

A Midsummer Night's Dream (Summer 2007)

Writing about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents a unique challenge, at least for the purpose of these essays. Though its fantastic collection of characters includes one of my favorite roles in all dramatic literature, the play endures in my imagination mainly as a kind of pleasure garden—the most glorious Shakespeare created, perhaps, but glorious more for its overall beauty than for the individuals strolling within. The play's best passages are triumphs of lyricism over characterization:

His mother was a vot'ress of my order,
And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th' embarked traders on the flood;
When we have laughed 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.

[II.i.123–34]

Thou rememb'rst
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,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music?

[II.i.148–54]

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
Have with our needles created both one flower,
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
Both warbling of one song, both in one key;
As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds
Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,

But yet an union in partition,
Two lovely berries molded on one stem.

[III.ii.203–11]

This is not to say characterization is lacking here or elsewhere. I am too familiar with these gorgeous lines not to hear in them the sensuous Titania, the brooding Oberon, the passionate, hysterical Helena. There is a difference between lyrical and operatic, and Shakespeare is not (usually) indulging in poetry for poetry's sake. In *Midsummer* he offers glimpses of bottomless deeps, but the barely restrained energies belong less to individual, evolving selves than to the wonderful world that contains them: a world of Celtic fairies and Roman gods, of earth and sea and siren songs, of innocence and experience equally desired. Who can locate with certainty the shifting center of this world? Is it the young lovers—Hermia, Helena, Lysander, Demetrius—around whose manipulated dreams the plot whirls? Is it the older couples—Theseus and Hippolyta, Oberon and Titania—observing, intervening, judging? Is it the hobgoblin (or puck) Robin Goodfellow, incapable of love even as he plays Cupid, or Nick Bottom and his fellow mechanicals, whose “palpable gross play” [V.i.359] inadvertently inverts what we have witnessed? Each takes a turn in the spotlight, and each shall receive due consideration below, though in the final analysis it is the “mutual cry” of their disparate voices—“So musical a discord, such sweet thunder” [IV.i.116–7], or, to borrow from Helena, their “union in partition”—that matters most.

The Lovers

The structure of *Midsummer* supports a reductive view of the four young lovers, who at times are literally interchangeable. When the play begins both men are contending for the right to marry Hermia. She wants Lysander but her father, Egeus, prefers

Demetrius—“a worthy gentleman” [I.i.52], according to Duke Theseus. Still Hermia refuses to budge; my choice is just as worthy, she protests, and Lysander steps forward with evidence: “I am, my lord, as well derived as he, / As well possessed; my love is more than his; / My fortunes every way as fairly ranked / (If not with vantage) as Demetrius” [I.i.99–102]. Lysander emphasizes his wealth and lineage, though Hermia would surely claim indifference to such petty points—what matters is they love each other. Unfortunately Theseus—who, “overfull of self-affairs” [I.i.113], no doubt would rather be contemplating his own impending nuptials—upholds the father’s will and exits, followed by Egeus, Demetrius, and Hippolyta, the duke’s Amazonian conquest. (Just how passively Hippolyta exits is the first big directorial choice.) Young love is left to plot escape.

We have traversed this ground before—it is the standard setting for romantic comedy . . . and sometimes tragedy. Indeed, Lysander either appropriates or anticipates one of *Romeo and Juliet*’s most powerful images of young love, which is, he tells us,

momentary 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.

[I.i.143–9]

Yet for all their passion, if the rest of the scene is any indication, Hermia and Lysander are not quite the kindred spirits they imagine. At times they seem to be having distinct conversations:

Lysander: Ay me, for aught that I could ever read,
 Could ever hear by tale or history,
 The course of true love never did run smooth:

But either it was different in blood—
Hermia: O cross! too high to be enthralled to low.
Lysander: Or else misgraffed in respect of years—
Hermia: O spite! too old to be engaged to young.
Lysander: Or merit stood upon the choice of friends—
Hermia: O hell! to choose love by another's eyes.
Lysander: Or if there were a sympathy in choice,
 War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it . . .

[I.i.132–42]

Hermia advises patience; Lysander concurs, then abruptly reverses course: “A good persuasion. Therefore . . .” let’s elope [I.i.156]! His dowager aunt lives outside the city, where “the sharp Athenian law / Cannot pursue us” [I.i.162–3], and she will shelter and support the runaways. This new plan appeals to Hermia, who reassures Lysander of her steadfastness with vows that would have made Juliet cringe:

I swear to thee by Cupid’s strongest bow,
 By his best arrow, with the golden head,
 By the simplicity of Venus’ doves,
 By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,
 And by that fire which burned the Carthage queen
 When the false Trojan under sail was seen,
 By all the vows that ever men have broke
 (In number more than ever women spoke),
 In that same place thou hast appointed me
 Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee.

