

Shakespeare's Italian Dream  
Cinquecento sources for A Midsummer Night's Dream(1)  
by  
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In the light of Shakespeare's extensive use of Italian settings and nomenclature, and his adaptations of plot-lines ultimately stemming from Boccaccio (Cymbeline), Giraldi Cinthio (Othello and Measure for Measure) and the novelle (Romeo and Juliet), it is surprising that the Italianate character of A Midsummer Night's Dream has not been generally noted. Most commentators(2) see the play as drawing from a pool of classical, traditional and romance sources which include Plutarch, Chaucer, the romance Huon of Bordeaux, Ovid, and Apuleius while Judith M. Kennedy is convinced that Book I of Jorge de Montemayor's Diana (c.1559, Yong's English translation 1598) furnished Shakespeare with the principal action of the play.(3) This last has a certain credibility since it is indisputable that Shakespeare used Montemayor's Felismena/Felix story in Two Gentlemen of Verona and Book I certainly contains a similar pattern of changing love relationships and rustic setting. However, the strongly Italianate character of Montemayor's Diana and the generic rather than precise nature of the similarities noted by Judith Kennedy do suggest that more exact parallels may be found in the literature of Italy. Hugh M. Richmond(4) appears exceptional in identifying a possible Italian source in Giraldi Cinthio's Hecatomithi II.8 (see Appendix 1 for summary). It would be apposite here to examine the description given in the novella's head-word:

Possidonio, & Peronello amano Ginevra, ella ama Possidonio, & h=E0 in odio Peronello, il quale =E8 amato da una altra Giovane detta Lisca, Egli non ama lei, Lisca =E8 promessa dal Padre a Possidonio, & Ginevra similmente =E8 promessa a Peronello; & nel volere celebrare le nozze , per nuovo accidente Ginevra divien di Possidonio, & Lisca di Peronello.

(Possidonio and Peronello love Ginevra. She loves Possidonio and detests Peronello who is himself loved by another young woman named Lisca. He does not love her. Lisca is betrothed to Possidonio by her father. Ginevra is similarly promised to Peronello but, on their way to celebrate the nuptials, through an unforeseen event, Ginevra becomes the bride of Possidonio and Lisca that of Peronello.)(5)

The shifting relationships of the Lovers and the conflict with paternal wishes (which is not present in Montemayor), taking into account Shakespeare's other instances of mining Giraldi for plots, demand our consideration while Richmond sees other parallels in Possidonio's denunciation of the obstacles to true love (cf. Lysander's similar listing in I.i), the removal to a rustic setting (in this case to complete the betrothals by marriage), an imbroglio involving danger and confusion which serves to re-align the love relationships and is ascribed to supernatural influence, and the challenging and overruling of parental opposition by a wiser authority. In addition to these structural details, Richmond also notes a common underlying theme of the superseding of archaic, patriarchal attitudes to marriage which is emphasised by the use of both supernatural and magisterial intervention to deny parental severity.

A full reading of the text, nevertheless, somewhat weakens Richmond's arguments. The bare description given by the head-word is, in fact, the only part which immediately suggests that here we may have the central matter of A Midsummer Night's Dream - although Shakespeare's

unquestionable use of Giraldian sources favours the view that he was at least aware of the Ginevra story. The close resemblance which we find between Giraldi's original stories and the plots of Othello and Measure for Measure is simply not present here, as I shall demonstrate.

There is no framing action of a wedding of important personages and neither is there any suggestion of legal recourse on the part of Ginevra's parents to enforce their choice of a son-in-law. While the old farmer who has tended the injured lovers claims to have a right to resolve their amatory problems, it is a right conferred by special circumstance rather than by law. His claim is presented through lengthy persuasion and argument while Shakespeare simply has Theseus say "Egeus, I overbear your will" (AMN'sD IV.i.176) to resolve the issue. The supernatural element is, apart from one brief reference to the Gods, completely compatible with a non-pagan monotheism and has no personification within the action. The rustic setting is the relatively humdrum world of peasant farmers rather than a threatening wood and the one instance of natural danger comes from a river in spate rather than from magical intervention and the presence of wild beasts. The river episode, in any case, occupies a considerably smaller part of the narrative than that taken up by the Athenian woods in Shakespeare's play; in fact, most of the action described takes place either in the fortress of Mirandola or in the home of the old farmer. Lastly, and this is admittedly a subjective point, the quality of writing in the Ginevra story is poor, being repetitive, sketchy in its characterisation, and bereft of comic moments such as lighten the perceived dangers of Shakespeare's Athenian wood. Aesthetically, the two works could not be more dissimilar.

