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English 12: The Bard

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Dreams, reality, and ambition: How A Midsummer night’s dream expresses bardic interpretations of Elizabethan mobility and change in circumstance, and the underlying themes of Artistic Darwinism.

Shakespeare an unusual life for a bardic figure,  and his particularly favorable relationship with England’s royals was no exception. Born into a trade class family, and with a lack of formal education,  one would not typically expect such an individual to ascend to such high echelons. However, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare appears to have not only embraced his risen status, but also  created a screed on the benefits of retention of the status quo. Some may think  that such an outlook is hypocritical, but Shakespeare, like many bards, appears to have ascribed to, or at least facilitated the philosophy of Artistic Darwinism, ensuring their creative supremacy through the ruthless exploitation and monopolization of intellectual properties.

Mindful of the status of bardic materials as ‘living’ and reliant on a conscious, engaged audience, practitioners of Artistic Darwinism (AD) do their utmost to propagate their works and influence the public mind. Much like an organism’s most basic desire is to ensure the genetic fitness of their lineage, the work’s artistic fitness is the predominant goal of a Darwinist’s mind. Though they ultimately do not have complete control over their works, the retention of key themes and, more importantly, their influence on later works, are tantamount.  Finally, ADs often feud amongst themselves in an attempt to ensure artistic dominance, be it on the intellectual stage, the securing of patronage, or, by the  implementation of personality cults. However, any text that has been engaged in AD risks further deleterious side effects, and a potential for numerous deviations off the artistic line.

The most common occurrence of such actions is artistic speciation, in which, through the passage of time and audience interpretation, the resultant texts become steadily more removed from its original, until the works are distinguished altogether. Some contemporary examples of this would include the film adaptation of “Starship Troopers”, which, though derived from its ancestral novel, is an entirely different story, both in composition and message. Inversely, certain Bardic texts, through creative stagnation and perennial repetitions, become creatively inbred, sticking truly to the original work at the cost of any artistic innovation.  The 1968 production was an example of one such occurrence, as, though the dedication to Shakespearean originality cannot be denied, the work itself was rendered sterile, as they wanted to, rather  than put their own creative spin on it, would rather content themselves with merely filming an already-created performance. As a result, the 1968 production both contributes nothing to artistic fitness, and actually undermines the overall fitness of Shakespearean works through their stagnant performance. Such losses are especially glaring when compared to the original works.

The creation and message of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is an example of AD, as, due to it being made during a placid period for Shakespeare, his intent was not to inspire opposition to the status quo, but rather a Darwinian ‘victory lap’, asserting his dominance over the artistic community. Throughout the play, the true power is held not in the hands of the mortal characters, be it noble or common alike but instead through the recreational machinations of the fairy community and, most significantly, the fairy court’s entertainer, Puck. Much like Shakespeare, Puck is not part of the fairy nobility, but drastically influences the world around him and the other characters, in many ways even serving as the driving force for the events of the play. By contrast, the mortal ‘rulers’ are shown to be listless, hedonistic, and, when confronted with the world beyond the walls of Athens, ultimately impotent. In this way, Shakespeare attempts to imply that, though there may be some that are more materially wealthy and, on paper, influential than him,   they cannot control or even fully understand that which pays no mind to worldly status: artistic influence.

As a further aspect of AD, Shakespeare lampoons the trends that abounded amongst popular theatre at the time, presenting them as roughshod efforts of amateurs far out of their league, a fact made all the more biting through their sincere efforts to interpret Shakespearean works.