

## Theater within the Graphic Novel about Theater: Neil Gaiman's Concept of the Artist in His "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

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### Introduction

It has been noted in the critical literature that in his graphic novel series *Sandman* (1989-1996), Neil Gaiman recurrently uses the character of Shakespeare to reflect on the immense responsibilities of the artistic genius. Annalisa Castaldo has explored in depth how Gaiman turns Shakespeare into "a human parallel to Dream," the protagonist of the Sandman-series (99), to reflect on one of the most important Shakespearean themes—dream as art. In her analysis, Castaldo heavily relies on the World Fantasy Award-winning story within the Sandman series, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (*Sandman* issue 19, illustrated by Charles Wess), to demonstrate Gaiman's approach to elaborating on the function of art and artist. Similarly to Castaldo, other critics, such as Kurt Lancaster, Julia Round, and John Pendergast, also use this graphic short story as a significant pillar of their studies to demonstrate how Gaiman applies Shakespeare's character to reveal his own *ars poetica*. However, little attention has been given to the importance of Gaiman's choice of the specific Shakespearean play, whose title he borrows and for which he proposes a myth creation in his graphic short story—beyond the obvious focus on its dream theme. I will argue that beyond the theme of dream that links to the theme of art, there is a crucial factor in Gaiman's choice of using Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (ca.1595) as an apt starting point to write about art. Importantly, *Midsummer's* theater within the theater scenes cunningly complete the ways in which Gaiman understands the relation between art and reality: what in Shakespeare's play is a tool to visualize that art is capable of mirroring reality becomes a means to express the interchangeability of the realistic and the fantastic realms.

Gaiman introduces Shakespeare as a human parallel to the titular protagonist (also known as the Dream Lord, Morpheus or Shaper) in the Sandman universe; consequently, both Shakespeare and the Dream Lord are doubles that reflect on Gaiman's position as an artist who creates the texts in which these characters appear. Doubling is a fundamental tool that Shakespeare employs in his comedy to highlight variations of the love themes he explores: characters, situations, and worlds double, all mirroring each other; and importantly, the theatrical world provides a double for the Athenian and the fairy world. Gaiman's version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" exploits

dramatic possibilities in doubling, as Julia Round argues (“Subverting” 26-28). Gaiman presents the Shakespearean comedy as a play within the artistic space of his graphic novel. Presenting a story in which images “narrate” Shakespeare’s *Midsummer* performed turns the renaissance comedy itself into a double of the craftsmen’s play—the play within the source play—twisting the idea of the play-within-the play by making fairies watch people “impersonating” the fairy characters of the audience on stage. Yet, not only does this solution liquefy the borderline between reality and illusion, but the graphic solutions of the short story also diversely highlight and enrich the context in which the theme of doubling may be interpreted. Firstly, mythical doubles bound by careful choices in the graphic work subtly present the argument that reality and illusion/fantasy/art may become interchangeable entities; secondly, especially relying on the visuals, Gaiman interprets the character of Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, as a seduced changeling, and Puck’s character as a voluntary changeling so that in the Sandman universe they become each other’s functional doubles. A reading that focuses on the significance of the doubles, therefore, reveals that in Gaiman’s understanding, art’s mimetic power is able to challenge factual reality: it may provide an understanding of life that surpasses the narrow interpretation of historical facts and thereby it may offer a viable alternative to what we experience as reality. This is the exact idea that the Puck of the fairy audience formulates while watching—and making sense of—the performance: “It never happened; yet it is still true” (Gaiman, “A Midsummer” 13).

### **Gaiman’s Artistic Responsibility: An Approach through Shakespeare and *Sandman’s* Dream Lord**

Neil Gaiman is a many-sided author whose career started with the publication of his graphic novel *Sandman* series launched in 1989. Since then he has garnered recognition as a prolific writer of novels for adults and children, as well as short stories, movie scripts, and essays. He has not become a playwright—but interestingly enough, one of his best known stories not only bears the title of Shakespeare’s dream play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but it also offers Gaiman’s myth-version concerning the circumstances of the play’s origin and implies that the events revealed in the source text come from and then influence the playwright’s reality. Gaiman systematically builds the Shakespearean myth in the various issues; what is more, he concludes his cult series with a story that focuses on the composition of Shakespeare’s last play *The Tempest* (ca.1610). Castaldo rightly claims that Gaiman’s primary interest lies not in the Shakespearean plays, but in the character of Shakespeare, the artist (99). Shakespeare acts as a double for the Dream Lord, and both graphic

novel characters communicate about Gaiman the creator; but in order to grasp Gaiman's concept concerning the importance and role of art and artist, it is inevitable to first turn to Shakespeare's dramatic works.

