

The Amendments of Imagination:

A Study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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As different as they appear, it is somewhat surprising that Shakespeare's brilliant tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* and his fairy-filled festive comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, both date to 1595. It is uncertain which was written first, but it is obvious from the plays that Shakespeare was thinking about the two—and maybe even writing them—at the same time.¹⁾ For instance, early in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Lysander and Hermia are thwarted in love by her father's objection and the laws of Athens, Lysander laments the numerous impediments to the course of true love—

LYSANDER Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
Making it momentany as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And, ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!',
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:

So quick bright things come to confusion. (1.1.141-149)—

and the final line would seem to be a perfect epigraph for *Romeo and Juliet*, a play characterized by tragically fleeting brilliance.

Yet despite the rapid pace of *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio is given a poetic speech of more than 40 lines on Queen Mab and dreams:

MERCUTIO O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate stone
On the forefinger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomi
Over men's noses as they lie asleep.
Her chariot is an empty hazelnut
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o'mind the fairies' coachmakers;
Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
Her traces of the smallest spider web,
Her collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her ship of cricket's bone, the lash of film,
Her wagoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not half so big as a round little worm
Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love. . . .

(1.4.53-71)

Mercutio only appears in four scenes, and one of them (2.1) is very brief, just 42 lines in all, and in the other two (2.4, 3.1) Mercutio speaks prose, so if, as Tony Tanner remarks, “Romeo cannot make head or tail of what [Mercutio] is saying . . . Romeo’s bewilderment is entirely understandable,” it is because Mercutio’s Mab speech seems to be more suited to—and feels as though it has been taken from—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.²⁾

Romeo and Juliet: Pervasive Haste and Deadly Choice

Romeo and Juliet is characterized by haste, and the “two hours’ traffic” of Shakespeare’s stage (Prologue, 12) often consists of characters running. Romeo wonders if it was his father “that went hence so fast?” (1.1.160), Benvolio tells Mercutio that Romeo “ran this way” (2.1.5), and Tybalt runs off after the fight: “Which way ran he that killed Mercutio? / Tybalt, that murderer, which way ran he?” (3.1.139–140). Characters are always hieing, hastening, and hurrying—or being told to do so. Her nurse tells Juliet to “hie you hence to Friar Laurence’ cell . . . Hie you to church . . . Hie you to the cell” (2.5.68, 72, 77) and “Hie to your chamber” (3.2.138), and at daybreak Juliet cautions Romeo in the same terms: “Hie hence, be gone, away!” (3.5.26).

The word *haste* is sounded repeatedly: Friar Laurence is troubled by Romeo’s insistence on “sudden haste” (2.3.89); despite all her hieing, the Nurse is troubled by Juliet’s eagerness to hear her news, “Jesu, what haste!” (2.5.29); the Nurse combines the two urgencies in her instruction to Romeo after delivering Juliet’s ring, “Hie you, make haste, for it grows very late” (3.3.163); Capulet wonders

whether Paris will be ready for a rushed marriage, “Do you like this haste?” (3.4.22); Juliet objects to her mother about the hurried preparations, “I wonder at this haste” (3.5.118); Paris assures the reluctant Friar Laurence that he is “nothing slow to slack his haste” about the marriage, for Juliet’s father only “hastes” the marriage out of concern for Juliet’s sorrow, the wise “reason of this haste” (4.1.3, 11, 15); and Capulet is in a frenzy over the preparations, shouting at the servants and Nurse—“Make haste, make haste . . . Hie, make haste, / Make haste . . . Make haste, I say” (4.4.15, 25-27).

Even the inanimate world is affected, for in *Romeo and Juliet* time flies (1.5.32-40), the sun gallops (3.2.1), mischief is “swift / To enter in the thoughts of desperate men!” (5.1.35-36), a dram of poison may be as “soon-speeding” as the “hasty powder” fired from a fatal cannon (5.1.60, 64-65), and the apothecary’s drugs are “quick” (5.3.120).

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* thus rushes towards its tragic ending, but one abiding question about the play is whether it is a tragedy of character or fate. Are the lovers “star-crossed,” as described in the Prologue (6), and thus fated to die, hapless if luminous victims of what Friar Laurence calls “unhappy fortune! . . . A greater power than we can contradict” (5.2.17, 5.3.153)? One way to try to answer the question is to look closely at the character of Romeo. The surest way for a playwright to reveal character is to show the character choosing, and in Act 3 Romeo faces a pivotal defining choice when challenged by Tybalt. Shakespeare also tries to make it easier for us to notice such significant moments by providing illuminating foils and parallels.

