

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by
Peter Cash



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks
No. 7

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1596)

by
Peter Cash

SCOPE OF TOPIC

Few of Shakespeare's plays are better known and more popular than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This Bookmark is a narrative account of its nine scenes which seeks to highlight the reasons for this popularity, not least Shakespeare's craftsmanship. At the same time, this scene-by-scene commentary accepts that the subject-matter of the play is not 'a weak and idle theme', but a strong satire of romantic love. Lovers, so the inter-related scenes argue, gild each other's images, seeing in their beloved ones qualities which are not there and describing them in over-excited language. Against such foolish behaviour, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a cautionary fairy-tale ...

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ed. J. H. Walter, Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, The Players' Shakespeare 1964
ed. Stanley Wells, Shakespeare *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, New Penguin Shakespeare 1967
H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, 1938
Northrop Frye, *The Argument of Comedy*, 1948
C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 1959
Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, OUP 1960
ed. Kenneth Muir, *Shakespeare: The Comedies*, C20 Views, Prentice-Hall 1965
Stephen Fender, *Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Studies in EL 72, Arnold 1968
Patrick Swinden, *An Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedy*, 1973
Michael Mangan, *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies*, Longman 1996
Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare*, BBC Publications 2003
Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, Jonathan Cape 2004

INTRODUCTION

Thus *Twelfth Night* exhibits in its action one of the fundamental motifs of comedy: the education of a man or woman. For a comedy, as everyone knows, is a play in which the situation holds some threat of disaster but issues in the achievement of happiness; and those comedies may satisfy us most deeply in which danger is averted and happiness is achieved through something that takes place within the characters.

Harold Jenkins: *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night* (1959)

According to Jenkins' definition, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) is a comedy: that is, 'a play in which the situation holds some threat of disaster but issues in the achievement of happiness'. It ends in a 'festival', not a 'black funeral': not with deaths and burials, but with kisses and marriages. To reassure his audience of this outcome, Shakespeare – at the end of Act III Scene 2 – puts these words into Puck's mouth:

Jack shall have Jill;
Naught shall go ill.

The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

Here, Puck refers to an idyllic land where lovers and their lasses live happily ever after under greenwood trees. He offers us reassurance that, no matter what 'ill' befalls our heroes and heroines, 'all shall be well' that ends well. An errant feature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that 'danger

is averted and happiness is achieved', but *not* 'through something that takes place within the characters'. In this comedy, nothing 'takes place within the characters'. Danger is averted and happiness achieved *only because* Puck – at the end of Act III Scene 2 – applies an antidote to Lysander's eyes, but does *not* apply it to Demetrius' eyes, thereby ensuring that Demetrius does not revert to Hermia, but becomes (artificially) enchanted by Helena.

In ***As You Like It***, dated 1599, Rosalind declares: "Love is merely a madness and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do" (Act III Scene 2). In ***Twelfth Night***, written in 1600, Olivia observes Malvolio's infatuation with her and comments, "Why, this is very midsummer madness" (Act III Scene 4); by Act V, Olivia has been deceived by the misleading appearance of Cesario and might have found herself "contracted to a maid." Here, in his mature comedies Shakespeare returns to the theme of ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***: namely, that love is merely a 'midsummer madness'. Informing each play is the idea that lovers fall short of Plato's tripartite ideal: that is, they are not men and women in whom the three parts of the soul – the appetite, the mind and the spirit – are in perfect balance/harmony.¹ In ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, Shakespeare shows that, by failing to control their appetites by the exercise of 'cool reason', such men and women behave comically and 'preposterously'.

ACT I Scene 1

In this early comedy, Shakespeare seeks to make fun of the tendency of human mortals to fall in love solely on the evidence of their senses. From the outset, he likens lovers' faith in the misleading evidence of their senses to a form of madness. Accordingly, this opening exchange between the power-couple Theseus (Duke of Athens) and Hippolyta (Queen of the Amazons) –

THESEUS	Four happy days bring in Another moon – but O, methinks how slow This old moon wanes!
HIPPOLYTA	Four days will quickly steep themselves in night; Four nights will quickly dream away the time: And then the moon – like to a silver bow New-bent in heaven – shall behold the night Of our solemnities

– is of symbolic significance in that it attributes their impatience to marry to the influence of the moon [= in Latin, *luna*]. By the repeated moon-image, Shakespeare implies that such passionate love is a kind of lunacy ... Egeus enters 'full of vexation' because his daughter Hermia (whom he had promised to Demetrius) has fallen in love with Lysander and is refusing to obey his wishes. Guess what charge Egeus levels against Lysander:

Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung
With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
And stolen the impression of her fantasy.