[I.i.169–78]

The stock rhymes about Cupid and Venus lead to darker allusions—Dido immolated herself because, unlike Hermia, “the false Trojan” Aeneas valued duty to ancestors over love. Yet Hermia has more current reasons to be anxious, for her lines cue the entrance of the final member of this foursome. Helena, Lysander has already noted, “dotes, / Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry” upon Demetrius, who “[m]ade love” to her¹ “[a]nd won her soul” [I.i.107–9] before inexplicably transferring his affections to Hermia.

¹ The expression most likely implies wooing rather than intercourse.

Lysander's charge is not a baseless attempt to discredit a rival, for Theseus confesses to having heard "so much" [I.i.111]. Helena's memory is fonder: "For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne, / He hailed down oaths that he was only mine" [I.i.242–3].

May we ask what motivated this change of heart? Helena and Demetrius (and, later, Hermia and Lysander) exemplify one of the play's main themes: that love is a matter of chance—one might as reasonably ask why a gambler rolled seven rather than snake eyes. Puck is directly responsible for much of the chaos that ensues, when he anoints the wrong man's eyes with love potion; from his perspective, shifting affections and broken vows most truly reveal human nature: "Then fate o'errules, that, one man holding troth, / A million fail, confounding oath on oath" [III.ii.92–3]. But neither chance nor fate is necessary to explain Demetrius's infidelity. Just listen to Helena, whose self-denigrating obsession with her former lover belies her claims to be "a gentle lady" [III.ii.152], "a right maid for my cowardice" with "no gift at all in shrewishness" [III.ii.301–2]. A single passage suggests otherwise:

Demetrius: Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?
Or rather do I not in plainest truth
Tell you I do not nor I cannot love you?
Helena: And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel, and Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel—spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
What worser place can I beg in your love—
And yet a place of high respect with me—
Than to be used as you use your dog?

[II.i.199–210]

Taken by itself, his reply—"Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit, / For I am sick when I do look on thee" [II.i.211–12]—seems excessive, cruel; the contempt is more

plausible, if still cruel, beside Helena's eagerness to shame herself for his purported pleasure. What man who isn't a sadomasochist *wouldn't* be turned off?

That said, I do not wish to excuse Demetrius. By all accounts he *did* entice Helena, he *did* speak her fair . . . but to what end? Our instinct is perhaps to assume he seduced her to bed her, then discarded her the next morning. Yet several of his lines suggest otherwise. When Helena persists in her desperate love suit, he tries out a threat:

You do impeach your modesty too much
To leave the city and commit yourself
Into the hands of one that loves you not,
To trust the opportunity of night
And the ill counsel of a desert place
With the rich worth of your virginity.

[II.i.214–9]

His choice of words here would be curious, nonsensical even, were not Helena still a virgin. Much later, after Puck has corrected his errors and the lovers are at long last properly paired, Demetrius offers the clearest description yet of their relationship, admitting to Theseus, “To her . . . / Was I betrothed ere I saw Hermia, / But, like a sickness, did I loathe this food” [IV.i.170–2]. If in fact he promised, however cavalierly, to marry Helena, it is easier to understand the single-minded ferocity of her passion—a passion that would have unnerved men more experienced than the callow Demetrius. The coldly disinterested Hermia—short and dark, the physical opposite of tall, blonde Helena (“a raven for a dove,” according to Lysander [II.ii.114])—grows increasingly appealing.

Compared to the others, Hermia seems a bit more mature. Her first speech conveys a certain respect for the transformative power of love:

I do entreat your grace to pardon me.
I know not by what power I am made bold,
Nor how it may concern my modesty
In such a presence here to plead my thoughts,

But I beseech your grace that I may know
 The worst that may befall me in this case
 If I refuse to wed Demetrius.

[I.i.58–64]

Contrast this with the shallow certainty of Lysander, who would convince Helena (and himself) that

Things growing are not ripe until their season:
 So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason.
 And touching now the point of human skill,
 Reason becomes the marshal to my will
 And leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook
 Love's stories, written in Love's richest book.

[II.ii.117–22]

He says this, of course, while under the spell of a love charm and thus totally deaf to reason!

Hermia's moments of wisdom notwithstanding, there is ample evidence that neither she nor her companions ever truly understand the power to which their wills and emotions are thrall. If language reveals character, all deliver lines with disquieting subtexts. What exactly does Hermia mean when she proclaims, "Before the time I did Lysander see, / Seemed Athens as a paradise to me" [I.i.204–5]? Presumably that her passion for Lysander has overwhelmed the innocent pleasures of home . . . yet the couplet that follows, almost as an afterthought, sounds an ominous note, though no one onstage hears it: "O, then, what graces in my love do dwell / That he hath turned a heaven unto a hell!" [I.i.206–7]. Lysander's *ungracious* behavior in the woods—culminating in the inexcusably vicious "Get you gone, you dwarf! / You minimus, of hind'ring knotgrass made! / You bead, you acorn!" [III.ii.328–30]—shall prove her more prophetic than she wishes.

