Dr. Jeannette Webber, 1999-2000

Lecture Dedication

DEDICATED TO the memory of my mother, Eva Jeannette Webber,
who taught me how to read.

Myth, Magic and Metamorphosis

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Presented in the James R. Garvin Memorial Theatre Before a Community Audience

Myth and Magic

The old woman sighed sympathetically. 'My pretty dear,' she said, 'you must be cheerful and stop worrying about dreams. The dreams that come in daylight are not to be trusted, everyone knows that, and even night -dreams go by contraries. Now let me tell you a fairy tale or two to make you feel a little better.'

-Apulieus, The Golden Ass

There are indeed many wonders, and

with regard to stories people tell one another,

it may be

that such tales go beyond the true account

and, embellished with iridescent lies,

beguile them.

-Pindar, Odes, Olympian 1

Now I shall tell of things that change, new being out of old.

-Ovid, Invocation to The Metamorphoses

I never may believe

These antic fables, nor these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends . . .

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen

Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing

A local habitation and a name.

-Theseus, Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream

These things never happened, but are always.

-Sallust, Of Gods and of the World

A warm welcome to President MacDougall, the Board of Trustees, colleagues, students, friends, members of the community, and my children, Eric, Kristen and Michelle.

I'm thrilled to have been chosen to give this talk today. Thank you all for coming on this beautiful beginning of spring of the new Millennium, a perfect time for my topic of myth, magic and metamorphosis. I dedicate this lecture to the memory of my mother, Eva Webber, a community college teacher herself. She taught me to read before I started school, recited huge chunks of memorized poetry for our entertainment, and loved words and insisted that they be used correctly. Her spirit is very much with us here.

I also dedicate this talk to my colleagues in the English Department and all our students. Literature offers a magical opening into the world and ourselves. When you write, you become something of a wizard, discovering hidden insights which you bring into form. I have had a bit of that experience myself, writing this talk.

Like any practice of sorcery, both reading and writing demand devotion. And, as with any magical practice, the rewards cannot be measured in mundane terms. We readers and playgoers participate in the miracle of centuries of imaginative creativity. I appreciate the opportunity to speak for and to all of you engaged in this magic.

And so: I conjure you sitting here. Now I ask you all to breathe deeply*[pause and do so]*- and again *[pause]*. Let your cares and concerns go for this hour. Open yourself to the magical possibilities of imagination.

At the beginning of epic poems, the bard presents his-or her-invocation: the argument or basic theme of the poem and a thankful prayer to the Muse, for only when she sings through the poet may the poet create. In keeping with my topic, I here offer thanks to

the gracious Muse. I shall speak of magical transformations and the destructive force of the "golden touch." I shall argue for the power of metamorphosis, even so radical as assuming the ears of a donkey, not just as punishment but as a comic yet profound revelation of the mystery of our existence. Through story and drama, I shall explore timeless themes, including greed, desire and personal identity.

We begin with stories from two master magicians, Ovid and Shakespeare, rooted in myths told by our ancient ancestors. In our technological era, "myth" often means something untrue. You may wonder why I suggest we look to timeworn stories for anything useful. We like to think we can explain and control our world, but underneath lurk potentials, images and dreams which reverberate through myth and symbol into our own imaginative lives.

For this understanding, we owe a debt to Carl Jung, who demonstrated the profound spiritual mysteries revealed in art, the collective unconscious discoverable through the study of myth, poem and tale. We must also thank Joseph Campbell, who, following Jung's lead, examined the myths of the world for their continued power in our lives.

William Shakespeare read historical chronicles, pastoral romances, Italian novels and just about anything he could get his hands on as a basis for those plays that he cranked out at such amazing speed, thirty-eight of them all together, no two the same. His favorite book was *The Metamorphoses*, a collection of myths of transformation set down around the time of the birth of Christ by the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso, whom we know as Ovid. On first reading, these tales appear to come from a world unconnected to our own. Gods appear among humans, disguised as eagles or swans or bulls. The wolfish man becomes a wolf. Tragic lovers fly off as birds.

European artists and poets rediscovered the stories of gods and goddesses in the fourteenth century. These myths sparked the Renaissance which flowered for some two hundred years and resonates still today.