While, as I have indicated, Shakespeare's use of other Giraldi plots suggests that he was probably aware of Hecatommithi II.8, the number of direct and significant correspondences between it and A Midsummer Night's Dream seem, therefore, insufficient to claim it as anything more than a minor contributory source. Much closer parallels may be found in the world of the Italian pastoral drama and, in particular, Guarini's best-seller *Il pastor fido* (published in London in 1591 and translated into English in 1602) which prefigures a number of key points of Shakespeare's plot and setting. For non-Italianists who may be unfamiliar with the work, I provide a plot-summary in Appendix 2.

With regard to *Il pastor fido*, Lady Politic Would-be's comments in Jonson's *Volpone* indicate a general availability of the text,

Here's *Pastor fido*...All our English writers,  
I mean such as are happy in the Italian,  
Will deign to steal out of this author, mainly:  
Almost as much as from Montaigne (III.iv)

while Shakespeare's mining of the Italian drama and novelle probably identifies him as one who is "happy in the Italian." (6). His debt to Montaigne is beyond question. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suppose the most successful playwright of the English public theatre to be one who "steal[s] from out of this author". A generic resemblance to *Pastor fido* may, in fact, be noted in any of Shakespeare's "Green World" plays, but only *A Midsummer Night's Dream* goes beyond a superficial borrowing of the scenery of the pastorate.

Like the *Pastor fido*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, poses its human characters a number of problems, in a world of inflexible custom, whose resolution is dependent to some extent on the placating of supernatural forces. Structurally, the progression court-wood-court in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* mirrors the temple-wood-temple movement of *Il pastor fido* and both court and temple represent stability and law. There is a mutual emphasis on legality and the background to both plays is the impending marriage of persons of some importance. The central action is dominated by

two pairs of lovers of whom one male is initially ill-disposed to the female who follows him through the woods. Both plays are set in Greece, a woodland setting frames their central actions, and the principal love plots of each are both comically mirrored and directed, to some extent, by mythical figures. Their dramatic infrastructures depend on the observance of Diana's rites and Montano and Theseus, as leaders of their respective communities, are charged with ensuring compliance with her decrees and traditional practices.

In the pastorella, the continued well-being of Arcadia necessitates a yearly sacrifice to appease the slighted moon-goddess whose oracle has stated

=ABChe si sacrasse allora e poscia ogn'anno  
vergine o donna a la sdegnata dea  
che'l terzo lustro empiesse ed oltre al quarto  
non s'avanzassa; e cos=ED d'una il sangue  
l'ira spegnesse apparecchiata a molti=BB (I.ii.pg.27)

("That there then be sacrificed each year  
to the offended goddess a virgin  
or dame past puberty but still youthful.  
In this way shall the blood of one assuage  
The wrath which was prepar'd for the many")

While, at Theseus's court, the Duke himself has to accommodate his nuptial plans to her rituals. As the play begins we find him complaining that his marriage to Hippolyta cannot be consummated until the next new moon, four days away - and already there is a suggestion that the presiding deity is not entirely benevolent:

... O, methinks, how slow  
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,  
Like to a step-dame or a dowager,  
Long withering out a young man's revenue. (I.i.3-6)

The frame of *Il pastor fido* is the impending marriage of a god-descended couple - again decreed by Diana's oracle:

=ABNon avr=E1 prima fin quel che v'offende,  
che duo semi del ciel congiunga Amore;  
e di donna infedel l'antico errore  
L'alta piet=E1 d'un pastor fido ammende=BB (I.ii.pg.27)

("There shall be no end to your woe unless  
love's god conjoin two of divine descent;  
and that old error of a faithless dame  
compassion of a faithful shepherd mend")

Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we celebrate the marriage of Hippolyta, who, as leader of the warlike Amazons, descends from Ares,(7) and Theseus who, according to Plutarch's *Lives*, is also, if only by repute, of divine descent (I quote Sir Thomas North's translation - a principal source for Julius Caesar et al.):  
And Pitheus [the grandfather of Theseus] also had given it out abroad, that he was begotten of Neptune(8)

It is tempting to speculate that the Silvio character's obvious modelling on the classical chaste hunter, Hippolytus, perhaps suggested, by an etymological resonance, the use of Hippolyta's marriage as the framing device.