Still playing the distressed damsel, Helena eggs on her new suitors, who compete to defend her from Hermia's wrath. "O, when she is angry, she is keen and shrewd," she flings at her bewildered rival; "She was a vixen when she went to school, / And though she be but little, she is fierce" [III.ii.323–5]. Yet privately she has had sharper words for Demetrius. In "doting on Hermia's eyes," Helena argues with herself, her former lover "errs," yet the line that follows—"So I, admiring of his qualities"—suggests she is guilty of a similar error. Then she elaborates: "Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity" [I.i.230–3]—an attempt at philosophical detachment that suggests Helena knows exactly how unappealing Demetrius is . . . if only she could stop loving him! When at last, himself besotted with love potion, Demetrius reverts to his original choice, Helena can only wonder: "And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own, and not mine own" [IV.i.190–1]. Perhaps this statement reflects her developing maturity, her awareness that lovers are neither won nor possessed—they are, at least in *Midsummer*, "found." The unsettling implication is they may as easily be lost and found anew by someone else.

Also lost, in the apparent harmony of their four-way reconciliation, is any acknowledgement of the suffering the lovers have caused each other. It is as though to accept their future together they must forget their shared past . . . or banish it to another realm. "It seems to me / That yet we sleep, we dream," Demetrius offers, and all four exit determined to "recount [their] dreams" [IV.i.192–3 & 198]. As is typical of Shakespearean comedy, the young women do not speak again, though they have suffered most; meanwhile, the men join with Theseus and Hippolyta to mock the mechanicals' woefully amateurish production of "The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of

Pyramus and Thisby” [I.ii.11–12]. This happens in a fifth act reminiscent—in structure if not quite tone—of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies from *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. Pyramus and Thisby, of course, are the tragic doubles of Lysander and Hermia and Demetrius and Helena—or Romeo and Juliet in motley disguise—but these lovers, sitting comfortably on the periphery of the stage, are oblivious to the parallels.² The mocks in *Midsummer* are less mean-spirited than those hurled by Berowne and his cronies—“what poor duty cannot do, noble respect / Takes it in might, not merit” [V.i.91–2], Theseus occasionally reminds everyone—yet they demonstrate the short memories of people who stumbled just as ineptly in their own recent attempts to secure love. Demetrius’s glib assessment of the “lamentable” play-within-a-play is only too apt: “A mote will turn the balance, which Pyramus, which Thisby, is the better” [V.i.313–14]. The line should serve as a warning—or a bucket of ice water—to all lovers on the verge of getting what they want.

Theseus and Hippolyta

Theseus opens the play bemoaning the four days and nights that stand—“Like to a stepdame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man’s revenue” [I.i.5–6]—between his nuptial hour with Hippolyta. The image is as unromantic as the law he upholds in sentencing Hermia “either . . . to die / For disobedience to your father’s will, / Or else to wed Demetrius, as he would, / Or on Diana’s altar to protest / For aye austerity and single life” [I.i.86–90]. Because he won the hand of his Amazon Queen in battle—“doing thee injuries” [I.i.17], he reminds Hippolyta—we may instinctively assume she chafes under the bridal yoke. Yet the lovely lines with which she introduces herself suggest she is

² At least the men are oblivious. Because the women have no lines, they may well sense the deeper meaning in the foolishness. Indeed, productions such as Michael Hoffman’s 1999 film seize upon this—quite effectively—as the play’s essential point: There but for the grace of greater powers go we.

content to be domesticated, at least initially. “Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time,” she tells Theseus, reimagining his barren vision,

And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

[I.i.7–11]

But they are interrupted by Egeus, “[f]ull of vexation” [I.i.22] against his headstrong daughter. Hippolyta spends the rest of the scene silently observing the Athenian power structure, as Theseus makes three unsuccessful attempts to convince Hermia to submit to her father’s will. At last, having sided with “the ancient privilege” [I.i.41] of patriarchy, he instructs Hippolyta to follow him offstage. Yet something seems to have changed between them, for her wordless response prompts him to ask, “What cheer, my love?” [I.i.122]. When still she does not answer, he turns back to Egeus and Demetrius; he has “some business” for them to perform, and more wisdom to dispense, though he does not specify either [I.i.124–6]. Finally, hand in hand—or not—he and Hippolyta exit.