First of all, Gaiman's oeuvre revolves around the dream as a central concept, which Shakespeare also used as a metaphor for what the creative mind is capable of producing. The *Sandman* series is set in a dream world whose cohesion is provided by the fluidity of the dream-texture of fantasies. These fantasies often feature the Dream Lord, one of the seven metaphysical entities (the Endless), thus making the anthropomorphic manifestation of dreaming—that is, imagination—a key character in many of the stories. The significance of the dream in its various functions, including inspiration and a space in which reality may manifest in a magically transformed manner, recurs in Gaiman's later prose as well. As he has become an extremely popular author, Gaiman has also taken several opportunities in speeches and essays to express his ideas concerning creative work, in which dreams and the ability to dream provide the basis for all other aspects. In his collection of essays entitled *The View from the Cheap Seats* (2016), he reflects on the essential role of fiction, and he uses the word *dream* (in variations) nearly a hundred times. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," Prospero claims in *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 4.1.155-56), and Gaiman's mission is to prove so in his wide range of texts.

In fact, it is Prospero's character that may provide the key to profoundly understanding Shakespeare's occurrences in Gaiman's Sandman universe. Prospero the magician "is identified as a dramatist, and thus, implicitly, with Shakespeare" (Peterson 247). Such a doubling enables the playwright to speak about the art of creation in an imaginative, metaphorical manner. Prospero, in this construct, mirrors Shakespeare as a creative artist, while the vision of the island itself becomes a theatrical show. Gaiman, it seems, then, did not simply seek to use a genius artist of world fame to include him in his graphic novel series, but his idea of creating Sandman as the Lord of Dreams relies on a literary precursor famous for exploring the dream land of creative imagination. When we look at the Gaiman-Shakespeare parallel, we should place it into the framework of the artist creating an artist character to metaphorically discuss the implications of shaping imaginary worlds. It is in this respect that the Gaiman-Dream Lord correspondence mirrors the Shakespeare-Prospero relation.

John Pendergast, who considers the Shakespeare-Gaiman relationship from a Shakespeare scholar's perspective, underlines that it is not by chance that Gaiman opts to integrate *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into his *Sandman* world. These plays are two of those four whose plots may be

considered as originally designed by Shakespeare; moreover, these two dramatic works highlight the importance of the creative work in art through Prospero and the Rude Mechanicals, respectively (186). Gaiman's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" thus becomes "a metacommentary on not only Shakespeare's play, but on the labor of producing art" (191). By looking at the thematic connections between Gaiman's *Sandman* series and Shakespeare's portrayal of imagination, Pendergast concludes that "Shakespeare's greatest legacy is his ability to bring his illusions, dreams, and art back to reality, and to bring reality back to illusions, dreams, and art" (196).

Certainly, this theme of interconnectedness between dream and reality appears as a focal point in the *Sandman* comics; furthermore, Gaiman is also intrigued by the consequences of such powers. The artistic responsibility only partially relies on the duty of exercising one's creative power that Emily Dickinson saw as the "Hints of Honey" that "made Reality a Dream / And Dreams, Reality" ("Within that little Hive" ll. 3-4). A significant part of this responsibility is to seek this "Honey" and deal with the sacrifice that is inherently connected to it. Castaldo takes note of this arduous task: "Shakespeare, as a character, discovers through his life and the course of the series the necessary loss tied to a life of bringing dreams to life" (99). The character of the artist in this frame is essentially bound to the idea of a bargain, a classical topos often inseparable from the theme of human hubris. Yet Gaiman turns the idea of the bargaining artist into a more complex and complicated concept because the gift that is bargained for is both for personal benefit and for the benefit of the world. It appears that only the long-lasting fame—artistic immortality—the playwright craves would satisfy his Shakespeare as an artist, but that could come into existence only if his works pleased people to generate the much-desired hype.

The plot-line linked to Shakespeare's character is embedded in the context of immortality: Shakespeare's first appearance in the *Sandman* books takes place in issue 13, entitled "Men of Good Fortune,"<sup>1</sup> in which the character Hob Gadling, who does not want to die, is introduced. Dream grants Hob longevity as a kind of experiment on the human experience, and the price for the extremely long life is a repeated reunion for a drink in every hundred years. This issue fundamentally presents Hob's story, and while Shakespeare's career story will unfold only later, we are shown how it begins. This embedding is based on the idea of doubling: there is Hob Gadling, who strives for real, physical immortality, wishing to avoid death; and instantly this desire to live forever is doubled by showing Shakespeare's character, who yearns for immortality through the fame that his works could earn for him. Furthermore, to complete the act of doubling, Gaiman presents Shakespeare envying

Marlowe's talent for having created *Faustus*, the play that now becomes the double object of his desire: he would love to write as powerful a play as Marlowe's *Faustus*, and he would love to exchange places with the character Faustus, offering anything he has for a talent that would allow his plays to survive his own bodily existence. His wish binds him to spheres of imagination: he envies a fictional character and he covets the fictional world, the play that Marlowe has created with his outstanding genius.

