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Film Paper
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Entrances and Introductions in Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The mechanicals know it: Introductions are important. They include multiple prologues in their rendition of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to both explain their play as well as warn about its most shocking elements (5.1). William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (referenced as "the play") includes a variety of introductions: the first scene establishes characters and couplings; 2.1 introduces the fairies' world; characters frequently enter the stage mid-scene in pursuit of one another. Michael Hoffman's 1999 adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("the adaptation") expands and amends these introductions to efficiently create a playful tone while emphasizing the play's theme of love triumphing over authority (while losing some nuance in the process).

The title sequence introduces Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, acting as a microcosm of the adaptation to efficiently establish the setting, tone, themes, and conflict of the play. The sequence is shot at night in the Italian countryside, with mountains in the distance. Fairies flutter and dance about the title, illuminating nearby sections. They are—and continue to be throughout the adaptation—equal parts pleasant and pestering; they are controlling, but gleefully so (Figure 1). As the music builds, an expository overlay tells the viewer that they are watching "The village of Monte Athena at the turn of the 19th century." Using non-diegetic text to inform the viewer of the setting of "Monte Athena," a fictional city in 19th century Italy, allows the adaptation to stay textually faithful when the play requires its characters to be "Athenians." This overlay also establishes the central conflict of the adaptation, continuing, "Necklines are high. Parents are rigid. Marriage is seldom a matter of love," which is partially

accurate. Necklines are high, up until Lysander and Hermia run off into the forest. One parent (not "parents") exists; but he, Egeus, does rigidly restrict his daughter Hermia's choice of whom to marry. The overlay continues by telling of "The good news" that "The bustle is in its decline, allowing for the meteoric rise of that newfangled creation, the bicycle." Phrasing this as "good news" brings the viewer to the lovers' side, if they were not already there. The word "meteoric" suggests the presence of magic, otherworldly powers, while describing the bicycle as "that newfangled creation," as though it were the foremost invention in the viewer's mind (certainly the only "newfangled" one), simultaneously establishes a central metaphor[1] while solidifying the adaptation's whimsical[2] and playful tone. Day arrives, the title is shown in full, it explodes into a batch of butterflies, and the viewer has been primed to sympathize with the lovers' struggle to marry freely while also understanding that the story's stakes are relatively low.

The relationships and personalities of play's lovers are established efficiently in Hoffman's adaptation, with some dynamics removed. Theseus is reasonable, but eager to celebrate. Lysander is defiant. Egeus is angry. Demetrius is bitter. And the women have their lines shuffled or removed. That Theseus "won [Hippolyta's] love doing thee injuries" is abandoned; it is replaced by laughter, kissing, and a flurry of wedding-related people and props moving around in the background (1.1.18). There is no reason to believe their relationship is anything but solid. The formal introduction of the main conflict, Egeus's denying Lysander the right to marry his daughter, Hermia, focuses on establishing Egeus's anger and Lysander's defiance. In Figure 2, we see Lysander with his arms crossed, refusing to meet Egeus's gaze.

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[1] Physical pursuit via bicycle serves as a metaphor for the pursuit of love, especially unreciprocated love. Puck even messes with the lovers' bikes when altering their love for one another.

[2] Or, perhaps, "whim-cycle."

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While Shakespeare's text, Hermia interrupts Theseus on her own behalf to point out that, in addition to Demetrius, "so is Lysander" a worthy gentleman, in Hoffman's adaptation her verbal introduction and argument with Theseus are pushed back to a latter point in the scene (1.1.55). Meanwhile, Helena's character is efficiently characterized as (and reduced to being) lonely and lovelorn. Helena's identifying characteristics and motivation are quickly established in her first appearance: off-screen, repeatedly yelling Demetrius' name. The high-angle framing of the first shot of her makes her seem tiny and insignificant (Figure 3). Moving and cutting the original text, Hoffman's adaptation introduces the couples and soon-to-be couples in easily describable states.

The introduction of the fairies' world comes in two parts: the jovial, drunk, shirtless world dominated by Puck and the commanding train of Titania. Puck, a prankster fairy, first appears in a tavern. Puck is the "merry wanderer of the night," flirting with and cheering up a servant fairy of Titania (2.1.45). Unlike in the human world, where food is only prepared, here it is eaten and enjoyed. Chipper flute music (as opposed to orchestral) is played, and merriment is so abundant that shadows of fairies can be seen dancing in the background of almost every shot. Instead of rattling off a list of Puck's jokes to establish his character (lines 2.1.47-59 of the play), the adaptation establishes Puck as a prankster, visually, when he appears in the cup of a fairy's beverage, causing him to spill it. The playful side of the fairies' world established via the introduction of Puck contrasts with the mysterious, serious world that Titania—"proud Titania"—occupies (2.1.61). When Titania enters, a storm comes with her. Mud bubbles and lightning strikes, only stopping once Titania silences it with a finger pressed to her lips. Like Puck, she commands a crowd, but hers is of silent cloaked figures awaiting orders (Figure 4). The implication is that she does so to challenge the authority of the fairy king, Oberon. Her

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world is one of conflict, a struggle for power. The duality of the fairies' world is emphasized by its two-part introduction.

In smoothing the characters' introductions, Hoffman's adaptation sacrifices nuance for clarity. The title sequence bluntly lays out the central conflict of the play, while the fairies and picturesque background establish the film's breezy tone. Central characters are established efficiently. The early lines of women, with the exception of the fairy queen Titania, are removed or shuffled around. The only introduction where nuance is added rather than removed is the muted addition of Bottom's wife.

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Works Cited

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Figure 1. Hints of the text "William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream" are illuminated by fast-flying fairies.

Figure 2. Lysander refuses to meet Egeus's eyes in his defiant introduction.

Figure 3. The unloved Helena is forced to share her introductory scene with a gardener.

Figure 4. Titania challenges the world of Puck and Oberon with her train of ominous and obedient followers.