Shakespeare's fascination with mythology didn't come from fashionable London or Florence, however: he first read Ovid in Latin in Kings New School in Stratford-upon-Avon. Yes, as a child of middle-class origins, he indeed read Latin-for classroom recitation, but also for pleasure and, as it later proved, for insights into the arc of personality, fate and discovery which creates each of our unique stories.

Ovid made the old Greek myths into a form that pleased his Roman audience. Shakespeare paid Ovid the tribute of remaking these tales into the forms of his time: poetry and drama. The story of his long poems, "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece," come from two works of Ovid which he recast for his own purposes. For his dramas, Shakespeare adapted Ovid even more freely.

Let me tell you a story of metamorphosis and magic which once caught the imagination of William Shakespeare.

Remember King Midas? He did a favor for the god Bacchus, who in return offered him one wish. Midas had long harbored a dream, so it tripped off his tongue. "Let everything I touch turn to gold." Bacchus gave him a cautionary look. But Midas appeared so pleased with himself that Bacchus shrugged as much as to say, "Why not? Let's see how this turns out!" He waved his god-like wine goblet and said, "So be it."

Midas made his way back to his palace, breaking off a leafy oak twig which turned to a golden spray of leaves, clods of earth which became nuggets to weigh down his robes-but why carry them home? With such a gift he could turn his very palace to gold. He reached his hand into a swiftly running brook. The water turned to a solid stream of gold before it could reach his mouth. He dipped down to drink, but water turned to gold upon his lips.

This would have given another man pause. But Midas was not one for reflective thought, so he carried on home. He touched the lintel over his doorway and, lo, it turned to gold. What other king should be so blessed as to live in a golden castle! Midas was like a child, touching each wall and piece of furniture as he laughed and danced his way down the corridors and through the chambers. "We must celebrate!" he cried, and commanded his servants to bring forth a splendid feast. He took his seat at the head of the long table, friends and family arrayed down each side. All gasped in amazement as the tablecloth turned to cloth of gold at a touch from Midas' finger. He lifted his goblet and it became a golden chalice.

"Some wine!" he called. But as the wine touched his lips each bubble turned to a golden grain of sand. He spat them out in disgust. The fragrant roast guinea hen that he forked onto his golden plate became-well, you know the rest of the story. Midas could not eat nor drink nor kiss his dear ones.

He cried out to Bacchus, begging forgiveness for his greed and folly, begging the god to take away this cursed gift. Bacchus agreed. He told Midas to climb to the high sources of a river in the Lydian hills and there to wash away his golden touch. Midas did as he was told and even today, as Ovid recounts in his *Metamorphoses*, the sands of that river bed gleam golden.

The children's tale ends here, or perhaps spins a moral about how warm, breathing mortals who eat and drink and love must beware of golden greed. We adults of the twenty-first century can see more in the story of Midas. In him we recognize a potent symbol of the values of our society, the supreme importance we give to money, even at the cost of the treasures of human relationships. Like the ancient alchemists, we hope to turn lead into gold. Instead, we turn spontaneous golden life to lead, that is, to cost-analysis accountability and financial bottom lines. We substitute computers for people; we pave the natural world in leaden blacktop, so to speak. We risk destroying our forests, waterways, oceans-and the very air that we breathe in our shared inhalations of life-for profit. It is time to remind ourselves of the lesson of Midas' hasty wish.

Ovid continues his story of Midas-in the woods, where Shakespeare's transformations also take place in the next tale I shall recount. The woods, the forests, belong to Nature but also represent the unconscious, both good and bad.

Ovid tells us that after he washed away his cursed gift, Midas could no longer bear the thought of gold nor face returning to his palace. Instead he stayed in the woods and became a follower of Pan, the goat-footed god of Nature. With Pan's entourage of woodland nymphs, Midas danced to the jolly melodies Pan played on his reed pipes and could wish no greater joy.

One day the god Apollo, playing his divine golden-stringed lute, could scarcely hear himself think for all the ruckus down in the greenwood. He appeared to Pan and said, "Enough of this, my man. You gather all these country girls to you and have a wild party night and day racketing on your pipes. Let's just see who is the better musician once and for all."

Pan agreed. They chose Mount Tmolus to be their judge. First Pan gathered his nymphs around him and began to blow the most rollicking of tunes on his pipes. When he finished, the fair nymphs crowded up to embrace him.