Romeo and Juliet may be the world's favorite dramatic celebration of romantic love, but the play begins with talk of fighting, and we witness *two* sword fights before 75 lines have passed. The Prologue informs us that two households are feuding violently, and the play begins with Samson and Gregory, members of the house of Capulet, entering the stage. Both are wearing swords, and Samson is blustering about how eager he is to draw his sword and fight a Montague: "an we be in choler, we'll draw . . . My naked weapon is out . . . Draw if you be men" (1.1.3, 32, 60). Gregory is right to fear his pugnacious friend more than the Montagues. Tybalt, the fiery Capulet who arrives on the scene after Benvolio has stopped the first fight, is even worse, as his response to Benvolio's intervention makes clear:

TYBALT What, drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word
 As I hate hell, all Montagues and thee.
 Have at thee, coward! (1.1.68-70)

When Tybalt goads the mercurial Mercutio in Act 3, a fight ensues in which Mercutio is mortally wounded as Romeo tries to intervene. As he is dying of his wound, Mercutio repeats the same bitter imprecation, "A plague a' both houses! . . . A plague a' both your houses!" (3.1.92, 101-102), but Mercutio, significantly, is a kinsman to the Prince and Paris, so he is neither Montague nor Capulet. He is wrong to blame the feud, for he has no one but himself to blame for choosing to draw his sword and challenge Tybalt (3.1.74-84). Just before, when Tybalt insults and challenges Romeo—"thou art a

villain . . . turn and draw” (3.1.60, 66)—Romeo first chooses love—“the reason that I have to love thee . . . But love thee better than thou canst devise” (3.1.61, 68)—and tries to walk away. Mercutio cannot understand Romeo’s refusal to fight—“O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!” (3.1.72)—but his own hot-headed choice soon leaves him dying.

Once Mercutio has been fatally wounded, Romeo changes: he now feels his reputation has been stained and that Juliet’s beauty has made him effeminate and soft (3.1.113–117), so he chooses “fire-eyed fury” as his guide (3.1.126), thus disastrously abandoning love as a guide to conduct and linking himself imagistically to Tybalt. The two fight, and when Romeo slays Tybalt, he ensures his own exile or death, according to the Prince’s decree. Romeo’s memorable lament, “O, I am fortune’s fool!” (3.1.138), is nothing other than a repetition of Mercutio’s blame-shifting error, not an accurate assignment of responsibility for his own wrong-headed choice.

The Reflection of a Foil: The Thematic Significance of Peter

There is yet another way in which Shakespeare illustrates Romeo’s failure of character, but it is more subtle and conveyed through a very minor character. Peter, the servant to Juliet’s nurse, only appears briefly, and the first time is in Act 2. The nurse has been sent with a message for Romeo, but she is upset by Mercutio’s rascally banter at her expense, and she rebukes Peter for not intervening: “And thou must stand by too and suffer every knave to use me at his pleasure!” (2.4.148–150). Peter is clearly no Samson, though he is eager to boast in safety:

PETER I saw no man use you at his pleasure; if I had, my
 weapon should quickly have been out. I warrant you, I dare
 draw as soon as another man, if I see occasion in a good
 quarrel and the law on my side. (2.4.151-154)

In his other appearance, Peter has a chance to assert himself. After Juliet's "death," the wedding to Paris is hastily called off and the musicians are dismissed. Peter tries to bully the musicians into playing for him—"I will then give it to you soundly . . . Then will I lay the serving-creature's dagger on your pate" (4.5.109, 113-114)—only to have the Second Musician turn aside the threat of violence: "Pray you put up your dagger and put out your wit" (4.5.118-119). They allow Peter to cap the exchange of witticisms, giving him a gracious exit, and even though the First Musician found Peter to be "a pestilent knave," the Second Musician has the perfect closing lines: "Hang him, Jack! Come, we'll in here, tarry for the mourners, and stay dinner" (4.5.139-141). Can there be a better way of dealing with such a situation than saying, in effect, "Just ignore him. We'll hang around a bit and then eat"? The choice to avoid any threat posed by the blustering Peter again points to Romeo's fatal mistake. Facing Tybalt and knowing that either or both must die, Romeo responds to Tybalt's assurance of victory by saying: "This shall determine that" (3.1.133). Literally, Romeo is saying that this fight shall determine who dies, but he is also, unknowingly but prophetically, saying that his present choice will determine what happens afterward.

It is Romeo's choice, not fate, that leads to the tragic conclusion, and the play uses parallels to help us note the importance of his

choosing. The interplay of Peter and the musicians at the end of Act 4 is almost always cut from productions, as it has no direct bearing on the plot. On the other hand, it is *thematically* significant, as it helps illuminate what is most important in the play, and becoming aware of the significance of a thematic scene leads one to a major insight about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for it is a thematic play.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: The Unifying Thematic Structure

There are obvious differences between *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One is a tragedy, the other is a comedy. One is based on character, and the names Romeo and Juliet have become eponymous of romantic love. The other is based on a concept or idea, and the four lovers are practically anonymous and indistinguishable. *Romeo and Juliet* has a familiar linear plot, with the obstructed lovers hastening to their tragic deaths. Although Lysander and Hermia face a situation superficially similar to that of Romeo and Juliet, whatever plot there is in their story ends happily in Act 4. Whereas *Romeo and Juliet* often fills the stage with desperately hurrying characters, at one point *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has six characters *sleeping* on stage, and rather than sword fights, *dreaming* appears to be the dangerous activity. If you expect a typical plot/character structure, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* poses problems. Why fairies? Why Act 5, which is extraneous to the main action?³⁾

It is necessary to think about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a different way. For one thing, the play's act/scene structure is pointedly symmetrical. The play begins and ends at the Palace of

Theseus, the scenes just following and before those (1.2, 4.2) are in Quince's house, and all the others, at the center of the play, are in a wood near Athens. Peter Holland quotes Mark Rose's description of the shape as "a double frame around the central panel," and the graphic description usefully suggests that Act 5 is indeed tightly bound to the play.⁴ It is also essential to note the vertical social structure of the play, which ranges upward from the ironic base of the "rude mechanicals," as Puck terms them, through the familiar low mimetic level of the obstructing father and lovers, to the high mimetic court of the Duke of Athens and Queen of the Amazons, and on to ultimately include the mythic realm of the King and Queen of Fairies. Looked at in this light, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes on the familiar shape of medieval allegory, and we begin to see that the unity of the play comes from the main theme being played out over these various levels of action.