The quiet dissonance of these moments may be emphasized or ignored in performance. If emphasized, it adds an intriguing subtext to the bride and groom’s next entrance, in Act IV. The moon-drenched night in the forest has ended, the chaos of unrequited love has been resolved, and Theseus and Hippolyta burst on with the sunrise. Theseus orders his hunting dogs released, then offers to lead his future queen “up to the mountain’s top / [To] mark the musical confusion / Of hounds and echo in conjunction” [IV.i.108–10]. The image stirs in Hippolyta memories of bygone days; we may hear in her nostalgia for this heroic past—and in his boastful reply—a gentle competition:

Hippolyta: I was with Hercules and Cadmus once
 When in a wood of Crete they bayed the bear
 With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
 Such gallant chiding; for, besides the groves,
 The skies, the fountains, every region near
 Seemed all one mutual cry. I never heard
 So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.

Theseus: My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind:
 So flewed, so sanded, and their heads are hung
 With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
 Crook-kneed, and dewlapped like Thessalian bulls;
 Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells,
 Each under each. A cry more tuneable
 Was never holloed to nor cheered with horn
 In Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly.
 Judge when you hear.

[IV.i.111–26]

“Judge when you hear”—might Theseus be asking Hippolyta to remain open to the possibility that married life, with him, shall be as pleasing as the past, when she tramped freely through the woods with Hercules? Of course, good manners forbid either to speak so directly, so they settle, with their dogs, on safer ground. More urgent business lies at their feet, for no sooner does Theseus conclude his speech than he stumbles upon the four young lovers, sleeping at the forest’s edge. With tactful irony—or terrific naivety—he declares, “No doubt they rose up early to observe / The rite of May” [IV.i.131–2], then orders them awakened. Immediately Lysander confesses to his and Hermia’s thwarted elopement, Demetrius confesses to his rediscovered love for Helena, and Theseus has another decision to make. As before, Hippolyta is silent, but this time judgment comes swiftly . . . and in a happier tone:

Fair lovers, you are fortunately met.
 Of this discourse we more will hear anon.
 Egeus, I will overbear your will,
 For in the temple, by and by, with us,
 These couples shall eternally be knit;
 And, for the morning now is something worn,

Our purposed hunting shall be set aside.
 Away, with us to Athens! Three and three,
 We'll hold a feast in great solemnity.
 Come, Hippolyta.

[IV.i.176–85]

This final line echoes the line from the opening scene that prompted his “What cheer, my love?” Has Theseus learned anything in the interval, or is he simply ceding to common sense—if Demetrius no longer desires Hermia, what is gained by forcing the match? More to the point, how does Hippolyta respond to this second request to “come”? The half-line of silence that precedes their exit may be filled any number of ways; to my mind, the moment is best served by a gesture of intimacy—or reconciliation.

After so many pointed silences, Hippolyta is the only woman to speak in Act V (excepting four lines by Titania, and Francis Flute’s hilariously inept performance as Thisby). She therefore stands in counterpoint to Hermia and Helena, who sit quietly as their new husbands behave like twelve-year-olds out past their bedtimes. The noble couple, though likewise rude to the mechanicals, comes off better, if only because their brief debates on love and art add unlooked-for depths to what is already the play’s funniest sequence. Unsurprisingly, Hippolyta is more sympathetic toward romance than is the pontificating Duke of Athens:

Hippolyta: ’Tis strange, my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.

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. . . .

Hippolyta: But all the story of the night told over,
 And all their minds transfigured so together,
 More witnesseth than fancy’s images
 And grows to something of great constancy;

But howsoever, strange and admirable.

[V.i.1–27]

When the subject switches to art—specifically theater—the roles appear to reverse, with Theseus defending the performers against Hippolyta’s impatient (if accurate) critique:

Hippolyta: This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.

Theseus: The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

Hippolyta: It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

Theseus: If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men.

[V.i.209–15]

In the play’s final speech, Puck memorably describes himself and his fellow spirits as “shadows” [V.i.415]. For all his “cool reason,” Theseus cannot appreciate the play’s overriding irony: that shadows are more substantial, more lasting, than any person. The Fairy King and Queen themselves see fit to bless “the best bridebed” [V.i.395]; Oberon goes so far as to predict, “So shall all the couples three / Ever true in loving be” [V.i.399–400]. Though I have my doubts about the younger generation of lovers, I too am optimistic for the elder. Unlike Lysander and Hermia, united by the lure of forbidden romance, or Demetrius and Helena, united by fairy magic, Theseus and Hippolyta seem able to hold a conversation. Not recite poetry, not reminisce, but talk about such everyday things as animals and art. Who knows—long after the honeymoon’s glow has faded, they just might still be talking.