At the sound of the perfect chord Apollo struck upon his lyre, they stopped mid-embrace. As they fell to the grass in awe, the brilliant god played a divinely beautiful melody, potent as the sounds of the heavens wafting through the leafy forest and lifting them out of themselves. When Apollo came to the end of his song, they sat in perfect stillness. Tmolus nodded his pinecrested brow towards Apollo, the certain victor. Pan conceded defeat.

But Midas cried from the forked tree where he sat, "Nonsense! Your music is far the best, my dear Pan. Apollo plays the thin strains of the gods but you play from the heart of life!"

Pan and the nymphs looked as stunned as Apollo, but only Apollo spoke. "You, Midas, are ever a dunce. Since your ears serve you no better than this, henceforth they shall be-" and here he paused and held Midas in his unflinching gaze while Midas felt a terrible pain in his head "-ass' ears!" laughed Apollo. And sure enough, two long hairy ears now flopped above Midas' brow.

Midas fled the woods and returned to his palace, though not before he fashioned a royal turban to conceal his shame. And so he endeavored to rule with some sense, as much as a man who must wear the ears of a donkey can manage. Midas succeeded in keeping them secret until it came time as it does for all men that his hair needed a trim.

He summoned the royal barber and charged him on pain of death to tell no one what he discovered as he clipped and combed the hair around those ugly ears. The barber did his job with a straight face, but when he left the palace his eyes watered from suppressed laughter. Ah, but he could tell no one. The poor barber lived with the secret

until finally one night, desperate to let it out at last, he went to the far corner of the royal garden and whispered into a deep hole, "King Midas has ass' ears." Next morning a cluster of reeds had grown on the spot, and as the wind blew through them they whispered, "King Midas has ass' ears, King Midas has ass' ears." So did his secret spread throughout the kingdom.

And here the story ends, with a laugh. Joseph Campbell has suggested that Midas experiences "the agony of breaking through personal limitations, the agony of spiritual growth" *(190)*, but Ovid leaves that to our imaginations. His Midas cannot still the whispering reeds.

Now we shall leap forward nearly 1,600 years from Ovid's penning of this tale, which had passed from person to person, from Greece to Rome long before he set it down. As I said, William Shakespeare and his contemporaries read Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Latin at school-and later in Arthur Golding's English translation. Though Shakespeare was borrower par excellence, he was no plagiarist. Once he joined a London actors' company, he had to turn out two or three plays a year, so he kept his eyes open for good material to inspire his own magic. Ovid provides him with many a metaphor and many a story, which he interprets and dramatizes to suit his purposes.

So what does Shakespeare do with King Midas? His play, *Timon of Athens*, deals with the ironies of seeking wealth, a free-form treatment of the story of the fatal golden touch. Otherwise Shakespeare does not directly use the tale of Midas' golden folly, most likely a familiar children's story in his time, as in our own.

But the second part: oh that tale of the ass' ears was too delicious! Many of the myths which Ovid tells in the *Metamorphoses* center around desire. In different stories, Jove becomes a bull, a shower of gold, a swan to win the mortal maid he loves or to capture her. Daphne becomes a laurel tree to escape Apollo's advances; Juno turns the girl Io into a heifer out of jealousy because Jove loves her; Hyacinthus and Narcissus become flowers. And so it goes: desire transforms god and mortal alike.

Yes, Midas covets gold above all else, but the myth shows his lack of wisdom more than any transforming desire. No human passion touches him, apart from his love of roisterous music; no woman, divine or mortal, dances near his heart. True, he experiences three transformations. He gains then loses his golden touch, then earns his ass' ears which he never sheds nor, as it turns out, successfully conceals. Yet in a sense nothing happens to him. He earns his just desserts for his false values and tin ear, but his heart gains no understanding, his soul no rebirth.

Shakespeare takes threads from Ovid's tale of Midas. Then he weaves in a twist or two from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, a Roman story in which a nobleman is punished by being temporarily turned into an ass, a beast both cursed and holy, as we are told. These sources Shakespeare spins, with his own silken strings, into the remarkable love adventure of Nick Bottom the Weaver, his most enchanting play, *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream. [I'm going to introduce a number of characters here, so if you're not familiar with the play, listen carefully and don't worry. All will come clear.]

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, two pairs of confused lovers flee Athens into the woods. Here dwell Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the fairies, who are fighting over a changeling boy whom Oberon wants from Titania.