The Plight of Lovers: A Father's Blindness, Away to the Wood

A Midsummer Night's Dream is almost entirely to do with seeing—with eyes, sight, and perception—and Harold F. Brooks notes that the word "eyes" appears far more often than in any other play.⁵ It is not uncommon for a father and daughter to fail to see eye-to-eye about the man she wishes to marry, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with just that impasse. Egeus insists that his daughter marry his choice, Demetrius, but Hermia is in love with Lysander, and Egeus has appealed to Theseus, Duke of Athens, to assert an Athenian father's right to control his daughter. Hermia has been unable to sway her father—"I would my father look'd but with my

eyes” (1.1.56)—but Theseus asserts the contrary: “Rather your eyes must with his judgement look” (1.1.57). For Hermia, this is intolerable, as she later laments to Lysander: “O hell! to choose love by another’s eyes!” (1.1.140).

Egeus is particularly vexed because he believes Lysander has “bewitch’d the bosom of my child,” making use of “rhymes” and “verses of feigning love” to steal “the impression of her fantasy” (1.1.27, 28, 31-32). Theseus appears to go along with this assessment, for he cautions Hermia: “For you, fair Hermia, look you arm yourself / To fit your fancies to your father’s will” (1.1.117-118). The possibility of false or faulty perception impeding the course of true love is also announced by Lysander when he accuses Demetrius, who now professes to love Hermia, of inconstancy for having previously wooed and won the affection of Helena, who now “dotes / Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry” upon the faithless Demetrius (1.1.108-109). This triple repetition signals the lower end of the spectrum of love, for doting is the foolish infatuation (to be redundant) that so often misleads the young, and Hermia speaks of Demetrius’ “folly” in spurning Helena and pursuing her (1.1.200). Nevertheless, no matter how foolish or delusional, to dote can be a powerful attraction, and therefore Lysander wishes Demetrius would dote on Helena, as she does on him, and Helena is convinced that Demetrius errs in “doting on Hermia’s eyes” (1.1.230).

Egeus appears blind to the outrageousness of his demand regarding his daughter—“As she is mine, I may dispose of her” (1.1.42)⁶—but since Athenian law supports a father’s right to control a daughter, Hermia faces a grim choice: marry Demetrius or face

either death or life as a cloistered nun. The desperate situation could easily lead to a tragic conclusion, but Lysander has a plan to escape “the sharp Athenian law,” and that night they are to meet in the wood outside the town (1.1.162-165). With their nighttime escape to the wood, Hermia and Lysander should be able to find solace, for the wood is the green world of seasonal comedy. It is a world of natural assurance, one in which spring follows winter and youth triumphs over age. The green world brings forth life rather than offering the threat of death. It is a world that makes sense in human terms, one in which a gravid woman’s body can be seen as a treasure ship, with the ship’s sails perceived in turn to imitate the woman’s fecund body, as in Titania’s lovely description of her votaress:

TITANIA His mother was a votress of my order;
 And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
 Full often hath she gossip’d by my side;
 And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands,
 Marking th’embarked traders on the flood:
 When we have laugh’d to see the sails conceive
 And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
 Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
 Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),
 Would imitate, and sail upon the land
 To fetch me trifles, and return again
 As from a voyage rich with merchandise. (2.1.123-134)

Titania and Oberon: The Forgeries of Jealousy, The Broken Dance

If the green world makes sense in this way—if the human and natural worlds complement and comment on each other—then the threatened lovers should be able to relax into the emerging and embracing natural order they find there. Unfortunately for them, the natural world is now disordered because of the discord between Oberon and Titania, the King and Queen of the Fairies. Titania's votaress died giving birth, and for her sake, Titania intends to rear the child. The jealous Oberon covets the "little changeling boy" (2.1.120), but Titania, we hear, has made the boy "all her joy" (2.1.27), even to the extent of forswearing Oberon's "bed and company" (2.1.62), leaving Oberon "passing fell and wrath" (2.1.20). Titania's impassioned speech makes clear just how the world should be put together and how it has now come apart:

TITANIA These are the forgeries of jealousy:
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
Or in the beached margent of the sea,
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou has disturb'd our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.