Oberon and Titania

The fairies’ attitude toward their human counterparts is not quite so condescending as Puck—with his cackling “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” [III.ii.115]—would have us believe. Oberon seems to take genuine pity on Helena, whom

he describes as a “sweet Athenian lady . . . in love / With a disdainful youth” [II.i.260–1], and though Titania is understandably horrified to find she has spent the night with the ass-faced Bottom, if Oberon is to be believed she has freely entertained more illustrious lovers such as Theseus (as Oberon has Hippolyta) [II.i.64–80]. Indeed, Titania is keenly aware of the bonds linking the two worlds:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have sucked 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 stretched his yoke in vain,
The plowman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock;
The nine-men’s morris is filled 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 blessed. . . .
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original.

[II.i.88–117]

It is worth noting that nowhere else do we hear of such catastrophes; certainly the human characters, whether mechanical or aristocrat, never mention them. Rather, disorder in nature symbolizes disorder in love—like the tragic ends of Pyramus and Thisby, Titania’s speech serves as a warning: Love is not all midsummer melodrama. Even for lovers as practiced as the King and Queen of Fairies, the fallout can be devastating.

As is so often the case, the problems originate in (to use Titania’s fine phrase) “the forgeries of jealousy” [II.i.81], though jealousy here is not erotic but parental. Puck provides a reasonably balanced account of the argument:

For Oberon is passing fell and wrath,
 Because that [Titania], as her attendant, hath
 A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king;
 She never had so sweet a changeling.
 And jealous Oberon would have the child
 Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild.
 But she perforce withholds the loved boy,
 Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy.
 And now they never meet in grove or green,
 By fountain clear or spangled starlight sheen,
 But they do square, that all their elves, for fear,
 Creep into acorn cups and hide them there.

[II.i.20–31]

From our perspective in the audience, this jealousy is an occasion for laughter, not fear. Though Oberon vows to “torment [Titania] for this injury” [II.i.147], the end result—to be cuckolded by the “shallowest thickskin” in a “crew of patches” [III.ii.9 & 13]—would likely torment more husbands than wives. After all, Titania is blissfully under the spell of love potion, and in her charmed eyes Bottom is an “angel,” “as wise as . . . beautiful” [III.i.123 & 141]. In the play she suffers for a single line—“O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!” [IV.i.78]—then calls for music and dances with her husband, who croons, “Now thou and I are new in amity, / And will tomorrow midnight solemnly / Dance in Duke Theseus’ house triumphantly / And bless it to all fair prosperity” [IV.i.86–9].

Clearly, for these two at least, monogamy is irrelevant to marital happiness. The crucial issue is custody of the human child, and I am less interested in the reasons for this quarrel than in its ultimate resolution.³ In fact, resolution comes so quickly it is easy to

³ If we remember Titania’s charge—“These are the forgeries of jealousy”—the reasons seem straightforward enough. As Russ McDonald explains, in his introduction to the Penguin Edition of the play, “Oberon appears injured by Titania’s neglect of him, by the threat to his primacy, while her attachment to the child may be construed as a form of willfulness and exclusion” [xliv]. Harold Bloom takes this a step further: “The Indian

miss—all Oberon will say is that he accosted Titania as she gathered flowers for the transfigured Bottom:

When I had at my pleasure taunted her,
And she in mild terms begged 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 fairyland.

[IV.i.56–60]

The logic here escapes me. Perhaps if Oberon had threatened to harm Titania’s new lover, but he merely makes fun. Nor does Titania seem upset, if “mild terms” is a fair description of her response. Besides, Oberon has taunted Titania before to no effect—their first scene together begins with him calling her “proud Titania” and “rash wanton” [II.i.60 & 63], then recounting the many times her jealousy of Theseus provoked her to interfere in his affairs with mortal women. The only difference now is that Titania has found someone new to dote on. But there is no reason why carnal desire for Bottom might not coexist with maternal affection for her foster son (just as maternal affection need not preclude spousal affection)—each is a wholly distinct kind of love. So consuming is Titania’s infatuation with Bottom, however, it drives out all memory of prior commitments—all Oberon need do is ask, and the child is his.

This is a disturbing twist, not least because it undermines the strength of those maternal feelings that once seemed so tender—as when Titania proclaimed, regarding the child’s deceased mother, her former votaress, “And for her sake do I rear up her boy, / And for her sake I will not part with him” [II.i.136–7]. Thus friendship too proves no

child is a true changeling; he will live out his life among the immortals. That is anything but irrelevant to Oberon: he and his subjects have their mysteries, jealously guarded from mortals. To exclude Oberon from the child’s company is therefore not just a challenge to male authority; it is a wrong done to Oberon, and one that he must reverse and subsume in the name of the legitimacy in leadership that he shares with Titania” [157].

match for the enchantments of romance, presented throughout the play as a subverter of all values but those found in the beloved. To be sure, some values—for starters, the draconian law that would sentence a girl to death for challenging her father’s self-centeredness—demand subversion; yet is it any wonder the least romantic couple in the play, Theseus and Hippolyta, seems most prepared for married life? This is not to suggest marriage is inherently unromantic, simply to acknowledge that spouses belong to a larger community, and have greater responsibilities, than do adolescent lovers.