Lysander, he alleges, has been able to steal Hermia's heart because he courted her 'by moonlight'. It is by the light of the silvery moon that Hermia has looked at Lysander and liked what she has seen. The subsequent exchange of iambic pentameters –

HERMIA:	I would my father looked but with my eyes
THESEUS:	Rather your eyes must with his judgement look

¹ In ***Poison, Play and Duel***, Nigel Alexander (1971) recasts this Platonic triangle: "In Shakespearean comedy, the competing claims of the contemplative, the active and the passionate life are usually reconciled in the harmony of marriage ... The union of Hamlet and Ophelia would have combined the sword of the active life, the book of the contemplative life and the flower of the passionate life" (Chapter 6).

– introduces the central conflict of the play: between the 'eyes' and the 'judgement', between the eyes and the mind. Put in Nigel Alexander's terms, the conflict is between passion (which the senses inflame) and reason (which the mind applies).

Duke Theseus issues a harsh ultimatum: within four days, Hermia must decide whether to be put to death or be sent to a nunnery for the rest of her life or be married to Demetrius. It is this predicament that Lysander and Hermia are then left alone to consider. Lysander's first questions –

How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale?
How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

– explain much about Shakespeare's characterisation in this play. He will be aiming not at psychological realism, but at poetic representation: in this play, his characters are stereotypes who primarily perform functions required by the plot. Here, Lysander articulates his concern for Hermia in a traditional imagery which, rather than express any great depth of personal feeling, prepares us for a philosophical generalisation. Famously, he relates their local difficulties to the lot of lovers everywhere:

The course of true love never did run smooth.

Even after Hermia ("O hell! – to choose love by another's eyes") becomes distraught, Lysander continues to reflect calmly upon the general drift of human experience:

So quick bright things come to confusion.

Both Hermia's line and his are important not because they depict contrasting characters, but because they are ironic. Their lines look forward to the comic development of the plot, expressly to those numerous moments in the play – not least in Act III – when 'bright things' make the mistake of believing their eyes and quickly 'come to confusion'.

Lysander has a plan: 'tomorrow night', he will wait for Hermia in the wood outside the town of Athens and elope with her. No sooner have they made this tryst than Helena, the young woman whom Demetrius has jilted, makes her melancholy entrance. Rejected and dejected, Helena ("Call you me fair?") is suffering from a loss of self-esteem and needs cheering up. Consequently, Lysander and Hermia confide in her, disclosing that they plan to elope and leave the field clear. After they depart, Helena delivers the soliloquy of thirteen rhyming couplets upon which the action of the play proceeds to pass ironic comments:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.

First, Helena is right to express such confidence in the transformative power of love: with a proleptic directness, this couplet anticipates that episode in Act III Scene 1 in which it magically 'transposes to form and dignity' a thing so 'base and vile' as an unwashed workman wearing a donkey's head. Second, she is wrong to attribute this magical power to 'the mind', for – as that episode demonstrates – 'the eyes' are responsible for the misapprehension. "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind"? The play sets out to contradict/refute this claim and maintains that the opposite is true. Cupid is not 'blind', but does not see straight – with perilous consequences.

Because she is love-sick, Helena ("I will go tell him of fair Hermia's flight") decides to betray the trust that Lysander and Hermia have placed in her and reveal to Demetrius where they have gone. She hopes thereby to re-ingratiate herself with him: 'for this intelligence', he will – so she foolishly argues – be grateful to her and waste no time in restoring her to his favour ...