The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
And nine-men's-morris is fill'd up with mud,
And the quaint mazes in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.
The human mortals want their winter cheer:
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original. (2.1.81-117)⁷⁾

Although Titania asks if Oberon will join and “patiently dance”

in her and her Fairies' round dance, Oberon refuses unless she will give him the boy (2.1.140-145). As Puck puts it, "they do square" (2.1.30), or clash, squared off in opposition, so they no longer dance their ringlets (2.1.86), and the world of nature is disordered. The image of dancing becomes a pervasive metaphor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a physical expression of the love that should order the human and natural worlds, and at the thematic heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a concept that is gracefully expressed in Sir John Davies' "Orchestra":

Dancing, bright Lady, then began to be,
When the first seeds whereof the world did spring,
The fire, air, earth, and water, did agree
By Love's persuasion, nature's mighty king,
To leave their first disordered combating,
And in a dance such measure to observe,
As all the world their motion should preserve. . . .

This wondrous miracle did Love devise,
For dancing is love's proper exercise. . . .

Kind nature first doth cause all things to love,
Love makes them dance and in just order move.⁸⁾

Puck and the Lovers: Confusion in the Green World

Even though Titania requests her attendant fairies to dance "a roundel" (2.2.1), the rift of jealousy between her and Oberon has not

been mended, so when entering the wood, the lovers find themselves in a green world of disorder and confusion. In order to console Helena, Hermia and Lysander tell her of their plan (1.1.202-220), but, wanting at least to catch sight of the disdainful Demetrius, Helena intends to tell him of the plan and then follow him to the wood when he pursues Hermia (1.1.246-251). As a result, all four lovers are soon in the wood at night. When Oberon overhears the resistant Demetrius and fawning Helena (2.1.186-246), he intends to remedy the situation. Oberon tries to orchestrate matters in the wood, but separated from and plotting mischief towards Titania, his good intentions go awry. He tells Puck to take the juice of a certain flower and anoint the eyes of the sleeping Athenian youth—meaning Demetrius—so that he will be exceedingly fond of Helena when he first sees her upon waking (2.1.259-264). When Puck comes upon the modest Hermia sleeping apart from Lysander, he assumes that is the youth Oberon meant, so he doses Lysander’s eyes with the juice (2.2.65-82), but it is the worried, breathless, Demetrius-chasing Helena who wakes Lysander, who immediately declares his ardent love for her (22.87-121).

So begins a magic-influenced, confusion-filled parody of the orderly and ordering dance of love. Eventually, after more confusion, both Demetrius and Lysander are professing their love for a disbelieving Helena, a complete reversal of the opening scene. There is a great deal of comic misunderstanding, but it is clear that the stichomythic dancing language of lovers—

LYSANDER But either it was different in blood—

HERMIA O cross! too high to be enthrall'd to low.
LYSANDER Or else misgraffed in respect of years—
HERMIA O spite! too old to be engag'd to young.
LYSANDER Or else it stood upon the choice of friends—
HERMIA O hell! to choose love by another's eyes.
(1.1.135-140)—

has completely broken down. Echoing Hermia, Helena comes to believe that Lysander and Demetrius are mocking her:

HELENA O spite! O hell! I see you all are bent
To set against me for your merriment. . . .
You both are rivals, and love Hermia;
And now both rivals to mock Helena. (3.2.145-46, 155-56)

Despite her sweet speech on their closeness in childhood—“with two seeming bodies, but one heart” (3.2.212)—Helena’s misperception now extends to the shocked, protesting Hermia, for she believes they are all counterfeiting their looks and protestations (3.2.237-39, 288), and the cross-talk leads to insults (3.2.328-330). The earlier stichomythia has degenerated into the sort of “jangling” that amuses Puck (3.2.353), but he has always looked down on mortals, as he confides to Oberon:

PUCK Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be! (3.2.114-115)

Oberon and Puck: Plans and Pranks, A Resumed Dance

Oberon has his own plan to make a fool of Titania. His jealousy about the changeling boy and his rift with Titania have caused a corresponding rift within him. On his better side, he clearly appreciates and longs for the harmonious nature he recounts to Puck:

OBERON My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou rememb’rest
 Since once I sat upon a promontory,
 And heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back
 Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
 That the rude sea grew civil at her song. . . . (2.1.148-152)

Yet at the very same time he swears to “torment” Titania for the injury to his pride (2.1.147), so he will apply the juice of a flower called love-in-idleness to the sleeping Titania’s eyelids, and she will “madly dote . . . with the soul of love” upon whatever creature she first sees upon waking, whether it is a lion, bear, or monkey (2.1.165-182). Oberon wants Puck to use the same juice to heal the breach between Demetrius and Helena (2.1.245-46, 259-266), but in the same speech he intends a real cruelty to Titania—“And with the juice of this I’ll streak her eyes, / And make her full of hateful fantasies” (2.1.257-58)—all with the aim of making Titania “render up her page to me” (2.1.185).

Puck is Oberon’s willing agent. In serving his King he may make mistakes, but he is more mischievous than malevolent. He may be Hobgoblin, as the Fairy addresses him, but there is more of Robin Goodfellow in his pranks, which, such as appearing as a stool

to induce a pratfall, are intended to evoke mirth and merriment (2.1.32-57). Even when he errs, such as in dosing the sleeping Lysander rather than Demetrius, Puck looks on the resultant confusion among the human lovers as a sport (3.2.347-353). The one time Puck acts on his own is momentous, though, for he takes it upon himself to create a monster when he gives Bottom the head of an ass.