The fairies are more difficult to judge. As immortal, magical beings, their perspective is necessary different. “But we are spirits of another sort,” Oberon declares:

I with the Morning’s love have oft made sport,
And, like a forester, the groves may tread
Even till the eastern gate, all fiery red,
Opening on Neptune, with fair blessed beams
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.

[III.ii.388–93]

Oberon speaks some of the play’s most beautiful poetry. Yet there is something ugly—and all too recognizably human—about his scheming, and the way he towers over his once-formidable queen at play’s end is both surprising, given her own magnificent poetry, and unsurprising, given Shakespeare’s treatment of women throughout his works. Of the forty-six lines they share following their reconciliation, Oberon speaks thirty-eight, leaving us to wonder: Has harmony or patriarchy been restored? The fogs shall disperse and the rivers return to their banks, but something has been lost, and it concerns the difference between the arias with which Titania first announces herself and the nursery rhymes with which she says farewell:

First rehearse your song by rote,
To each word a warbling note.
Hand in hand with fairy grace

Will we sing and bless this place.

[V.i.389–92]

Granted, Oberon follows this with lines utilizing the same rhyme scheme and meter; the true force of the blessing, however, is entirely his to bestow, as when he chants over the bed-bound lovers,

And the blots of Nature's hand
 Shall not in their issue stand.
 Never mole, harelip, nor scar,
 Nor mark prodigious such as are
 Despised in nativity
 Shall upon their children be.

[V.i.401–6]

These words remind us of the ultimate purpose of marriage, for the Elizabethans if no longer for ourselves: to produce heirs, thereby securing one's legacy against time. The immortal Fairy King and Queen are free of such anxieties—their authority shall hold long after the changeling over whom they quarreled has died. Why then is it important they stay together? Should we interpret their reconciliation as evidence of a deeper love, more binding than anything in the transitory affairs of the men and women with whom they share the stage? Their final words to each other⁴ do suggest a tenderness of feeling, cultivated, no doubt, through the countless ages they have lived (and feuded) together:

Oberon: Then, my queen, in silence sad
 Trip we after night's shade.
 We the globe can compass soon,
 Swifter than the wand'ring moon.
Titania: Come, my lord, and in our flight
 Tell me how it came this night
 That I sleeping here was found
 With these mortals on the ground.

[IV.i.94–101]

⁴ I do not mean their final *appearance* at the end of the play, when they address their respective trains but not each other.

Of course, we already know how she came to sleep with a mortal, and the explanation does not reflect well on Oberon. Shakespeare, crafty as ever, chooses not to dramatize this crucial moment, and so we can only guess at Titania's reaction, imposing upon the imagined scene our own standards for acceptable behavior between husbands and wives. In this respect Oberon and Titania are similar to Kate and Petruchio—there is a mystery at the heart of their marriage, impenetrable to all but themselves.

Puck

There is no such mystery at the heart of Puck, and so I find myself with rather less to say about him . . . or her (or both or neither, though for convenience I shall refer to Puck as male throughout). He encapsulates himself in a couplet: "And those things do best please me / That befall prepost'rously" [III.ii.120–1]; consequently, he may be played as nearly any personality type, from hyperactive madcap (see Mickey Rooney) to knowing drifter (see Stanley Tucci's infinitely more palatable interpretation, in the aforementioned Hoffman film). One may even decide—as did Adrian Noble, in his 1994 staging for the Royal Shakespeare Company (later transferred to film)—that there exists a homoerotic tension between Puck and his dour master, Oberon (though I cannot guess why one would).

Still, we mustn't assume Puck is *all* lighthearted mischief, for there are several moments when he flits through darker skies. Consider his warning to Oberon of the coming dawn,

At whose approach ghosts, wand'ring here and there,
Troop home to churchyards. Damned spirits all,
That in crossways and floods have burial,
Already to their wormy beds are gone;
For fear lest day should look their shames upon,
They willfully themselves exile from light,

And must for aye consort with black-browed night.
[III.ii.381–7]

This would not be out of place in *Hamlet*. Oberon pierces the gathering gloom with his lovely ode to the sun [III.ii.388–93, quoted above]; late in the play, after the lovers have retired to bed, Puck tries again:

Now the hungry lion roars,
And the wolf behowls the moon,
Whilst the heavy plowman snores,
All with weary task fordone.
[V.i.363–6]

The plowman’s snores jar resoundingly with what we imagine is happening in the bridal chambers; inspired, Puck cranks up the volume:

Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.
Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite,
In the churchway paths to glide.
[V.i.367–74]

This time Puck steers himself back to a safer path—despite the horrors just beyond the threshold, he promises, “Not a mouse / Shall disturb this hallowed house” [V.i.379–80]. Oberon and Titania then enter to bless the lovers with song and dance.

