Astronomy, alchemy, and archetypes: An integrated view of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

Abstract
"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a complex blend of metaphors: multitudinous references to the moon, mythological figures ancient and Elizabethan, and alchemical symbolism. An understanding of Shakespeare's cosmology leads to an analysis of the play's astronomy, revealing mythological archetypes that correspond to the play's characters. The archetypal struggle which ensues among the characters is the process of the opus magnum of alchemy—the coniunctio—a physical as well as psychic process which embodies the transforming theme of the play's characters from singleness to marriage. Emerging from the collective unconscious, the alchemical symbolism of the coniunctio correlates directly to Jung's process of individuation and reveals not only an integrated view of the play, but also an equivalent, contemporary reading. While the moon operates significantly within the play as metaphor, the astronomy of the play manifests the actual stage of the moon during which the coniunctio occurs. The constellations of the late spring/early summer sky also reveal archetypes in the play which are grounded in medieval concepts of cosmic numerology and alchemical number symbolism, the microcosm/macrocosm, and the seasons that operate as cycles of transformation. The rites of courtly love correspond to the Dionysian rites of passage in the May Day festivities, and also operate as metaphors of metamorphosis within the play. Through these rites, the play's archetypes interact in the alchemical stages of the nigredo, putrefactio, albedo and renovatio that culminate in the reconciliation of opposites, or the coniunctio. An alchemical, Jungian reading of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" offers innovative ways to interpret the play that may facilitate equivalent contemporary readings and performances of Shakespeare's Elizabethan work. As such, this work confirms Shakespeare's collaborative genius and poetic vision, in Ben Jonson's words, as "not of an age, but for all time."

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