It is left to Oberon to begin setting aright the problems caused by Puck. When Demetrius and Lysander go to fight over Helena (3.2.336-338), Oberon orders Puck to cause an obscuring fog and lead the “testy rivals” astray by imitating their voices (3.2.354-362). At night, Puck is also at times the Will-o’-the-wisp that leads travelers astray (2.1.39, 3.1.101), an *ignis fatuus* or false light that misleads in the darkness, and *fatuus* is the root of infatuation, that intensely beguiling and probably false form of love that leads so many youth astray. Puck had earlier led Bottom’s frightened fellows “about a round / Through bog, through bush, through brake, through briar” for his own amusement (3.1.101-3), and now, directed by Oberon to correct the mistakes that have left “Some true love turn’d” (3.2.91), Puck uses his powers of deception to lead the contentious Lysander and Demetrius “Up and down, up and down” (3.2.396). It is not yet a dance, but once the bewildered and exhausted lovers fall asleep, Puck can apply the remedy to Lysander’s eye (3.2.450-452), ensuring that the partners will be properly sorted, for in the morning when they wake, “Jack shall have Jill; / Nought shall go ill” (3.2.461-62).

Puck may have been unable to distinguish one Athenian youth from the other, but Oberon has dealt with the sleeping Titania himself: “*Enter OBERON* [, *and squeezes the juice on Titania’s*

eyelids]" is the stage direction following (2.2.25). His chanted charm makes it clear that he intends for Titania to be compelled to dote upon "some vile thing" when she wakes, "Be it ounce, or cat, or bear, / Pard or boar with bristled hair" (2.2.26-33). He had earlier suggested a fitting object for the waking Titania to look upon might be "lion, bear, or wolf, or bull, / On meddling monkey, or on busy ape" (2.1.180-181), so he is obviously thinking of some creature native to the wood, not the monster Puck creates. Nevertheless, when Puck reports what he has done—"An ass's nole I fixed on his head"—and the result—"When in that moment, so it came to pass, / Titania wak'd, and straightway lov'd an ass"—Oberon is pleased at the result: "This falls out better than I could devise" (3.2.17, 33-35).

Oberon dispatches Puck to correct all the confusion besetting the lovers, but his own plan is simple:

OBERON Whiles I in this affair do thee employ,
 I'll to my queen, and beg her Indian boy;
 And then I will her charmed eye release
 From monster's view, and all things shall be peace.
(3.2.374-377)

When Oberon and Puck together view the sleeping Titania and Bottom, Oberon confesses that he is moved by the sight—"Her dotage now I do begin to pity" (4.1.46)—but the resolution of their conflict is rather neatly and easily glossed over:

OBERON When I had at my pleasure taunted her,

And she in mild terms begg'd my patience,
I then did ask of her her changeling child;
Which straight she gave me, and her fairy sent
To bear him to my bower in fairy land.
And now I have the boy, I will undo
This hateful imperfection of her eyes.
And gentle Puck, take this transformed scalp
From off the head of this Athenian swain,
That he awaking when the other do,
May all to Athens back again repair,
And think no more of this night's accidents
But as the fierce vexation of a dream. (4.1.56-68)

The awakened Titania is understandably perplexed—"My Oberon, what visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamor'd of an ass. . . . How came these things to pass?" (4.1.75-76, 77)—but rather than answer, Oberon asks her to call for music to charm Bottom and the lovers into an unusually deep sleep, and then joins hands with Titania in a dance to the music, the twinned arts representing the restored harmony and unity:

OSBERON Sound, music! [*Music strikes into a dance.*]

 Come my queen, take hands with me,

 And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be.

 [*Oberon and Titania dance.*] (4.1.84-85)⁹⁾

Bottom and the Mechanicals: Illusion Destroyed, A Dream Denied

Bottom and his fellows are referred to in various ways throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck condescendingly labels them “hempen homespuns” (3.1.73) and “A crew of patches, rude mechanicals” (3.2.9); they are called “clowns” in stage directions, such as at the beginning of 3.1;¹⁰) and late in the play Philostrate describes them to Theseus as “Hard-handed men . . . Which never labour’d in their minds till now” (5.1.72–73). These “mechanicals” form the bottom of the play’s social structure, and they are extreme literalists. They are artisans who fear the imaginative power of art, and much of the humor comes from their ludicrous attempt to perform ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ without any dramatic illusion.

When he learns that his part of Pyramus is that of a lover who kills himself for love, Bottom immediately thinks of the dramatic impact: “If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes: I will move storms” (1.2.22–23). The concern for the play’s effect upon the audience becomes more pronounced when they start to rehearse in the wood. Because they are certain the ladies in the audience would not be able to abide any theatrical killing, Bottom proposes a solution:

BOTTOM Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (3.1.15–21)

And so it goes. Because “a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing,” the actor must allow his face to be seen, assure the watchers that he is really a man, and speak out directly to the ladies: “let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner” (3.1.26-44). Peter Quince tells Robin that when he enters with a bush of thorns and a lantern, he must “say he comes to disfigure or to present the person of Moonshine” (3.1.56-57). In this way, the “mechanicals” disfigure any possible dramatic illusion right out of existence.