Really, Puck’s darkest lines are variations on the central theme of *Midsummer*: A thousand dangers may threaten the “fairy tale” ending. The trickster-god is not always accommodating; the scheming Loki, of Norse mythology, is an archetype.⁵ But Athens remains a comic world—even as he eagerly fans the flames of jealousy, Puck serves a more powerful will in Oberon. The Fairy King’s generally watchful eye at last compels

⁵ Neil Gaiman makes this connection explicit in his *Sandman* series.

even the hobgoblin to conclude, “Jack shall have Jill, / Nought shall go ill, / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well” [III.ii.461–3].

Bottom

I began this essay with the question of where to locate *Midsummer*'s center. Were I forced to answer, I would venture that moment toward the end of Act IV when Bottom, peeping once more through his “own fool’s eyes” [IV.1.83], awakens with memories of a “dream” too compelling to leave at the edge of the forest. He calls amazedly to his friends, and when they do not answer, he turns to us:

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.

[IV.i.203–5]

We heard similar musings from the four lovers, who wake from their own midnight adventures remembering “things . . . small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds” [IV.i.186–7]. Likewise from Titania, who wakes to find herself lying in the arms of an extraordinary lover. Yet only Bottom, simple clown though he is, attempts to comprehend his vision *onstage*:

Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—But man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. It shall be called “Bottom’s Dream,” because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of our play, before the duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

[IV.i.206–17]

Despite his muddled anatomy, Bottom is as serious here, in his way, as ever were Hamlet or Macbeth in theirs—anyone who doubts this should watch Kevin Kline’s

masterful performance in the Hoffman film.⁶ Indeed, the most amusing part of the speech has nothing to do with hearing eyes or seeing ears; rather, it is Bottom's unfounded confidence in Peter Quince's ability to "write a ballet" (or ballad) of his astonishing dream. We never learn whether the men follow through on this intention—certainly Quince never refers to such a ballad—yet I am drawn to Bottom's otherwise unremarkable offer at "the latter end" of their play "before the duke." The heroine's death has brought "Pyramus and Thisby" to its merciful conclusion when Bottom breaks character to ask Theseus, "Will it please you to see the epilogue, or to hear a Bergomask dance between two of our company?" [V.i.346–7].

Alas, Theseus declines the chance to see more amateur theatrics (though he does consent to the Bergomask). Suppose with me for a moment: What if the unrequested epilogue is none other than "Bottom's Dream"?⁷ How characteristic of the unimaginative duke to dismiss the ultimate expression of the play's imaginative possibilities! "Bottom's Dream," after all, is the tale of an ordinary man transformed simultaneously into a beast and a demi-god, the paramour of the Fairy Queen; it is a parable that reminds us of the unbounded range of human experience. What makes Bottom so exceptional is that regardless of the experience—good or bad, humiliating or sublime—he remains happily and wholeheartedly himself. Who among his fellows onstage (or in the audience) could manage so serenely to maintain his poise, though in every direction friends are fleeing, as the unflappable Bottom?

⁶ If it is not already clear, I love this film, which, though somewhat overstuffed with celebrities (most of whom turn in respectable performances), contains more "Ah ha" moments of insight than most productions I have seen. In this respect it is not unlike Kenneth Branagh's full-text *Hamlet*.

⁷ Is it merely coincidence that Bottom again seems to transpose his senses? Do not most people "hear" epilogues and "see" dances?

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.

[III.i.115–18]

Confronted with similar evidence of personal grotesqueness, Helena (“I am as ugly as a bear” [II.ii.94]) turns to self pity; Hermia (“Either death, or you, I’ll find immediately” [II.ii.156]) turns to melodrama; Lysander and Demetrius turn on each other; and their best laid plans all turn to chaos.

The song Bottom chooses to prove his courage is a catalogue of Elizabethan birds, culminating in the usual joke about the cuckoo, “[w]hose note full many a man doth mark, / And dares not answer nay” [III.i.126–7]. His ensuing interpretation of the lyrics, though frequently cut in production, is wonderfully telling: “For, indeed,” he announces to no one in particular, “who would set his wit to so foolish a bird? Who would give a bird the lie, though he cry ‘cuckoo’ never so?” [III.i.128–30]. Thus Bottom both misses the bawdy punch line—that married men “dare not” refute the charge of “cuckold,” lest their wives make liars of them—and transcends it, secure in his superiority to “so foolish a bird.” His childlike innocence here and elsewhere—unlike most Shakespearean clowns, Bottom never intentionally puns on sex—makes him the perfect foil to the lusty Titania. He replies to her insistent overtures with tact, then forced acquiescence, but from the start he seems ambivalent about the relationship, perhaps because he assumes the gorgeous Fairy Queen is either jesting (“gleeking”) or insane:

Titania: I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
 Mine ear is much enamored of thy note;
 So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
 And thy fair virtue’s force perforce doth move me,
 On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee.