Nick Bottom plans to meet in these same woods with his fellow "mechanicals," as they're called-that is, tradesmen-to rehearse a play they hope to present for the wedding of Hippolyta with Duke Thesus of Athens. Each of these craftsmen's names derives from their trade. So too does Bottom's name relate to his trade as weaver: he "is named for the bottom or core on which thread is wound," as the note in my *Riverside Shakespeare* explains (259).

In Shakespeare's day as in our own, more can be made of such a name. Not only are we sitting on our bottoms, folks did in his day too. In addition, according to *A Shakespeare Glossary*, in his plays the word "bottom" can mean low-lying land or valley, presumably fertile; the keel or hull of a ship; a ball of thread, specifically the core of the skein where the weaver has wound his wool. When used as a verb, "to bottom" is to wind, as in a skein of thread *(Onions 27)*. Nick Bottom is grounded. Earth is the "bottom" as contrasted to the heights of heaven. He is the keel for his fellow mechanicals. He is centered. He winds his adventures around himself, never losing his central identity. He gets to the bottom of things-or does he? That you may judge after I tell his story.

Bully Bottom, as his fellows call him affectionately, is the star of the company. None of them, except perhaps their director Peter Quince, has any experience of the theatre. Bottom wants to play every role in their play about tragic love, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, based on another of Ovid's stories. Earlier, I said that Shakespeare recreates the old myths to his own purposes. *Pyramus and Thisbe* is something of an exception, in that it follows the plot of Ovid's tragic tale of star-crossed lovers precisely. Yet this "play within the play" comes close to turning tragedy into farce, thanks in large part to Bottom's performance.

Peter Quince tells Bottom that he must play only Pyramus, who is, after all a lover, "a sweet-fac'd man; a proper man as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely gentleman-like man" *(I.ii.85-87)*.

As they rehearse in the woods, who should be watching these "hempen homespuns," as he calls them, but Puck, the mischievous elfin henchman of Oberon the fairy king. When Bottom goes offstage for a moment, Puck cannot resist bestowing an ass' head upon his shoulders.

[Start slides here: images of Bottom with his ass' head from art and from two videos of the play.]

"Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee," cries Peter Quince when the transformed Pyramus emerges from the trees. "Thou art translated!" *(III.i.118)* The men flee at top speed, invisible Puck in pursuit. Bottom has no idea why his friends have run away. He feels the same as ever.

I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could; but I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here and I will sing, that they shall hear I am not aftaid *(III.i.120-124)*.

And so he does, though his lovely tune rather resembles that of a braying donkey.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Cupid's arrow inflicts desire on both gods and mortals. In a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon commands Puck to bring him the juice of a flower called "love in idleness" which, dropped on the eyes of a sleeper, causes her or him to fall in love with the first being they see upon waking. Vengeful Oberon has anointed Titania's eyes with this magical elixir.

[Show slide of Oberon touching the eyes of sleeping Titania.]

Titania remains asleep in her woodland bower until Bottom comes near her, singing his song. "What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?" she asks-and straight away loves an ass.

[Slide]

One moment Bottom is keeping up his courage in the lonely woods. The next, Titania, queen of the fairies, calls to him.

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.

Mine ear is much enamored of thy note;

So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;

And thy fair virtue's force (perforce) does move me

On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee *(III.i.137-41)*.

Bottom remains his grounded self despite her astonishing declaration.

Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that.
And yet,

to say the truth, reason and love keep little company
together now-a-days.

We see Bottom the Weaver in an even better light now than before. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transmuted beings usually retain an unchanged inner self

regardless of their altered external form. So too with Bottom in ass' ears, who manages to keep his head, so to speak.

"Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful," Titania tells him.

Bottom replies, "Not so neither" -though he wouldn't mind having enough wit to get out of the woods.

But when Titania commands him ["Out of this wood do not desire to go;/Though shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no" *(III.ii.51-52)*], Bottom takes it in good grace and makes friends with her fairy band. Along with his new ears, he does of course possess certain traits befitting an ass, such as a wish for some good dry oats. He asks Titania's attendant fairy Peaseblossom to scratch his head for, as he says, "I am marvails hairy about the face" *(IV.i.24)*. Titania, ever-doting, says, "Tie up my lover's tongue, bring him silently," a comment on his tendency to hee haw.

[Slides of Bottom and Titania together.]