In Athens, the right of disposal of a daughter in marriage is governed by custom, herein vested in the father, as the determinedly litigious Egeus affirms:

I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:  
As she is mine I may dispose of her; (I.i.41-2)

And the unlucky Hermia is thus faced with three unwelcome choices: to marry Demetrius, to die, or to become an unwilling votress of that very moon which delays the Duke's own marriage. In *Il pastor fido*, the shepherd Ergasto credits Titiro, the father of the pastorale's Amarilli, with a severity akin to that of Egeus:

Misera lei, se risapesse il padre,  
ch'ella a prieghi furtivi avesse mai  
inchinate l'orecchie (I.ii.pg.22)

(Woe to her if e'er her father heard that  
she to furtive prayers had bent an ear)

And Amarilli too is faced with an unchangeable ritual and a suitor, Silvio, whom she has no wish to marry. Her love for Mirtillo, like that of Hermia for Lysander, places her at risk of death; for the oracle has decreed Diana's law to be

...=ABChe qualunque  
donna o donzella abbia la f=E9 d'amore,  
come che sia, contaminata o rotta,  
s'altri per lei non muore, a morte sia  
irremissibilmente condannata=BB. (I.ii.pg.27)

(..."That any maid or dame, whate'er her name,  
who fouls or somehow breaks her vows of love,  
must then be irredeemably condemn'd  
if surrogate will not die in her place.")

The Fairy King's greeting "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania" (II,i,60) again invokes the moon as a symbol of disharmony, a disharmony centred on Titania's refusal to present a changeling boy to her husband. The world of the play is in turmoil as a result of Oberon's and Titania's displeasure and again the moon is participant:

Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,  
Pale in her anger, washes all the air  
That rheumatic diseases do abound. (II.i.103-105)

Arcadia too has known disruption as Diana's fury caused mayhem and disease

...ella [Diana] prese  
l'arco possente e saett=F2 nel seno  
de la misera Arcadia non veduti  
strali ed inevitabili di morte. (I.ii.pg.25)

(...she [Diana] took  
her mighty bow and in the wretched breast  
of Arcady sent arrows unperceiv'd  
of death from which there could be no reprieve)

and here it is perhaps fitting to point out yet another parallel between the two works: Ovid, in *Metamorphoses* III.173,(9) specifically uses the

matronymic Titania in referring to the bathing Diana. Both in characterisation (as a powerful woodland spirit) and name, therefore, Titania stands revealed as an avatar of Diana and in both plays we see a destructive chaos occasioned by her wilfulness. The Moon/Diana/Phoebe is referred to forty-eight times in the course of Shakespeare's play while the equation Titania=3DDiana augments that presence not only by reference but by direct characterisation. As far as I have been able to discover, *Il pastor fido* has no precedent, either literary or mythological, for its depiction of Diana's wrath occasioning a general affliction and Shakespeare's use of the same device, taken in conjunction with the other structural resemblances, surely argues a connection.

The love themes too are structurally similar. Initially, the marriage of Mirtillo and Amarilli, like that of Shakespeare's Lysander and Hermia, is forbidden by law; and the pursuit of Silvio by Dorinda in *Il pastor fido* finds a parallel in Helena's wooing of Demetrius. In the latter instance, both plays show the nymph/woman facing not just initial rejection but outright scorn:

Silvio: N=E9 t'ho cara n=E9 t'amo, anzi t'ho in odio,  
brutta, vile, bugiarda ed importuna! (II.iii.pg.63)

(I hold you neither dear nor lov'd but loath'd  
you craven, foul and importunate liar!)

demetrius: Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit;  
=46or I am sick when I do look on thee. (II.i.211-212)

Helena and Dorinda brave the dangers of the woods to be with the unwilling recipients of their love (AMN'sD II.i/Il p.f. IV.ii). Helena's reward for this is to be threatened with violence by Demetrius,

...let me go;  
Or, if thou follow me, do not believe  
But I shall do thee mischief in the wood. (II.i.235-237)

while Dorinda is, in fact, wounded by Silvio's arrow (IV.viii.pg.155).