Bottom’s disfigurement is of another sort. Puck’s transformation of Bottom provides the iconic image that identifies *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Bottom is blithely unaware of his transformation, and his immediate reaction to his friends’ horror at his appearance—“O monstrous! O strange! . . . O Bottom, thou art changed! . . . Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated” (3.1.99, 109, 113-114)—anticipates that of Hermia to her friends, for Bottom just assumes his fellows are having sport with him, that in their “knavery” they are pretending to be afraid, and he refuses to be rattled (3.1.115-119).¹¹ The crucial point to notice is that Bottom, despite his grotesque ass’s head, is essentially unchanged. He is unfailingly polite and courteous to the doting Titania and the Fairies to whom she introduces him. Although Bottom had been eager to play the parts of Thisbe and the Lion, too, he has been cast in the role of Pyramus because of his nature:

QUINCE You can play no part but Pyramus: for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man as one shall see in a summer’s day; a most lovely, gentlemen-like man: therefore

you must needs play Pyramus. (1.2.79-82)

At bottom, in his essential goodness, Bottom is unchanged.¹²⁾ He may find himself “marvellous hairy about the face” and have a particular craving for “a bottle of hay” (4.1.24-25, 33-34), but he always remains “bully Bottom” (to Quince, 3.1.7) and “O sweet bully Bottom!” (to a relieved Flute, 4.2.19). Throughout the play, Bottom remains “the best person,” a true paragon rather than a paramour (4.2.11-14). Bottom is the only mortal granted the privilege of seeing and talking to the Fairies, but because of his extreme literalism and excessive fear of imaginative illusion—and, perhaps, in part due to his frequent comic misuse of words—Bottom is inarticulate when it matters most and is utterly unable to recount his magical experience.¹³⁾ He senses the significance of his “most rare vision” and hopes that perhaps Peter Quince might be able to express the meaning in a poem (4.1.199-217), but despite his intent to “discourse wonders” and tell his fellows “everything, right as it fell out,” he cannot: “Not a word of me. . . No more words” (4.2.28-30, 32, 42).

Theseus and Hippolyta: The Amendments of Imagination

Theseus, the highest authority in Athens, who initially upheld its rigid, restrictive law concerning a father’s right to dispose of his daughter, turns out to be not as inflexible as Egeus would like. When Theseus and his train enter the wood in the morning, ushered in by his huntsmen’s horns, he hopes that Hippolyta will enjoy “the music of my hounds . . . the musical confusion / Of hounds and echo in conjunction” (4.1.105, 109-110). When he sees the “gentle concord”

among the formerly discordant lovers, he is quick to reject Egeus and Athenian law—"Egeus, I will overbear your will" (4.1.178)—and he is eager to hear more of what has happened in the night.

Oberon wishes to conceal from the mortals the part he and Puck have played in their eventful night, so he has them charmed into a deep sleep, ensuring that when they return to Athens they will "think no more of this night's accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream" (4.1.67-68). The lovers are not as inarticulate as Bottom with regard to their dreams, but Lysander is notably halting and uncertain when he first tries to give his account:

LYSANDER My lord, I shall reply amazedly,
 Half sleep, half waking; but as yet, I swear,
 I cannot truly say how I came here.
 But as I think—for truly would I speak—
 And now I do bethink me, so it is. . . . (4.1.145-149)

Theseus wishes to hear more of their discourse, so the lovers, who are uncertain about what they have seen and even wonder whether they are awake or still dreaming, agree to recount their dreams on the way back to Athens (4.1.186-198).

It is these recountings of the dream-filled night that are the subject of Hippolyta's comment at the beginning of Act 5, back in Athens: "'Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of" (5.1.1). In his reply, Theseus voices the thematic core of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

THESEUS More strange than true. I never may believe
 These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact:
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
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.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy:
Or, in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear! (5.1.2-22)

Despite its familiarity, the speech requires close attention, for it is often interpreted reductively as Theseus' attack on the dangers of strong imagination and his complete support for cool reason.¹⁴⁾ The speech has a pleasing symmetry, as the "apprehend/comprehends" pairs appear near the beginning and end, and Theseus clearly distin-

guishes between apprehension, or basic perception, and comprehension, the understanding of what is perceived. Famously, Theseus links the lunatic, lover, and poet as sharing the same sort of flawed imagination, the product of seething brains, but when Theseus describes the poet, an interesting thing happens. The lunatic and lover are dealt with in a mere line-and-a-half each, but the poet gets six lines, and the description is oddly positive. The poet's eye may be rolling in a "fine frenzy," but in what sense is "fine" negative? The scope of the poet's glance, "from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven," seems more appropriately expansive rather than lunatic. For the poet's imagination to body forth the "forms of things unknown" and for his pen to give to "airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" . . . well, that sounds like an imaginative description of metaphor, the essence of the poet's art. Even the apparently scornful "seething" takes on a positive suggestion, as we expect poets to see things we do not or cannot perceive and turn them into shapes—poems, plays—that we can. The final lines condemn imagination for playing tricks, but supposition is not comprehension, and, as Puck has shown us throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one can easily be deceived and misled at night.