When he hears about Titania's new beloved, Oberon exults in the fullness of his revenge. She loves not only a mortal, but one of exceptional grossness. And yet together she and Bottom, twined in flowers, are an arresting sight that has inspired more paintings than any other characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and an array of films, ranging from this 1969 production with Judi Densch, who last year won an Academy Award for her role in "Shakespeare in Love," here playing Titania in green makeup and not a lot else, to Helen Mirren in the BBC production of the '80s, to last year's movie with Michelle Pfeiffer and Kevin Kline, now out in video.

[Frames of Titania and Bottom from those three films.]

Let me interrupt the story for a moment here. As I wrote this talk, I realized that a good number of you might not be familiar with a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I hope you get to see many performances, on stage best of all, though these videos are readily available, at our own Learning Resource Center, for starters.

When I got to this part of the story, I thought what your reaction might be. Here we have Oberon, a husband. Yes, he's king of the fairies, but he *is*married to Titania. And what does he do but drug her to fall in love with a monster! Isn't this pretty horrific for a play that I'm arguing reveals powerful transformations? Oberon keeps up a good front for Puck, his elfin henchman. But it can be argued that he is sickened by what he has done to her; that he himself discovers, through this mistake, a better truth. When he and Puck find Titania sleeping in Bottom's arms, Oberon says he's begun to pity her. Now that she's given him her changeling boy, he removes the "hateful imperfection" from her eyes with another magical herb.

On awakening, Titania laughs, "My Oberon, what visions I have seen!/ Methought I was enamored of an ass!"

[Slides of her awakening.]

Oberon points to bottom, asleep in her bower. "There lies your love." She's horrified, dances off, reconciled to Oberon, with their fairy train into the trees, and all's well. As none of us inhabits the fairy realm, the best we can hope from the likes of Titania and Oberon is a hint of their magical blessing such as they sparkle over the three couples who marry at the end of the play-and pray we suffer no random drops of love elixir on our sleeping eyes.

[Final slide of the fairies in a sparkling halo. Turn off slides.]

No, we're closer to Nick Bottom. He wakes alone in the woods, the fairies departed and his ass' head removed, thanks to Puck. His first words echo Titania's, though his recollections are far from loathsome. "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 t'expound this dream." And then, for once, Bottom is almost speechless. "Methought I was-there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had-but man is but a patch'd fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had" *(IV.i.204-21)*.

In parody of a verse from 1 Corinthians, he continues, "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"*(211-214)*. In the Tyndale New Testament translation of 1526, the passage reads: "The eye hath not sene/ and the eare hath not hearde/ nether have entered into the herte of man/ the thynges which god hath prepared for them that love hym" *(1 Corinthians, chapter 2)*.

Is Nick Bottom simply making humorous hash of these Biblical verses? Eyes don't hear nor hearts report, not literally. The critic Harold Bloom has proposed that this passage shows how Bottom's "awakened senses" have fused into a harmony beyond mortal sensory limitations *(Bloom 167)*.

The next verse in 1 Corinthians, chapter 2, again in the Tyndale translation, continues most remarkably, in light of this play: "For the spirit searcheth all thynges/ yee, the botome of the goddes secretes." Though our Bottom, trespassing in Titania's bower, may not have been a searching spirit, to him nonetheless were revealed the depths of the goddess' secrets, In his book*Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, Edgar Wind suggests that this secret is the underlying unity in the world, which permits us to see that all opposites are one. Beneath the multiplicity of experience remains a unity, "for those who are changed are also unchanged. We must embrace the metaphoric multiplicity of the world before we can understand its underlying unity."

This is the secret paradox of existence which Shakespeare gives us in his metamorphic comedies *(Wind 196; Carroll 35-38)*. Change and multiplicity of the self, whether by means of ass' ears and an interlude in the fairy kingdom, or confusion of twins, or gender disguise, or reversals of fortune, bring his characters to wholeness.

Shakespeare's comedies speak to our longing for unity beneath the fragmentation of contemporary life.

Nick Bottom awakens, changed and yet unchanged. He considers telling Peter Quince about his "rare vision" so that Quince can write a ballad of it. Such a "dream" is subject for art, for poetry. He says, "It shall be called Bottom's dream, because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke" *(IV.i.214-219)*.