Bottom: Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And

yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. The more the pity that some honest neighbors will not make them friends. Nay, I can gleek, upon occasion.

Titania: Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.

Bottom: Not so, neither; but if I had wit enough to get out of this wood, I have enough to serve mine own turn.

[III.i.131–44]

But Titania will not be put off. “Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no,” she declares [III.i.146]; then, evidently determined to catch her fly with honey, she calls for servants to lavish him with jewels and song. So charmed is Bottom by these attending fairies he completely forgets about Titania; he spends the remainder of the scene “desir[ing] . . . more acquaintance” [III.i.176] of the tiny elves and gently teasing them about their colloquial names, until she has no recourse but to order his tongue tied up [III.i.195]. When next we see them they are entwined in bed, presumably having consummated their one-sided passion. Beautifully at ease in his new role as lord of the fairy folk, Bottom continues to devote himself to his subjects rather than to his lady—indeed, his curious blend of paternalism and epicurism (in English, French, and Italian) produces some of the funniest passages in the play:

Monsieur Cobweb, good monsieur, get you your weapons in your hand, and kill me a red-hipped humblebee on the top of a thistle; and, good monsieur, bring me the honey bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, monsieur; and, good monsieur, have a care the honey bag break not. I would be loath to have you overflowen with a honey bag, signor.

[IV.i.10–16]

When he finally acknowledges Titania it is to order supper (“Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay” [IV.i.32–3]) and request he not be disturbed, for “I have an exposition of sleep come upon me” [IV.i.37–8]. Opposite such banalities, her lovesick reply is exquisitely ludicrous:

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.
 Fairies, be gone, and be always away.
 So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
 Gently entwist; the female ivy so
 Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
 O, how I love thee! how I dote on thee!

[IV.i.39–44]

When Bottom wakes, all is gone but the memory, and even this proves fleeting. Following his great soliloquy, Bottom hurries off to find his friends; to them he speaks with considerably more enthusiasm than inspiration:

Bottom: Where are these lads? Where are these hearts?
Quince: Bottom! O most courageous day! O most happy hour!
Bottom: Masters, I am to discourse wonders, but ask me not what. For if I tell you, I am not true Athenian. I will tell you everything, right as it fell out.
Quince: Let us hear, sweet Bottom.
Bottom: Not a word of me. All that I will tell you is, that the duke hath dined.

[IV.ii.25–33]

As he dictates costuming and hygiene for the upcoming performance at court (“eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath” [IV.ii.40–1]), we sense his dream slipping further away. By the time his uproarious death scene (“Now die, die, die, die, die” [V.i.301]) rings down the curtain on his career as leading man—and prompts Hippolyta to exclaim, dryly, “Beshrew my heart but I pity the man” [V.i.285]—no amount of love potion seems likely to tempt Titania a second time.

Still the Dream remains, in our memories if not quite Bottom’s. Indeed, Puck’s famous farewell invites us to emulate the inimitable weaver:

If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended—
 That you have but slumbered here
 While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,

Gentles, do not reprehend.

[V.i.415–21]

We, like Bottom, have passed an evening with immortals, and his wonderful speech in which eyes and ears, hands, tongue, and heart exchange functions is more than just one man's struggle to make sense of the senseless. It derives from an impulse shared by all who straddle earth and heaven and wonder where they belong. From this impulse spring religion, mysticism, philosophy, art—and though it may fade by daybreak it never vanishes entirely: the wisdom that defies articulation.⁸ Indeed, what is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but an attempt by Shakespeare to clarify his own perception of that wisdom, by translating it to art?

Shakespeare's art is theatre, and I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that all of his plays are at least partly about that most theatrical of relationships—between actor and audience. Scene after scene features characters either performing or watching others perform, and *Midsummer* is no exception, with its cast of would-be thespians and lovers strutting and posturing before the invisible Fairy King and Puck. And ourselves, of course, for we are watching too, at times deliriously aware that the whole giddy spectacle is being performed for our pleasure. Nowhere is this truer than at the end, when Puck, enchanting as ever, places himself at our mercy: “Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore amends” (V.i.429–30). I can think of few plays so deserving.

⁸ Yet another virtue of the Hoffman film is its insistence that Bottom *has* in fact been permanently changed by his experience. One of the final shots reveals Kline gazing dreamily into the heavens as a flash of light whirls toward him. For an instant the light becomes Titania, who appears to nod in recognition. The expression of gratitude on Kline's face is heartbreaking.

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