publications include Captain Goulding's *Essay Against Too Much Reading* (1728) and anonymous allegories such as *The Life and Adventures of Common Sense* (1769) or *The Story of the Learned Pig* (1786). Many subsequent texts have theorised that Shakespeare was little more than a pseudonym and have accredited authorship of his plays to, variously, Kit Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon, William Stanley, or Edward de Vere (see <http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com/histdoubt.htm> for a complete list, or the Australian Film programme *Mich Ado About Something*, dir. Michael Rubbo, for a more detailed discussion).

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Hoffman, *The Man who was Shakespeare* (1955).

However, Gaiman's purpose may be quite different, as Morpheus comments of their bargain "Will is a willing vehicle for the great stories. Through him they will live for an age of man; and his words will echo down through time" (p.19.2). By naming Morpheus as the source of Shakespeare's stories, it may be that Gaiman is redefining Shakespeare as a divinely inspired genius, offering a more pleasing alternative to the history of doubt. Further, by aligning Morpheus and Shakespeare (both as literary co-laborators and as fathers who have lost their sons), he extends the metafiction of *The Sandman* (as a comic about storytelling) to include even the Shakespearean canon.

### Conclusion

Although many elements of the *Sandman* (such as Gaiman's scary fairies or his metafictional treatment of bardolatry) may initially appear to go against generally accepted interpretations of *Dream*, closer examination reveals that in fact *The Sandman* sustains many of the essential dichotomies and themes found in the play. The postmodern nature of Gaiman's framing provides a new approach to *Dream*'s reality/illusion dichotomy and its theme of transformation while staying true to the original text. Both sinister and pastoral elements from *Dream* (present in the original text's combination of Midsummer and Mayday rites) are sustained as Gaiman juxtaposes his menacing fairy audience with their prancing actor counterparts (see fig. 4; also p.18.2-3).

In fact, I would suggest that just such a tendency towards juxtaposition and contradiction is apparent in the original play. From the very beginning, where we hear how Theseus wooed Hippolyta "with my sword" (I.i.16), the paradox of love and hate is introduced and subsequently exploited by the events in the wood. Helena's affection for Demetrius makes him hate her, while Hermia's hatred seems to make him love her. Linguistic construction is similarly inverted (II.i.188-194), and metaphor and imagery equally contradictory (for example in the image of an abused yet fawning spaniel (II.i.203-4)). Ultimately all the lovers change roles, yet the structural inversion continues, as discussed in the context of Act V. Only with the chaotic intervention of the fairies can matters be resolved, creating the transforming structure of the play.

Parallels can be drawn between comics and dramatic texts, which are subject to constant reinterpretation and re-creation and, while having a textual basis, therefore exist in no original form. It therefore seems appropriate that so many elements of *Dream* are sustained by *The*

*Sandman* and that, in the final analysis, even its apparent subversions are shown to have their basis in the play's text and performance legacy.

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*Sub/versions* draws together recent work analysing texts that exist in a complicated relationship to issues of "high" and "low" culture. An important aspect of this debate is the manner in which the critical reception of "original" versions can act to resist the validity of new or re-imagined adaptations. Equally important is the reception of works that are self-consciously intertextual, or exist in various forms and different media. The research represented here examines these issues, exploring the changes that are made between versions and the ways in which these transformations might subvert the original text. The approach of this collection is therefore fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing on a range of topics related to subversion and "sub/versions", including translation, parody, satire, metafiction, performance, allegory, and genre.

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**Pauline MacPherson** is a Postgraduate Researcher in the English Programme at the University of Dundee.

**Dr Christopher Murray** lectures in English and Film at the University of Dundee.

**Gordon Spark** is a Postgraduate Researcher in the English Programme at the University of Dundee.

**Dr Kevin Corstorphine** lectures in English at the University of Limerick.



9781847183729  
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Pauline MacPherson,  
Christopher Murray,  
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