While Bottom is awakening, his fellow players lament his absence. Without him as Pyramus, their play for Theseus' wedding feast cannot go forward. Then he appears! "O most courageous day. O happy hour!" Peter Quince greets him. They all pound him on the back in joy and relief. Bottom's thoughts, however, are still on his dream.

Masters, I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what; for if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything, right as it fell out *(IV.ii.29-31)*.

But when Peter Quince urges him, Bottom replies, "Not a word of me," and never does he say.

Duke Theseus has chosen their "Pyramus and Thisbe" for the wedding celebration, a "tedious brief scene of . . .very tragical mirth" *(Vi.56-57)*. Onstage, to everyone's amusement, Bottom's Pyramus dies most tragically and lengthily for his love Thisbe.

Then Thisbe enters. She comes upon Pyramus' body and determines to die herself. As we, and the newly wedded couples on-stage, watch her grief, giggles stop. These pairs of lovers are reminded of how close they all came to tragedy. In effect, Shakespeare here negates the spirit of suffering. Thisbe does kill herself in the Romeo-and-Juliet ending of this play within the play. There is a moment of silence. Then Bottom/Pyramus pops up to assure their audience that now "the wall is down that parted their fathers." His company's entertainment ends not with "Bottom's Dream," but with a lively Bergomask dance.

Nick Bottom has been transformed by his dream that wasn't a dream. Shakespeare gives him his solitary waking moments for reflection, before he connects up again with his fellow mechanicals. At the end of his story, as told by Ovid, King Midas' folly is blowing on the wind through the whispering reeds. At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom has experienced the magic of Titania. He has gained a glimmer of realms beyond: realms love opens, realms where we may escape our earthen hairy selves, where the particulars of our own little lives connect to the profound unity of all existence, the collective unconscious, as Jung would say.

Bottom is a weaver, an actor, a lover, whose supernatural experience, like that of Midas, takes place in the woods, that is to say in Nature. Each of these conditions-weaver, actor, lover-and that setting are metamorphic.

Weavers create rare tapestries from threads and strings.

Actors impersonate other beings and yet paradoxically may find their truest selves in these disguisings.

And the lover is the ultimate flexible self, monstrous and divine by turns.

Nature runs her annual cycles. The changing seasons are the source of the earliest myths of transformation, particularly the miracle of spring, which we are all experiencing today. Persephone, or Proserpina, as Ovid calls her, spends half the year as queen of the Underworld, while her mother Demeter, or Ceres, the grain goddess, mourns her and winter comes to the land. The king of the Underworld releases Persephone to her mother in early spring. They play together in the sunshine until harvest, when Persephone again returns to the dark. Dionysus, the Greek precursor of Bacchus, is torn apart and then reborn each spring in a pagan ritual which became the source of Greek tragedy. Transformation in these stories and others replicates Nature's mysterious process: death, followed by rebirth, resurrection, the blooming of spring for a sweet short season.

Resurrected in a magical way which echoes these transcendent rebirths is Nick Bottom, weaver, actor, lover, child of nature-and dreamer of what is in fact a waking illusion. Oberon erred in casting a spell on his wife. Titania seems, in the end, little affected by her own strange "dream." But Bottom has benefited. Bottom, metamorphic clown and sage, has experienced himself as unified, unfallen man. Apart from those fetching ass' ears, he's touched by no magic elixir-he is never drugged. Before he went into the woods, he never knew a being such as Titania existed, let alone did he desire her. But when he finds himself her chosen beloved, he plays his part amiably. He awakens from his "dream" to knowledge of deeper realms of experience than his weaver's life in Athens ever suggested.

Years ago I had the fortune to play Titania in an amateur production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Before each performance I wove a garland of white roses out of my garden which I coiled like a sort of leash around Bottom. So it caught me by surprise that it should be Bottom whom the Muse sent me for this talk, not the lovely fairy queen. But after all, we, women and men, are mortal. Unlike gods and fairies, we cannot escape the turning of clocks and calendars. We are the ones who discover intimations of secrets beyond everyday existence through the waking dreams of art.