The satyr is the visible manifestation of the mythic in *Il pastor fido* and Puck, as a non-human anarchic element, principally fills that niche in the dramatic ecology of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck's role as the mischievous sower of love and creator of confusion also hints at another supernatural force normally resident within the world of pastoral: the love god, Cupid. Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* (1573) opens with a boy-actor as Cupid who, having run away from his mother, Venus, is going to have fun sowing love among the mortals:

Io, che non son fanciullo se ben ho  
volto fanciullesco ed atti,  
voglio dispor di me come a me piace (Prologo. 23-25)

(Although in face and gesture I may seem  
a boy, yet know that I am not so young,  
and will proceed where'er my pleasure leads)

In form and characterisation, Tasso's Cupid has perhaps more in common with Puck than does Guarini's unseen love-god who tardily confirms his presence in *Il pastor fido*'s Arcadian wood by engaging in a mocking dialogue with Silvio in which he pretends to be an echo (IV.viii). This unseen participation in events, however, prefigures Puck's voice directing the lovers in the darkness laid upon them - which occurs at the same point, Act

IV, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Puck differs from the satyr in that he does not display the latter's exaggerated sexuality - perhaps because the role was played by a boy (cf. Tasso's Cupid), but, like the satyr, he plagues womankind:

...Are not you he  
That frights the maidens of the villagery (II.i.34-5)

The grotesquely comic sexuality of the satyr is, however, represented in Shakespeare's cast in the character of Bottom. In *Il pastor fido*, the principal love themes are caricatured by the sub-plot involving the half-human satyr and the wood-nymph Corisca. A similar mirroring occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but comically reversed, as Bottom, rendered part-animal, is pursued by the female woodland spirit Titania. Titania's powers of attraction being, by definition, greater than those of the satyr, her advances have a positive outcome.

A final resemblance is, of course, the epithalamium - a topos mutual to both plays. In *Il pastor fido*, this is sung by the Chorus whose interjections throughout the work, although mainly non-musical, provide the same type of dramatic punctuation supplied by the numerous songs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

With regard to other Italianate elements not present in *Il pastor fido*, Puck has a satiric attribute which may indicate another part-source: like Satiro in Beccari's *Sacrificio* (1554), he is possessed of a magical substance which, when applied to the victim's eyes, causes transformation. In the case of Satiro the substance is a combination of soporific and truth-serum while Puck's flower-juice evokes or cancels love; it is nevertheless interesting to note the similarity of application and the fact that both the satyr and Puck induce their victims to sleep. The characters of Oberon and Puck may also owe something to the improvised pastorali of the commedia dell'arte. Ferdinando Neri, in his *Scenari delle maschere di Arcadia* (Città di Castello, 1913), cites a number of scenari which may have inspired Shakespeare. While Neri's intent is to identify links between the commedia and *The Tempest*, the combination of directing Mage and servitor Sprite which he notes in Locatelli's island pastoral *Li tre satiri* recalls Oberon and Puck as much as it does Prospero and Ariel. Among the available entertainments listed by Theseus is one which perhaps has as its suggestion Poliziano's *Orfeo* (circa 1480),

'The riot of the tipsy Bacchanals,  
Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage.' (V.i.48-9)

while the 'rude mechanicals' and their ludicrous version of 'Pyramus and Thisby' suggest the Zanni of the commedia dell'arte.. Anne Barton sees them as simply "plain Elizabethan workmen"(10) but Bottom's offer of a "Bergomask dance" (V.i.344) surely implies at least a measure of identification with the original Zanni characterisation as the uncouth porter from Bergamo.

These minor details apart, it is *Il pastor fido* which most commends itself as a direct Italian inspiration for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While the central plot lines of the plays differ in some respects, their constituent elements display remarkable similarities. The strong presence of Diana/Moon in both plays and the way in which she afflicts not just an Actaeon figure but the whole community most firmly indicate Guarini's play as a source while the shared elements of song, choric interlude, comedy, implied danger, woodland setting and mythic backdrop confirm that *Il pastor fido* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* inhabit the same aesthetic world. Taking into consideration the additional points of similarity in plot and characterisation, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a contaminatio of identifiable Italian elements

which derive in the main from Giovanni Battista Guarini's pastorale, *Il pastor fido*.