Issue 13 makes the first step in positioning Shakespeare as part of a complex doubling process. Here Marlowe appears as a Faustus-like character, while Shakespeare is juxtaposed with both Marlowe and his literary creation as one who aspires for becoming such a character, having the potential to mirror both Faustus and Marlowe. Shakespeare's ambition doubles that of Hob's on an abstract level, it seems (although the wish for enduring remembrance is connected to people in their very corporeal reality). Historical characters and phenomena double ones that are purely fictional, assuring an inherent relation between the realms of reality and imagination. The bargain that Shakespeare makes with the Dream Lord suggests, furthermore, that there is an interchangeability between the two realms. From Morpheus, Shakespeare gets the creative power that may ensure the long-lasting fame he desires, and in return he needs to write two plays related to Morpheus's Dreamland; consequently, an item from the realm of dreams may be exchanged for something coming from the world of reality—and vice versa.

The concept of a miraculous bargain explains Gaiman's notions about how art operates. Castaldo emphasizes the price the artist must pay for the special talent, claiming that "[w]oven into and around the performance are the themes of responsibility and regret" (104)—an idea that is more directly addressed in the final issue of *Sandman* (issue 75), in which we can see Shakespeare writing *The Tempest* and regretting the path he took and "the life he lived (or didn't live)" (107). However, while the idea of the bargain does indeed highlight the unnatural burden the artist must take in his life in order to achieve the fame that will keep his oeuvre alive long after the author's death, Gaiman's presentation of the magical deal and its consequences equally underline the reciprocity. Hob's story, paving the way to Shakespeare's, shows that while Hob does indeed pay a high price for the unnaturally long life he has, the deal is not an experiment on human nature modifying Hob's perception of life. Instead, the deal aims at transforming Dream: Death believes that it is in Dream's interest to descend among mortals and learn the way they think (Gaiman, "The Men of Good Fortune" 1). And indeed, the closing panel of the issue concludes on Death accepting his own

transformation by becoming a more social entity, one who has become aware of the importance of friendship—or relationships, feelings in general.

This “punchline” about Morpheus’s revelation about his own, newly developed needs, which comes as the upshot of the deal with Gadling, gains significance when issue 19 picks up the thread of Shakespeare’s bargain story. For what happens in issue 13 is the indication of a reciprocal experience: the human Hob finds it difficult to cope with the emotional losses he suffers and understands that the gift of endless existence prevents him from living a life of close human relationships; in contrast, Morpheus comes to the realization that he has grown attached to Hob and he has become addicted to their recurring meetings. This transformation allows the Dream Lord in issue 19 to ponder about the deal he made with Shakespeare. He has his doubts whether he did the right thing when he offered the bargain to Shakespeare, because he is now capable of perceiving what price Shakespeare has had to pay. His wording appears to explain the price in terms of gain, but actually, the implication focuses on what becomes loss. “[T]he price of getting what you want, is getting what once you wanted,” Morpheus reveals (Gaiman, “A Midsummer” 19), which may suggest that satisfying the desired self results in the loss of longing—the loss of dreaming, if you like. As Stephen P. Olson interprets Morpheus’ words, “[i]n acquiring one’s dream, one loses them, for they are no longer dreams” (48). This interpretation, however, fails in the given context, as Shakespeare’s deal is exactly about the gift of a special creative power, that is, dreaming. Thus a more accurate reading focuses on the importance of the phrase “once you wanted.” The Shaper is more likely to imply that a wish always reflects one’s momentary situation. In this respect, when Shakespeare met the Dream Lord, he wanted fame and did not mind the consequences; nevertheless, he may not have wanted the “byproducts” of his deal—had he fully understood their significance. As Kurt Lancaster asserts, Morpheus in this scene assumes the role of “Shakespeare’s conscience” (73). The Sandman’s doubts appear to spring from the fact that “the poet’s dream ... wins out over familial responsibility” (Lancaster 73), since Gaiman makes the Hamnet-Shakespeare relation central.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the observed father-son conflict is the symptom of a larger problem, Shakespeare’s loss of interest in reality (Castaldo 105), which affects Shakespeare’s emotions in the first place. The exchange of words he has with Morpheus about Marlowe’s life are telling: the Sandman does not think the news would “hurt” Shakespeare, while Shakespeare accuses the Dream Lord of having no “care for human lives” (Gaiman “A Midsummer” 16; emphasis added). The scene, however, has the potential for irony, as Shakespeare may be hurt by the news mostly because he appreciated Marlowe as an artist—and