ACT I Scene 2

No sooner has that group of Greek aristocrats (who speak verse) sped off stage than a bunch of English yokels (who speak prose) lumbers on. Although they are conspicuously English, they are to be understood as belonging to an Athenian guild of craftsmen: *Enter Quince the carpenter, and Snug the joiner, and Bottom the weaver, and Flute the bellows-mender, and Snout the tinker, and Starveling the tailor*. Even though their very names signify that they have no place in an Athenian setting, this incongruity somehow passes unnoticed – even in performance.

For this gathering, possibly at a tavern, the context is the imminent wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta at which the craftsmen are hoping to supply the entertainment. They are meeting to rehearse a play [= a dramatic 'interlude'] in the hope that it will be chosen and staged 'before the Duke and the Duchess on his wedding day at night'. At the outset, a verbal confusion ('on his wedding day at night') sets the comic tone of their best efforts.

Accordingly, Peter Quince announces that their play is to be *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*; another unintentional confusion ('lamentable comedy') warns us that this 'scrip' will be dire. Immediately, it becomes apparent that, although Quince is the director of the play, Nick Bottom is the leader of the 'company'. Bottom is a domineering character and gives the orders: "Masters, spread yourselves." In some productions, the slow-witted workmen take this instruction literally and throw themselves prone on the floor!

Furthermore, Bottom is a braggart. Upon being given the leading role of Pyramus, he boasts of his thespian prowess: "If I do it, let the audience look to their eyes! I will move storms. I will condole, in some measure." He does not hesitate to air an extremely high opinion of his own capabilities. Like a ham actor, he threatens to express the tragic hero's grief ('condole') until there is not a dry eye in the house! Indeed, he is such a shameless show-off that it can be difficult to decide just how amusing he is.

Bottom is an egocentric oaf who considers that his gifts are equal to every challenge. When Francis Flute is reluctant to play the female part of Thisbe, he volunteers for that role too on the grounds that he can manage a convincing falsetto/'speak in a monstrous little voice'; here, another unintended oxymoron signals that he may not be quite as capable as he thinks he is. When Quince assigns the part of Lion to Snug the joiner, Bottom tries to seize a third role: "I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me." He is without either modesty or regard for others; indeed, such a self-justification taxes the patient resources of his fellow craftsmen to the point at which they appear ready to down tools and go home. Peter Quince retrieves the situation. To his credit, he refuses to be taken aback by Bottom's bombastic display and seeks to dissuade him by diplomatic means: "An you should do it too terribly" At first, Bottom is so full of his own importance to their project that he will not be humoured. He is so confident of his own powers –

But I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove

– that he continues to promote himself, no doubt delivering this line in a voice that reproduces his idea of a gently roaring dove! Once again, misuses of language [= that malapropistic use of 'aggravate' for 'moderate', that clash between verb and adverb] are signs that his broad faith in his own talents may not be entirely justified. Certainly, Quince fears so and resorts finally to flattery, informing Bottom that he 'can play no part but Pyramus' for the compelling reason that Pyramus is 'a sweet-faced man', 'a proper man' and 'a most lovely, gentlemanlike man'. Sure enough, such reasoning pampers Bottom's vast ego and settles matters: "Well, I will undertake it." Such is his vanity that he begins at once to visualise the colour of the beard in which he will discharge the role.

To close the scene, Peter Quince requests that his fellow craftsmen learn their parts 'by tomorrow night' and then – lest their 'devices' be discovered – meet him 'in the palace wood a mile without the town by moonlight'. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an early play, Shakespeare's craftsmanship could not be more assured, more skilful.² The time and the place – 'tomorrow

² The single anomaly concerns the unity of time: at the beginning, Theseus specifies that the action of the play will occupy 'four days' and 'four nights'; in the end, it spans no more than forty-eight hours.

night/'the palace wood' – could not be more coherent ... From this moment, it becomes clear that the four lovers and the six workmen are on a collision-course: that is, on course to collide in the moonlit wood – where, as we all know, the fairies dwell.

* * * * *

ACT II Scene 1

In this scene, Shakespeare takes us into the magical world of the fairies: 'Fairyland'. He sites it in the wood outside Athens.