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Appendix 1:

Giraldi Cinthio, *Giovanbattista De gli Hecatommithi* (Girolamo Scotto, Vinegia 1566) Novella VIII pp.240-246

Plot Summary:

In the town of Mirandola, a young woman, Ginevra, loves Possidonio who returns her affections. Peronello also loves Ginevra and, because he is wealthier than his rival, is betrothed to her by her parents. Lisca loves Peronello but is, in turn, betrothed to Possidonio. Ginevra's wedding is to take place at her father's farm and Possidonio decides to seize Ginevra at the river-crossing en route. The river suddenly sends a wave which sends the boat out of control and Ginevra and Lisca, who is one of her attendants, are washed overboard. Possidonio plunges in to rescue them and, more dead than alive, the three young people finally reach the shore well downstream in Modenese territory where they are pulled out by some peasants who take them home and summon an old farmer who has medical knowledge. He nurses them to health and a message is sent to their families informing them that their children, believed drowned, have survived. The parents arrive with Peronello and it is suggested that the weddings take place on the spot. Possidonio threatens violence and the old farmer intervenes. After much persuasion, he convinces Peronello that Providence has decreed that Lisca be his bride and that Possidonio marry Ginevra. The parents finally agree to bless the unions and the weddings take place in the old farmer's house.

Appendix 2:

Guarini, Giovanni Battista *Il pastor fido a cura di Gioachino Brognoligo* (Laterza, Bari, 1914)

Plot Summary:

Prior to the action of the play, Aminta, a priest of Diana, loved Lucreina. She forsook him for another and Aminta asked his goddess to avenge him. Diana unloosed a plague on Arcadia which the oracle stated would have no end unless Lucreina, or someone who would take her place, were sacrificed. Aminta, appointed executioner, stabbed himself at the altar and Lucreina, stricken with guilt, followed suit. Diana, still angry, renewed the plague and the oracle made three pronouncements: that a young woman must be sacrificed each year to abate the plague; that any faithless woman should die unless a voluntary substitute were found; and that the preceding should be valid until Love united two people of divine ancestry.

The chief priest, Montano, is the theocratic hierarch of Arcadia. His son, Silvio, is descended from Hercules and, in order to end the curse, is betrothed to Amarilli who is descended from Pan. They do not love each other. Mirtillo, lately arrived in Arcadia, loves Amarilli and she, albeit chastely, loves him. Dorinda loves Silvio and follows him through the woods. Initially he despises and threatens her but the shock of accidentally wounding her awakens his love. Previously this has been forecast by a mischievous Cupid in the role of an informative echo.

Corisca, a wayward nymph, is pursued by a satyr whom she comically teases. She is jealous of Amarilli and Mirtillo and arranges that Amarilli, although innocent, be found in an apparently adulterous situation. This done, Amarilli is condemned by the theocracy who govern Arcadia but

Mirtillo confounds Corisca's plan by offering to bear the penalty himself. As he is about to be sacrificed, his adoptive father, just arrived in Arcadia, interrupts the ceremony and Mirtillo is identified as Silvio's long-lost brother and therefore eligible to marry Amarilli. Corisca repents and, at the wedding celebrations which follow, the Chorus sing an epithalamium.

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#### =46ootnotes:

- 1 A shorter, Italian version of this article is to appear in *Biblioteca teatrale* (probably in the Spring '96 edition).
- 2 E.g. Geoffrey Bullough in his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare Vol.1* (London 1957), Anne Barton in her introduction to the play in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston 1974) and Kenneth Muir in *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London 1977)
- 3 See her critical edition of Yong's translation, pg.xlvii.
- 4 Richmond, Hugh M. "Shakespeare's Verismo and the Italian Popular Tradition" in *Theatre of the English and Italian Renaissance* pp.179-203.
- 5 All translations are my own.
- 6 Not to mention his quoting of "Venetia, chi non ti vede non ti pretia" from John Florio's Italian phrase book *First Fruits* (1578) in *Love's Labours Lost* (IV.ii.91-2). Vis==E0-vis Shakespeare's linguistic abilities,

Robert Ball's article comparing Epitia and Measure for Measure makes a strong case for his having at least a reading knowledge of Italian (see Bibliography for publishing details).

7 See William Smith's *A Smaller Classical Dictionary* ed. E.H. Blakeney (London 1910) pp.265 and 532-534.

8 Plutarch *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* trans. Sir Thomas North. This quotation is from pg.3 of the 1676 edition published by George Sawbridge, London.

9 Loeb edition.

10 Riverside Shakespeare pg.218