not because he cares so much about him as a friend. It is also ironic that the interaction between the dream universe and the world of realities has a repercussion beyond Shakespeare's transformation: Morpheus learns to fully comprehend the implication of Shakespeare's bargain—and this is why he cares little about the playwright's feelings when he speaks about Marlowe's fate. What is a loss on the human side is a gain on the dream side—although this growth of personality does not bring happiness to Morpheus, either.

Hob, Shakespeare, and Morpheus underline diverse aspects of the theme that knowledge may enrich one's life, but enrichment is not synonymous with happiness. When the world of reality and the world of imagination interfere with each other in a way that is out of the ordinary, harmony becomes disrupted. At the same time, the unsettling of order creates new potential for creativity—a potential that mostly is beyond the comprehension of the human mind because it does not adhere to the rules of everyday reality and opens up a space of (artistic) imagination. The bargain is important thus as a means of exchange between the two worlds that hereby mutually benefit from it even though the deal generates difficulties, challenges, or even tragedies. The items exchanged may differ from each other greatly in quality; however, they may be swapped because from a certain, magical perspective they correspond to each other. How this interchangeability is focused through the theater performance is going to be the subject matter of the next section.

### **Theater: Mirroring Reality to Create Myth**

In the framework provided by the highlighted correspondences between Shakespeare and Gaiman as authors of fictional worlds, it is nearly inevitable that Gaiman relies on the Shakespearean idea that acting has the purpose “to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III, ii, 22). Accordingly, presenting Shakespeare in a story about acting, applying the method of mirroring that allows a reflection on the relationship between art and nature, maximizes the potential for Gaiman to express his artistic credo.

Shakespeare's above noted idea about the function of the theater is put into practice by Gaiman as he takes a play written by Shakespeare, and turns it into a reflection of the playwright's personal story, demonstrating that for him now “all the world's a stage” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* 2.7.139). In effect, the way Gaiman exploits the potentials of the source text allows us to see his story itself as a theater performance. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play that Gaiman uses, includes a play-within-the-play that mirrors the themes of the play it is in (and addresses in itself the relation of theater to reality),

while the performance that Gaiman's work centers on mirrors, in many ways, both the Shakespearean play and its play-within-the-play. As the invited audience comes from another sphere, the world of the fairies, the mirroring effect is accentuated when the fairies recognize themselves in the characters of the play, or when they actually talk to the actor who has their character's role. Such instances blur the boundaries between reality and imagination because they destabilize the notion of reality. For how can you claim for sure what is the reality that is mirrored if, when reading the comic series issue, the human readers watch fairies who watch fairies who are played by human readers, or more precisely, actors (and, in some cases, male actors in the role of female characters)? "Real" as factual becomes both untraceable and a confusing idea due to the process of multiple doubling, especially that in Gaiman's story those involved with the play either as members of the audience or the cast continually recognize the real in the doubles. Due to Gaiman's use of *mise en abyme*, the borderline between reality and imagination becomes fluid: what used to be known as a wild fairy fantasy (notably placed in the magical wilderness) serves now as the artifice in the story, subverting the civilization versus nature theme of the source play. In effect, we are invited to accept the magical as part of reality, thereby renegotiating what reality means to us ultimate spectators and readers.

Gaiman's focused reliance on (cultural-) historical and biographical facts in his story also aims at creating a realistic context, in which readers are invited to accept the realism of the magical, the fantastic. By creating a context for the source play with historical characters and facts, Gaiman uses reality in order to mythologize the Shakespearean play. This method connects curiously to the concept of the bargain, too, as it assumes again the interchangeability of items coming from the realms of reality and imagination, respectively. While Shakespeare plays with the fairy lore to build his world of the fantastic,<sup>3</sup> which stands in contrast to, yet also mirrors the real(istic) world represented by Athens, Gaiman adopts the Shakespearean fantasy wilderness, and connects it to the reality we know from literary history. The contemporary theatrical practices, including an emphasis on men playing female characters, and the specifics of Shakespeare's life and the period that are evoked by the historically known actors conjure up a kind of realism that lend credence to the fantastic components, too.<sup>4</sup> This way even setting the performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the "The Long Man of Wilmington" in 1593 may not appear as such an absurd idea if we know that the plague drove Lord Strange's Men out of London to perform in the country.