For the beautiful kingdom that comes into view, Shakespeare's poetry is responsible. At the start of the scene, Puck is in animated conversation with an anonymous fairy who speaks to him in rhyming couplets, first of iambic tetrameter, then of iambic pentameter. In this musical verse, the Fairy (beside whom cowslips are 'tall') explains that he is a servant of the Fairy Queen and dare not dally. The Fairy Queen – Titania – must not catch him in idle chatter when he ought to be about her urgent business:

I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.
Farewell, thou lob of spirits; I'll be gone.
The Queen and all her elves come here anon.

With an extraordinary delicacy, the Fairy accounts for minute details of the forest floor and supplies us with a squirrel's eye view of the natural world: here, he presents himself as being actively responsible for each drop of dew ('a pearl') on the petals of 'every cowslip'. For his part, Puck is alarmed to discover that 'the Queen' (Titania) is on a collision course with the Fairy King (Oberon) who is heading for this same copse: "The King doth keep his revels here tonight." The reason for Puck's alarm is that King and Queen are in the midst of a bitter quarrel: for her train, Titania has spirited away a boy child whom 'jealous Oberon' covets. This quarrel (of only incidental relevance to the plot) has atmospheric consequences to which Puck's whispered couplets give dramatic resonance:

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.

Even as it is carrying forward the narrative, Shakespeare's vivid description is pausing to embellish the exiguous world of the fairies. His language ('creep into acorn cups') is hard at work, establishing the precise scale of fairy activity.

Shakespeare's creation of this fairy-world is a spectacular achievement of his imagination, albeit a feat that relies for its inspiration upon contemporary folk lore/rural superstition. Described is a miniature world intimately related to the human world, existing right alongside it and even seeming parasitic upon it. The subsequent exchange between the Fairy and Puck readily concedes that mortal humans are right to attribute any number of their misfortunes to the tiny inhabitants of this kingdom. Robin Goodfellow is a character in English folk lore, 'a shrewd and knavish sprite', an imp, a 'hobgoblin', a feral elf, a puck; he is the mischief-maker whom country folk instinctively blame for mishaps in their everyday lives. It was thought that, if milk would not turn to cheese, then the 'puck' [= Puck] was playing a prank: that he had 'bootless' [= to no avail] made 'the breathless housewife churn'. Robin Goodfellow/Puck answers to his name. To the Fairy, he confesses that he is 'that merry wanderer of the night' and offers a further example of his mischief-making:

And sometimes lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab;
And when she drinks against her lips I bob,
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.

Puck is a practical joker: according to this account, old women spill their drink down their chins because he immerses himself in their tankards and surfaces just as they are about to sip. It is in this incarnation that Puck becomes Oberon's willing accomplice in the subsequent plot against Titania.

Such description sets the scene for the grand confrontation that the symmetrical stage-direction implies: *Enter Oberon, the King of Fairies, at one door, with his train; and Titania, the Queen, at another with hers.* From the iambic grandeur of their opening exchanges, we can hear that Oberon and Titania make up another couple for whom 'the course of true love' is not running smoothly. The dialogue –

OBERON	Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!
TITANIA	What, jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip hence. I have forsworn his bed and company.
OBERON	Tarry, rash wanton! Am not I thy lord?
TITANIA	Then I must be thy lady. But I know ...

– resounds with both the accents of marital strife and the epithets ('proud Titania', 'jealous Oberon', 'rash wanton') of an uncompromising power-struggle. Titania's feisty rejoinder ("But I know ...") proceeds to accuse Oberon of a more serious offence: an adulterous infatuation with 'the bouncing Amazon', Hippolyta. Given the close relationship between the fairies and the mortals, it makes sense to imagine an organic connection between their respective royalties: accordingly, Oberon retaliates, expressing his equal resentment of Titania's 'love to Theseus' – a passion which she allegedly consummates by taking a vicarious delight in his sexual conquests.³ With this slander, acrimony between Fairy King and Fairy Queen intensifies.

Quite literally with a vengeance, Titania rounds on her husband, delivering a diatribe that accuses him of fabricating charges against her and blames his 'ill' temper for every evil under the moon: specifically, for the bad weather from which England suffered throughout the summers of 1594 and 1595. Queen-like, she speaks a blank verse that sustains its dignity for thirty-seven lines. The majesty of this irate utterance –

These are the forgeries of jealousy;
And never since the middle summer's spring
Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,
By pavèd fountain or by rushy brook,
Or in the beachèd margent of the sea
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport.
Therefore the winds ...