Bottom of course cannot have a happy-ever-after with Titania. Not all loves lead to marriage and produce those fair children which Oberon wishes for the three couples who unite at the end of the play. One does not settle down with a goddess or a fairy queen. Indeed, Bottom is most blessed to be returned to his weaver's life, safe and sound. In mythology, a mortal whom Aphrodite, or Venus, as Ovid calls her, loves is marked for life if in fact he survives. The least of it is that henceforth he can never love a mortal woman. More likely he suffers a fate like that of Venus' beloved Adonis, who is gored to death by a wild boar. Well did Shakespeare know the risk for a man who falls into the arms of a goddess, having recently finished composing his own "Venus and Adonis" poem and his sonnets, where the Dark Lady has a fatal charm for the poet.

But in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom is spared this dangerous bewitching. Here is a fresh angle on the theme of man's impossible love for womanly perfection which will destroy him, or so he fears; that unconscious longing-and dread-of being consumed by passion and losing one's self.

Yes, Bottom is lost in the woods and captured by the fairy queen. However, Titania is no *femme fatale* who leaves him a ghost or a corpse. Bottom returns enriched, not destroys. Shakespeare gives a unique twist to this archetype of the deadly enchanting woman through the tale of Bottom and Titania. Bottom's transcendent experience dispels deep-seated male fears which are still with us today. Of course, he *did* love the fairy queen in the guise of an ass.

Many of the stories in *The Metamorphoses* are violent and terrifying despite Ovid's somewhat comic tone. Many is the character racked by the extremes of passion-and Shakespeare too borrows these, most notably the story of Tereus, Procne and Philomela, a tale of rape, mutilation and cannibalism which he carries even further in his tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, now on the big screen as "Titus" with Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange. A forest that resembles the mischievous but ultimately benign woods of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, in *Titus Andronicus*, the wild scene of horrible crimes-perpetrated by humans, not supernatural beings.

As I said, the woods can represent the unconscious, realm of both blessing and evil. Indeed, these chilling tales ring with contemporary relevance. The gun-death statistics and accounts of bizarre murders, rape and violence towards women, hate crimes and genocidal revenges which fill our news media and films show the continuing power of this dark side not only over our imaginations but, in too many cases, our actions as well. Shakespeare, like Ovid, like the Greek tragic playwrights before him, treats these sorts of crimes in mythic-symbolic dramas. Aristotle tells us that when we witness theatrical tragedies we, the audience, vicariously experience our own dire unconscious impulses. When we leave the theatre, our potential crimes are purged from us through a spiritual catharsis. Here's a compelling reason to keep these plays alive: they can save us from our worst selves!

In a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Ovid's gods become Shakespeare's fairies with a touch of British folklore, their whims and dreadful vengeances tamed into Puck's pranks and Oberon's manipulations. And yet the fairy world has supernatural power. At the beginning of the play Titania says that the dissension between herself and Oberon has disrupted the weather, bringing storms and mud and misery to earth. Like gods, fairies do not function by human law nor are their actions tempered by the certainty of death. They could play on the dark side, but as Oberon says, "We are spirits of a different sort"-not night-haunters but lovers of the dawn. They may not be subject to death, but the fairies are agents of metamorphosis.

Western thought is obsessed with change. It starts with Genesis, where earth is created out of chaos. A similar story begins Ovid's *Metamorphoses*and creation tales of countless other cultures. In Genesis, the dramatic change for humanity is a fall, Adam

and Eve cast out of Eden. To rise again requires God's grace. In the Bible, by and large, miracles belong to God and Jesus; humans should strive for virtue and fulfill their role in God's plan.

Renaissance humanism added a new perspective. With its revival of the arts of Greece and Rome came a belief that the present could learn from the past, that we can learn and change. Old stories in dead languages proved the catalyst for political change, for scientific advancement, and for a spread of literacy in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe. The self was seen anew, something one could *fashion* as contrasted to the medieval concept of the constant self with a clear function and purpose. No, says the Renaissance, we are flexible, we can stretch our minds and capacities and vision to new heights-and depths. Villains, Machiavellian and otherwise, fashion themselves into heartless powers.

How high can we rise, how low might we fall? The great works of the Greeks, the Romans, and their embodiment in the European Renaissance, explore the range. Ovid sallies forth with a jaunty tone, where Shakespeare speaks through more various and complex voices. Still today we are moved by these writers' daring, their expression from the inner world of the self, of suffering, of the extremes of passion and delight. Ovid's characters' passing reflections become, in Shakespeare's soliloquies, revelations of these inner dimensions and struggles of the human personality.