The above detailed method allows us to comprehend Gaiman's story about the origin of Shakespeare's play and its first theater performance as a part of Shakespeare's personal history. It is not by chance, therefore, that the graphic novel starts with a dialogue between Shakespeare and his son, that the central pages display and contextualize Hamnet's poor relationship with his father, and that the closing panel includes information on Hamnet. These images denote that the focal story, this time, attempts to question what we know or understand as real.

The strange, often incomprehensible nature of love, reflected in the suffering from unrequited love and the joy of returned love appear as one of the foci in Shakespeare's pastoral comedy, while the relationship between the real and the fantastic, or the civilized and the wild, is the other central aspect of the play. In Hamnet's story, these themes merge. Unrequited love—his father's lack of attachment to his son—is what Hamnet complains about behind the scenes, while the fairy audience enjoys the play of romantic love games. The parallel in the themes is made (literally) visible when Gaiman creates a double page ("A Midsummer," 12-13) where stage and backstage scenes help the theme of neglect unfold. The right-hand side page mirrors the troubles presented on the left-hand side page: the actors on the left present the moment Hermia awakes from her frightening dream and realizes that she is left on her own in an unfamiliar world, the enchanted forest; on the right-side page Hamnet reveals his feeling of loneliness and his fear that he might be more interesting to his father as a character in a space of imagination, in a work of art—a kind of enchanted forest, fantastic world to the child. Gaiman's method of juxtaposing these two scenes reminds us of Shakespeare's technique of mirroring in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the play-within-the-play reflects the love complications in the play. In consequence, all the problematic romantic relations somehow evoke the others, and thus the Athenian romance and the fairy forest romance mirror each other. The Shakespearean characters that enter the magical forest, however, return to the real world in the end, whereas Hamnet, in Gaiman's version, is transported into an "other" world, or, more precisely, "an otherworld," a secondary world (Clute 738)—without the chance to return.

Hamnet becomes part of the theater production, playing the Indian boy, who is usually an off stage character. In the source play, the Indian boy is the starting point of the love game, or rather love war that bursts out between Titania and Oberon as the fairy king becomes jealous of his wife's new object of love. Gaiman, however, subverts the Aristotelian idea that "art is to imitate nature's way of acting" (Crohn Schmitt 3) and this time makes nature imitate what takes place on stage when the "real" Titania speaks to

Hamnet in the interval and tries to seduce him with a piece of exotic fruit—a strawberry—and with talks about the beautiful Fairyland to win the child for herself. This gesture of enticement is foreshadowed by the scene when on page four Henry Condell, who plays Titania in the play, receives compliments on his looks and is promised a strawberry. The real and the fantastic further merge at the end of the story and we are made to face reality—Hamnet’s early and unexplained death—presented with a mythical coating by Gaiman.

The final panel of the comic is something like the last piece in a complicated puzzle that reflects Gaiman’s mythologized version of history. Knowing that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was first performed in 1600, we can assemble what Gaiman offers us as history and myth, subtly presenting his argument that Hamnet’s death inspired Shakespeare to write his *Hamlet*, and that Hamnet’s death may have to do something with Titania’s love for the boy, leading the fairy queen to kidnap Hamnet and turn him into a changeling, just as the Indian boy is narrated to have been taken by Titania in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The overall mirroring effect naturally leads to this conclusion, which Gaiman further reinforces in another DC comics. In “The Land of Summer’s Twilight,” Titania is served by the grown-up Hamnet, confirming that the Fairy Queen successfully seduced Hamnet to live with her in the land of fairies (Wagner, Golden, and Bissette 194).

The mirroring Gaiman applies in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” reinforces the idea that two things may not be identical but still could be of equal worth, making them thus exchangeable. The focus on interchangeability is obvious in Shakespeare’s comedy, too, but it is important to note a crucial difference between the two authors’ approaches. Shakespeare’s extreme mirroring strengthens the comic aspect of interchangeability, and mocks human nature that makes people easily switch their interest under the effect of love, which functions as a misapplied magic potion. Gaiman’s use of interchangeability, in contrast, is never to mock but rather to reward the human characters with dignity: exchanging one thing for another is costly, and the price is always paid—but it may produce magical material (for instance, Shakespeare’s plays) that fundamentally defines how we think about humanity and culture.