At any rate, Hippolyta's short rejoinder is significant—

HIPPOLYTA But all the story of the night told over,
 And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
 More witnesseth than fancy's images,
 And grows to something of great constancy;

is not just making a witticism when she tells Theseus that it must be *his* imagination, then, not theirs, for the “mechanicals” have repeatedly shown themselves to be totally opposed to and fearful of imagination. They can only “amend” ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ in the absolutely (and absurdly) wrong way, divorcing all fancy from fact, thereby comically destroying any possible imaginative illusion.

We have seen this disjunction staged in Act 3. Puck, who can change his shape at will in order to trick or mislead, is the embodiment of Fancy. Bottom, who remains fundamentally unchanged despite Puck’s grotesque transformation of his head, is grounded in Fact. What happens in the transformation of Bottom is the ironic inversion of what we are asked to do at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when we are requested to *amend* with our imaginations, to put fact and fancy creatively together in our minds in order to comprehend what *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is showing us—repeatedly and on different levels—about the importance of imagination as a way of perception.

Puck and Us: The Exposition of the Dream

Early on, Helena had extolled the power of love to transform:

HELENA Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
 Love can transpose to form and dignity:
 Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind. . . .
(1.1.232-234)

The imagination is likewise capable of perceiving with the mind, and

at the end of the play, Puck, alone on stage, speaks directly to us:

PUCK If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended,
 That you have but slumber'd here
 While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,
 Gentles, do not reprehend:
 If you pardon, we will mend.
 And, as I am an honest Puck,
 If we have unearned luck
 Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
 We will make amends ere long;
 Else the Puck a liar call.
 So, goodnight unto you all.
 Give me your hands, if we be friends,
 And Robin shall restore amends. (5.1.409-424)

Our relationship to the play is now made explicit, that of dreamer to dream, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is our shared dream. Strangely, Puck is here uncharacteristically generous to us mortals in accepting responsibility for any amends to be made. To the contrary, amending is *our* responsibility. Or challenge. We can react to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Hippolyta does to 'Pyramus and Thisbe'—"This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard"—or as Samuel Pepys did to seeing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1662—"it

is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life.”¹⁵) But if we perceive the underlying and unifying theme of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is neither weak nor idle, that imagination is an essential and vitally necessary means of engaging with and comprehending art and life, then any apparent disharmony will resolve in concord, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* will reward us through its strange but magical unity. It is only through the creative engagement of our amending imaginations that we will achieve our own resolving exposition of the *Dream*.

Notes

- 1) For recent agreement about the dating of Shakespeare’s early plays, see Frank Kermode—“The next tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, is a kind of twin to a comedy, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and both of them are fairly securely dated 1595” (*Shakespeare’s Language*, 52)—and Marjorie Garber: “Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the same years that he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, and the two plays have a great deal in common” (*Shakespeare After All*, 213). Here is Peter Holland’s sensible assessment of the relationship between the two plays: “Determining whether *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* preceded or followed *Romeo and Juliet* is difficult . . . but, in the final analysis, all that matters is that the two plays were clearly being worked on at roughly the same moment” (Introduction, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 110).
- 2) *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 115. Tanner refers to Mercutio’s Mab speech as “certainly the most surprising speech of the play” (114). Although Frank Kermode calls it a “brilliant scherzo . . . written at a time when, on the evidence of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare

- was thinking of miniature fairies,” he also posits that the lengthy speech “may well be an afterthought inserted into a scene where it serves no narrative function” (*Shakespeare’s Language*, 55).
- 3) This opinion is expressed by both Harold F. Brooks—“Thus the plot is completed . . . before the start of Act V” (Introduction, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, xcix)—and Peter Holland: “In many ways . . . Act 5 is formally extraneous to the action of the drama” (Introduction, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 106).
 - 4) Introduction, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 103.
 - 5) “The way perception is dwelt upon is illustrated by the fact that ‘eyes’ are mentioned far more frequently than in any other play of Shakespeare’s” (Introduction, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, cxxxvii).
 - 6) Here Egeus echoes Capulet, Juliet’s father, when he insists that she, despite her obvious reluctance, must marry Paris, whom he has provided as a worthy match: “An you be mine, I’ll give you to my friend, / An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets” (3.5.192–193).
 - 7) Just as with Romeo’s “This shall determine that” (3.1.133), in which the ambiguous pronouns can usefully be understood to have more than single referents, so it is with Titania’s initial “These,” which can be taken to specify either the preceding mutual accusations of infidelity (2.1.64–80) or the catalog of examples that follows. In either case, “forgeries” here primarily means false perceptions, although the term also encompasses the flawed, disastrous terrestrial results of their discord.
 - 8) Sir John Davies’ “Orchestra: or, a Poem of Dancing” (1596) was written at the same time as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and expresses an idea of nature that had not yet been lost to common awareness. As she winds Bottom in her arms, Titania makes a comparison to the

natural world—"So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle / Gently entwist; the female ivy so / Enrings the barked fingers of the elm" (4.1.41-43)—and "Orchestra" includes the following similar lines: "What makes the vine about the elm to dance / With turnings, windings, and imbracements round?" "Orchestra" can be found in *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*, 354-385; the lines I have quoted appear on 358-59 and 367 (st. 17-18, 56).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dance provides the visual image of restored harmony, whether in signifying the healed rift of jealousy between the King and Queen of Fairies ([*Oberon and Titania Dance.*] (4.1.85)), appearing in the form of the Bergomask dance that Theseus urgently prefers to any spoken epilogue at the end of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' (5.1.347-348), or in accompanying the Fairies' blessing of the marriage—TITANIA: "Hand in hand, with fairy grace, / We will sing, and bless this place." [*Oberon leading, the Fairies sing and dance.*] (5.1.385-386).