In our new Millennium, the era inaugurated by revival of the classics is threatened if not already over. Does it matter? What will we lose? What really is the point of holding onto stories of golden touches and divine music, of ass' ears and romances with fairy queens in the midnight woods, or dread tales of desire, desperation, destruction?

As I have been arguing today, these tales contain something of ourselves-our unconscious, our dreams, our fears, our horrendous flaws, with which we must engage to be fully human. And so we teachers devote ourselves to sharing our love of literature with you. We know from the heart why we must preserve the classics, not as museum pieces, but as vital to our lives and yours, now and into the future. These works by Ovid and Shakespeare and writers before and after create a magical lifeline that connects us to the past, to the "bottom of the goddes' secrets," and to the mysteries of the inner self.

Let's give one last thought to metamorphosis and magic.

Biological change is linear, from birth to maturity to death. As Jaques says in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, "And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,/ And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot/ And thereby hangs a tale"*(II.vii.26-28)*. Life rushes by all too fast; "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/ Old time is still aflying," in the words of the poet Robert Herrick. From this point of view, change is not only inevitable, but to be lamented.

Metamorphosis, however, breaks the boundaries of time and self. Nick Bottom doesn't age; he loses, gains, loses and ultimately gains in his midsummer night's dream. He

ends up a transformed being, translated once again from an asshead monstrosity into his former sweet-faced self. Bottom is no gold-grasping Midas, once a fool always a fool, though he is not above hamming up his stage death as Pyramus, nor does he cease being Bully Bottom, everyone's best buddy and the life of the party. Other than Bottom himself, only we recognize the secret depth which he gained by becoming an ass. We learn from his story what we learn from poetry-a secret and ineffable sense of magic beyond mundane understanding which touches us with fairy dust and yet is our true subjective reality.

We live in times where perfection, we are told, can be attained through genetic modification whether of corn and tomatoes or human beings. Some people see in the Millennium a brave new era of information, technological achievement and uniformity, based on reason. I don't need to remind you of the forces of unreason ever on the loose which counter any such "perfection," or of the often limited profit and loss mentality that drives many of these innovations, the fatal Midas wish for the golden touch which pervades our culture.

What this utopian, or dystopian, world view of attainable and uniform perfection omits is the sense of human identity. Who am I? Who might I be? What is my stable center within the changes-or is there one? How can I fulfill myself without falling into tragic extremes? What is the significance of life? What indeed is the "spirit?" These are the essential questions we confront when we open ourselves to the powers of story, poem and play.

If we take all of Ovid's works and all of Shakespeare's works in their entireties, what we get is a tragicomic vision that resonates to our own reality. Macbeth may see life as "a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing" (*V.v.* 26-28), but other plays offer surprise reconciliations, return of what was lost, recovery of what one never knew one possessed. Literature offers us a poetic sense of possibility, a depth which enhances our pleasures and gives nobility to our pain.

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the overly rational Thesus says, "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact" *(V.i.8-9)*. In the realms of imagination, you can't tell madmen, lovers, or poets apart, he argues. All have lost their grip on reality.

Theseus is right to a degree. Love, dream, desire, imagination and visions are the opposite of reason. But rather than being proof of madness, they offer us divine wisdom. Through Nick Bottom, Shakespeare shows us that we need to don ass' ears at least once in our lives so that our spirits may see to the bottom of the goddess' secrets. Thus may we gain self-knowledge and, if we're lucky , a glimpse of supernatural enlightenment and wholeness. Such magical metamorphoses lie at the heart of our fullest human explorations in the new Millennium, as in the past.

I'll close with the words of the magician Prospero in *The Tempest*:

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep *(IV.i. 156-58)*.

APPRECIATIONS

Many thanks to Jeff Barnes, Lorraine Belmont, Charles Courtney, Shelley Cull, Helena Hale, David Hupp, Evanne Jardine, Jack Johnston, David Kiley, Pam Lasker, Susan Lentz of the UCSB Arts Library, Barbara Lindemann, Tony Mangini, Lois Philips, Rob Reilly, Margie and Mike Reinhart, Michelle Smith, Beverly Schwamm, David Wong and Tom Zeiher.

Music played during slideshow before the lecture: Henry Purcell, "Suite from the Fairy Queen." *A Distant Mirror: Music of the Fourteenth Century and Shakespeare's Music*. The Folger Consort. CD: Delos International, 1986.

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