The price of entering the sphere of the magical, furthermore, is losing the chance of restoring the real world: the bargain may not be undone. This truth in Shakespeare’s version becomes part of the tools that contribute to the creation of the mocking effect. The comedy seems to celebrate restoration on many levels with so many happy couples that one finds it difficult to count—thus the “tiny” flaw in the system, manifest in Demetrius’s magically generated love for Helena, almost goes unnoticed. Everyone is cured from the effect of

the magic potion but Demetrius, who is thus magically driven to marry Helena and to support the fake image of complete harmony resulting from a perfect restoration process. As István Géher notes, Shakespeare's comedy concludes on the not so happy note of consolidation, where the barbaric fairy rite is replaced by the civilized ceremony (135). The outcome of the play deprives Demetrius of his free will, and thereby of his dignity. What is more, Shakespeare conducts an experiment on us, spectators, as we do not have the chance to criticize his solution but are forced to clap our hands if we conform to the conventions of watching theater. The great magician mocks us, too.

The other great magician, Gaiman, also taunts us. If Shakespeare is to make a magnificent show of mirroring and doubling, Gaiman will demonstrate that he is capable of surpassing even the "most high miracle" (Shakespeare *The Tempest* 5.1.182) Shakespeare conjured up in his two dream-plays. Gaiman doubles the hidden disruption of harmony—and by this he manages to create a new kind of order. Hamnet, as we noted before, ends up in fairyland—but there is another character who counterbalances this move between the two spheres. Puck, Robin Goodfellow, is a trickster fairy in the comic, who decides to play himself in the comedy, knowing that no one could play him any better than himself. He knocks out Dick Cowley, the actor who plays Puck, and stands in his place. While he recites Robin Goodfellow's famous farewell speech, the fairy audience disappears from this world, and the actors fall asleep. Considering this turn in the story, Castaldo's remark that in Gaiman's fantasy "Hamnet's 'death' is actually a real case of fairies taking a child, but with no goblin changeling left in its place" (105) does not necessarily hold true, as Puck's fate is at least ambiguous. He is not seen leaving this human plane with the other fairies, but his absence from the company of actors who wake up from the dream does not prove his return to the realm of fairies, as in those panels we still see Hamnet. The last page of the graphic novel hints at the possibility that a "real" theatrical performance with a really fantastic audience was just a dream—a midsummer night's dream, which may, however, just *feel like* a dream, echoing the closure of Shakespeare's play, in which magic is performed to make the lovers believe that the miseries they went through was just a nightmare. Puck is responsible thus for theatrical magic, in which dreams are actually real yet disguised as illusions. Accordingly, when he steps into the performance, the mask that served to hide the reality of the actor and give the illusion of a hobgoblin now serves to give the illusion that there is an illusion provided by the theater, and thus hide the reality that there is no theatrical performance when Puck speaks. Puck is attracted to this world by the fantastic that is manifest in theatrical magic (which he understands as reality, a misunderstanding that leads to his replacing the actor

playing Puck); in a similar manner, Hamnet is drawn to Fairyland by all its fantastic details that Titania speaks about. Puck and Hamnet thus may be taken as each other's functional doubles, both attracted by the fantastic and lured to a dimension that is unreal from their perspectives. Puck's decision to make the theater even more real implies a possible reading in which the hobgoblin must be around in this human plane wherever and whenever "real" magic takes place. This interpretation, just like "real" magic, needs the active involvement of imagination: the last panel on page twenty-three is pitch dark. It is human imagination that must fill in that gap.

Gaiman's Puck from the world of fantasy assumes the role of Puck in the human sphere. He upsets the natural order by taking up someone else's character, and Hamnet undermines the same order by stepping over the borderline between the two dimensions. These changes are irreversible ones, transformations that may not be undone, Gaiman suggests. Thus, I would argue that even Demetrius's magically transformed emotions that stay "uncured" in the Shakespearean drama to present a seeming harmony are mirrored by Gaiman's presentation of a double upset of balance. This solution signals that the changes taking place due to the intervention of the fantastic sphere cause trouble, loss, and sorrow—an idea that is also present in Shakespeare's work but remains obscure by virtue of the forced and seemingly happy ending. To give this outcome a twist, Gaiman adds a latently positive ring to the tragic finale that he proposes. Upsetting the original separation of the real and the fantastic generates magic, the inspiration for real Art—for writing not only the dream plays, but also *Hamlet*, for instance. Writing dream plays and accepting the consequences become the price for acquiring the talent Shakespeare needs to become remembered for his dramatic genius. Yet the consequence itself—in this case, losing Hamnet—becomes also the source for further miracles of the creative mind.

