

Reading Shakespeare: <http://readingshakespeare.org>

Mary Ellen Dakin

Reading BottomS

<i>Reading the Critic</i>	<i>Reading the Reader</i>	<i>Reading the Critic</i>
<p>Dominant Reading Stephen Greenblatt: <u>Will in the World</u></p> <p>“Bottom, to be sure, is asinine, but it takes no magical transformation to reveal that fact. Indeed, what is revealed is not so much his folly – he does not have one moment of embarrassment or shame – as his intrepidity. ‘This is to make an ass of me,’ the ass-headed Bottom stoutly declares, when his friends have all run away in terror at his appearance (3.1)...He is surprised at the Fairy Queen’s passionate declaration of love, but he takes it in his stride: ‘Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet...reason and love keep little company together nowadays’ (3.1). And he is entirely at his ease in his new body: ‘Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay...’ (4.1). When the ass’s head is finally taken from him, he does not experience a moral awakening; rather, as Puck puts it, he merely peeps at the world once again with his own fool’s eyes” (35)</p>	<p>Which Bottom do you read and why? Review your responses to the Reader’s Survey. What predispositions do you have that would cause you to see this character as you do?</p>	<p>Alternative Reading Harold C. Goddard: <u>The Meaning of Shakespeare</u></p> <p>“To Puck, Bottom is an ass. Yet Titania falls in love with him, ass’s head and all: ‘And I will purge thy mortal grossness so That thou shalt like an airy spirit go,’ she promises (3.2). And she keeps her promise by sending him Bottom’s dream. The moment when Bottom awakens from this dream is the supreme moment of the play. There is nothing more wonderful in the poet’s early works and few things more wonderful in any of them. For what Shakespeare has caught here in perfection is the original miracle of the Imagination, the awakening of spiritual life in the animal man. Bottom is an ass. If Bottom can be redeemed, matter itself and man in all his materiality can be redeemed also. Democracy becomes possible. Nothing less than this is what this incident implies. Yet when it is acted...this divine insight is reduced to nothing but an occasion for roars of laughter. Laughter of course there should be, but laughter shot through with a beauty and pathos close to tears” (1:79-80).</p>

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