

Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*,
and the Nature of Fame

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whom Shakespeare has irrelevantly included in the comparison, the tone becomes clearly less skeptical (ll. 12–17); logically, Theseus cannot be praising these powers, but a note of admiration seems to creep into his voice nevertheless. Moreover, for all its extraneousness, this section on the poet is lengthier than those on the lunatic and the lover and, seen from the viewpoint of the “poet” of this play, noticeably self-reflective:

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
(5.1.14–17)

Up to this point in the play, the “things unknown” have been the function and power of the imagination in love, including its abuses; to them Shakespeare has given both “a local habitation and a name.” In the remainder of the play, he will go on to deal with “things unknown” by dramatizing the powers, functions, and abuses of the imagination in art, specifically drama. This intrusive section serves as an anticipatory signpost,¹⁵ and the entire speech as an authorial commentary, directing us to the play’s symbolic meaning: the imagination as a way of knowing. In effect, this speech also explains why the play continues for another act after the plot has been concluded. Hippolyta’s reply to Theseus (ll. 23–27), the final word on the subject, affirms the playwright’s special regard for the truth of the imagination, “howsoever, strange and admirable” (27) its products; she finds that Theseus’ rational view is inadequate, and the implication is that we should too.

Examples of Shakespeare’s often exuberant displays of verbal ingenuity strike us either when several characters speak with the same depersonalized cleverness (e.g., in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* and *Richard II*) or when a character speaks out of character, as Lady Capulet does in developing the metaphor of Paris as a book (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.3.81–94), and as Capulet does in extending an invitation to Paris:

This night I hold an old accustomed feast,
Whereto I have invited many a guest,
Such as I love; and you among the store,
One more, most welcome, makes my number more.
At my poor house look to behold this night
Earth-treading stars that make dark heaven light.
Such comfort as do lusty young men feel