As Castaldo reminds us, Hamlet's name does not originate from the variation of Hamnet's name (104), yet we readers are invited to enter the space of imagination and leave the doubts of realities behind. As Gaiman repeatedly emphasizes, truths may not be real in terms of factual correspondence. Truths may be completely imagined yet may mirror reality, which explains why the "real" Puck is a perfect replacement for the dramatic, that is fictional, character Puck, who is impersonated by a "real" actor on stage. This interchangeability leads us to question what is real and what is fictional and also questions the causal relationship between the two realms. In a similar manner, Hamnet's disappearance into the fairies' world is like a closed time curve, a loop: Shakespeare's play presents the abduction of Hamnet as history, while allowing the abduction to take place after the play is performed. But in

Gaiman's fantasy, even this phenomenon is possible, because alternatives complete each other instead of excluding each other—for the author's task is to open doors into (not alternative facts but) alternative layers of truths, so-called "shadow-truths" (Gaiman, "A Midsummer" 21). Such "shadow truths" allow a more complex perception of the world through an active interaction with imagination.

### **Conclusion: "All the World's a Stage"**

Gaiman's graphic story is a commentary not only on Shakespeare's character and life but also, as Julia Round contends, it can be read as "metafiction that deals with ... the creative process and the telling of stories" ("Transforming" 105), that is, art. To understand Gaiman's notion of artistic creativity, the concepts of interchangeability and bargain prove especially useful. On the one hand, the struggle and the sacrifice, that is, the price of the bargain is emphasized by Gaiman when he presents Shakespeare as one who pays with the loss of his emotional life for the talent that he is given by the Dream Lord. On the other hand, the author's responsibility to provide a vision in which the real may seem magical and the magical becomes real is observable.

Gaiman underlines that it is in the Shaper's power to disclose the kind of truths that are not connected to time-specific facts but are bound to the universal quality of life. He makes two of his characters indicate the importance of such truths linked to art rather than to historical records. First it is Puck who becomes entertained by the magic of the theater: "It never happened; yet it is still true. What magical art is this?" (13), he asks. Later, near the end of the story it is the Dream Lord who implies the answer by saying that "Things need not have happened to be true. Tales and Dreams are the shadow-truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes, and forgot" (21).

Gaiman has written about his artistic mission of unveiling such shadow-truths in several of his essays. He claims that "we who make stories know that we tell lies for a living. But they are good lies that say true things, and we owe it to our readers to build them as best we can" ("Telling Lies for a Living"). He also explains that "it is the function of imaginative literature to show us the world we know, but from a different direction" ("Some Reflections on Myth"). In other words, Gaiman argues that the function of art is providing a new perspective to the world we live in—creating new meanings for the phenomena we encounter on an everyday basis.

This idea that art is transformational is strongly connected to theatricality and metaphorical representation. Comic book as a medium shares

basic similarities with the theater, as neither of the media can “physically show everything and so must rely upon suggestion supported by a few perfectly chosen details” (Zulli qtd. in Pendergast 185), encouraging “the audience to participate by using their imagination to cross the boundary between what is real and what is unreal, or what is shown and what cannot be” (Pendergast 185). The metaphor of the theater in the graphic novel thus seems a natural choice by Gaiman to express his artistic conviction. Theatricality, furthermore, is inseparable from metaphorical representation, as Ragnhild Tronstad argues. Using Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the metaphorical meaning as a “*new* predicative meaning which emerges from the literal meaning” and thus functions as “the solution of the enigma” (qtd. in Tronstad 219) that arises when we cannot rely on the literal meaning any more, Tronstad points out that

Like the metaphor, theatricality creates new meaning by connecting two different spheres. Following the analogy, theatricality could now be seen as “metaphorical performance.” In contrast to real life performances, which are supposed to be literal, theatrical performances are based on a metaphorical gap between the real and the fictitious. Thus, the theatrical performance is at the same time both real and fictitious, but for the performance to be seen as theater, the spectator must identify the theatrical framing. (212)