Peter Holland suggests that the elaborate governing action of the lovers—their complicated, at times confusing couplings, uncouplings, and recouplings—might also be considered as a kind of dance (Introduction, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 65).

- 9) At this point, there is a nicely useful note in the Oxford Shakespeare edition: "The earth itself becomes the sleepers' cradle and the Fairies' power to make the earth and weather destructive through their dissension is, in Oberon's single word 'rock', transformed into a benign, soothing natural magic swaying the ground" (219).
- 10) Although declaring that "The First Quarto is of the very highest textual authority" (xxii), the Arden Shakespeare edition changes the Q1 stage direction at the beginning of 3.1, "*Enter the Clownes,*" to "*Enter QUINCE, BOTTOM, SNUG, FLUTE, SNOUT and STARVE-*

LING” (52), on the grounds that the Q1 s.d. is “unspecific” (xxx). The Oxford Shakespeare edition follows Q1, but adds the names, “*Enter the clowns: Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling*” (177), as do the Signet Classics edition, which adds the names in brackets, “*Enter the clowns: [Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, and Starveling]*” (33), and the Penguin Shakespeare edition, though it changes the order of the names, “*Enter the clowns: Bottom, Quince, Snout, Starveling, Flute, and Snug*” (33). The New Cambridge Shakespeare edition likewise follows Q1, but, in addition to adding the names (in yet another order) in brackets, also provides information about Titania’s presence on stage: “*Enter the Clowns [, BOTTOM, QUINCE, SNOUT, STARVELING, SNUG, and FLUTE. TITANIA remains on stage, asleep]*” (87).

- 11) Bottom’s response to the terrified flight of his friends, which Puck later likens to that of cawing choughs flying madly away at the sound of a hunter’s gun (3.2.19–24), is typically mild—

I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can; I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid. (3.1.115–119)—

whereas Helena grows increasingly upset by and angry at what she takes to be mocking deception on the part of her friends:

O spite! O hell! I see you all are bent
To set against me for your merriment.
If you were civil, and knew courtesy,
You would not do me thus much injury. . . .

Ay, do! Persever: counterfeit sad looks,
Make mouths upon me when I turn my back,
Wink each at other; hold the sweet jest up;
This sport, well carried, shall be chronicled.
If you have any pity, grace, or manners,
You would not make me such an argument.
But fare ye well; 'tis partly my own fault,
Which death, or absence, soon shall remedy.

(3.2.145-148, 237-244)

- 12) Harold Bloom is effusive in his praise of Bottom's heroic soundness of character: "What we do have is a gentle, mild, good-natured Bottom . . . heroically sound in the goodness of his heart, his bravery, his ability to remain himself in any circumstance, his refusal to panic or even be startled . . . Bottom is unfailingly courteous, courageous, kind, and sweet-tempered, and he humors the beautiful queen whom he clearly knows to be quite mad" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 149, 152, 161).
- 13) One of Bottom's comic characteristics is his frequent misuse of words. He advises Quince to call their names "generally" (1.2.2) when he means "individually," declares he will "aggravate" rather than "moderate" his voice (1.2.76), and he agrees that their planned rehearsal in the wood will be most "obscenely" instead of "seemly" (1.2.100). A later malapropism appears to have a more serious significance, however. Just before he falls asleep in her arms, Bottom tells Titania that he feels "an exposition of sleep come upon me" (4.1.38), misusing "exposition" for "disposition." Sadly, when he later awakens, Bottom will be unable to expound upon his most rare vision: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the

wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream” (4.1.203-206). Bottom’s dream may be fiercely vexatious, but for him it remains ineffable.

- 14) For a reductive treatment of Theseus’ speech, see Jonathan Bate, who finds that “these lines spoken by Theseus are a critique of the imagination’s delusive power” (*The Genius of Shakespeare*, 179), and Marjorie Garber: “Theseus in fact disparages the poet, and discounts and criticizes art, because it is not reasonable . . . It is a powerful passage of poetry—but what does it say? That the imagination cannot be trusted. That poets are crazy. That art is an illusion. That lovers and madmen . . . are given to unrealistic fantasies that ‘apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends’” (*Shakespeare After All*, 222).

But surely Harold Bloom is more sensitive—more imaginative—and more perceptive in his apprehension that “there are two voices here, and one perhaps is Shakespeare’s own, half-distancing itself from its own art, though declining also to yield completely to the patronizing Theseus” (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 169).

- 15) *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. 1, 299, the entry for 29 September 1662 (Michaelmas day): “. . . and then to the King’s Theatre, where we saw ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream,’ which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life.”

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