This framing, as Gaiman suggests, should not be limited to the performance in time and place. Artistic magic allows for an extension of the experience, as his graphic novel demonstrates. The top three panels of page four, presenting the actor Condell’s transformation for entering his role of Titania prepares us for the magic theater may provide. First we see Condell’s half-naked, muscular, male body, as the actor is about to put on the dress in which he will play Titania. Then we may look at his figure that turns his back to us. He is already dressed as a woman, but the illusion is not perfect, as he does not have the wig on. Then, when all parts of his costume and props are in place, he turns, and the drawing shows a woman’s face, in which Condell is not recognizable. His gestures are those of a woman; his words reflect a woman’s care about her look; and his promise of the strawberry completes his association with the role that he has entered. These three panels visually establish Gaiman’s convictions about art: it is seductive, it is able to conjure up a vision that plays with our senses, and it is an illusion that is relevant outside its strict framework, that is, it provides magic even outside the theatrical/artistic space in which it appears. All the world must become a grand stage if the miracle is evoked by an artist whose gift of talent comes from the Dream Lord himself. Condell is

a perfect Titania once he is in his costume—even before the anticipated play begins. This perfected correspondence between actor and role is given another visual proof in the bottom panel on page sixteen, when the “real” Titania seduces Hamnet. While the Fairy Queen wears a dark blue dress, the stage character Titania has a red dress of similar design, so it is easy to make a distinction between the two; however, in this specific panel, the colors are faded for Titania and Hamnet, lending it a dream-like quality. The graphic solution suggests that the real and the illusionary may completely merge in the “interval,” that is, at the meeting point of the real and the fictional.

This idea that the real and the fantastic fade into each other is given a twist by Gaiman when he suggests that Puck may have stayed behind as a voluntary changeling in the place of Hamnet, who, just like the rest of the troupe, wakes up in the field next morning. This last page of the graphic novel appears to give a frame to the strange performance, which becomes a dream to the people who remember the visitation of fairies. This would reflect the Shakespearean idea that there is possible interaction between the real and the fantastic, but the magical is driven into the human subconscious and may be perceived only as a dream, although the characters actually “had entered a deeper reality than ‘the world of secondary effects’” (Sagar 41). Gaiman, however, is not satisfied with this metaphorical correspondence between dream and reality, and shows Hamnet later as a servant actually living in Fairyland. Now, which reality is to be believed?

If Hamnet becomes indeed abducted by the “real” Titania some time after the performance, what is shown as a dream was surely reality, in harmony with how dream and reality relate to each other in the Shakespearean source play. But there is a play(fulness)-within-the-play: we may not be sure when Hamnet is taken. Consequently, we are in doubt about who is dreaming despite our having seen on the penultimate page Puck reciting the magic spell that binds the audience to dreaming. What if theatrical/fairy magic is able to control reality? What if we live in a fantastic matrix? By the construction of his fantasy world, Gaiman evokes Zhuangzi’s famous butterfly dream teaching dating back to the third century B.C.E. But while Zhuangzi (and even the Matrix movies) philosophize about the uncertainty of human existence, Gaiman highlights how human existence may be strengthened by looking at the world from a perspective that allows the interchangeability of reality and fantasy.

As Gaiman argues in his masterpiece of intertextuality, the above noted interchangeability may be achieved only if all details of fantasy are carefully crafted so that they may indeed add up to a coherent world—that is, the world should always be larger than just the actual work of art that we look

at. Accordingly, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” by Gaiman is only a small fraction of his *Sandman* universe, which creatively completes and interprets the fairy fantasy Shakespeare wrote, and thus becomes integrated into Gaiman’s mythologized reality of our world. Therefore, when the performance is over, pitch-darkness in the visual text halts action, indicating a suspension in existence. The theater is a dead world without spectators, thus the darkness signals the end of the world for a moment, as everyone falls asleep—or dies, as Shakespeare’s Hamlet would see it. And this is congruent with Gaiman’s idea of how the world will end: with everyone dead, and in pitch-blackness. As his character Death reveals: “When the first living thing existed, I was there waiting. When the last living thing dies, my job will be finished. I’ll put the chairs on the tables, turn out the lights and lock the universe behind me when I leave” (*Sandman*, issue 20:20).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Castaldo refers to “Men of Good Fortune” as issue 12, but it is counted as issue 13 when the Prologue in the *Doll House* is numbered as a separate issue. Since the latter is the more frequently applied numbering, I adhere to that one.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare places Hamnet’s loneliness theme literally in the center of the story: the boy complains about his detachment from his father on page thirteen in the booklet that consists of twenty-four pages. Counting the front page as well as part of the graphic novel (as it should be in this medium), this theme is in a perfectly central position.

<sup>3</sup> Virgil Hutton cites C. L. Barber’s observations to stress how in Shakespeare’s comedy the fairies contrast the world of realism, becoming responsible for the “dreamlike atmosphere of unreality in the play” (295). Using Barber’s argument, Marie A. Plasse also highlights that Shakespeare’s “Fairy creatures ... do not ask for our unconditional acceptance of their reality” (40).

<sup>4</sup> How faction appears in Gaiman’s fiction is explored in more detail by Julia Round (“Subverting” 28-30).

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