Therefore the moon ...

And this same progeny of evils
Come from our debate, from our dissension.
We are their parents and original

– results from the regal movement of the syntax, rhythmically accompanying the rhetorical pattern of her argument: 'Met we', 'But with', 'Therefore', 'Therefore', 'And this', 'We are'. For twenty-seven lines, Titania lists the meteorological symptoms of their 'dissension': 'contagious fogs', floods, failed crops, 'rheumatic diseases'. For this cosmic disorder, she holds her husband entirely responsible; it is his fault that 'the seasons alter' and 'change their wonted liveries'. She concludes her tirade with a succinct synthesis of this climate-change, her voice rising to a triumphant crescendo as at the end of a song.

³ Shakespeare organises scenes so that Theseus/Hippolyta and Oberon/Titania never appear on stage at the same time: in modern productions, Directors take advantage of this convenience, suggesting the empathy between the two worlds by casting the Theseus-actor as Oberon and the Hippolyta-actress as Titania.

Titania speaks for two minutes. For the duration of her speech, the action of the play comes to a stand-still; furthermore, she says nothing that advances the development of the plot. Stanley Wells comments that "Titania's lines present a poetic image of confusion in the world of nature": accordingly, it makes sense to imagine that her speech is an operatic aria, a set-piece that amplifies the Prima Donna's passion and explains her motivation. After all, Titania reproaches Oberon for the disruption in the natural order just because she is angry with him.

In her anger, Titania ("Not for thy fairy kingdom") rebuffs Oberon's half-hearted attempt at reconciliation and storms off with her train of fairies. Instantly, Oberon ("My gentle Puck, come hither") calls upon Puck's services. Being Fairy King, Oberon can recall a plausible encounter with Cupid, the Roman god of love, of erotic desire; he recounts that he once saw an arrow from Cupid's bow fall to earth and noted where it fell: 'it fell upon a little western flower'. Oberon's description of this flower – 'before, milk-white; now, purple with love's wound' – is a description of a pansy. The point is that this purple-and-white pansy has magical properties:

The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees.

Described here is the spectacular device by which 'bright things' will quickly 'come to confusion'. Oberon instructs Puck to fetch him one of these flowers and, whilst his feral sprite is about this business, explains in a soliloquy how he intends to use it. He will 'drop the liquor' in Titania's sleeping eyes so that she will fall madly in love with the first living thing whom she hears or sees upon waking up:

The next thing then she, waking, looks upon –
Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On meddling monkey or on busy ape –
She shall pursue it with the soul of love.

He thereby plans to fill her head 'full of hateful fantasies'.

Shakespeare's ingenious plot gathers pace: no sooner has Oberon outlined his cunning plan than Demetrius enters the wood in search of the eloped Lysander and Hermia. Oberon ("I am invisible") places Demetrius under immediate observation and discovers that he is fleeing from Helena who – it appears – can tolerate any treatment at his hands except being ignored.

Dramatic irony enriches the following dialogue. To Oberon, all is revealed: first, that Demetrius is 'wood [= mad] within this wood' because he cannot find Hermia; second, that Helena ('you hard-hearted adamant') is heart-broken by his adamant refusal to have anything more to do with her. Demetrius re-states his position in no uncertain terms: "Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more". He tells Helena to get lost: although she is following him, he is not leading her on ("Do I entice you?") He spells out his feelings 'in plainest truth' and with renewed precision: "I do not nor I cannot love you". Such a series of rejections is hubristic: in a comedy, it signals that the 'd disdainful' speaker will eventually meet his nemesis in his 'sweet' and under-appreciated pursuer ...

Undaunted, Helena continues to make a complete nuisance of herself. She humbles herself before him in the hope that her abject aspect will appeal to him: indeed, she prostrates herself, pawing the ground beneath his feet as if she is a 'spaniel'. She behaves like a stalker: feeling 'unworthy', she begs leave of Demetrius simply to follow him as if she is his 'dog'. Still, Demetrius refuses to take pity on her: "For I am sick when I do look on thee." From Oberon's vantage-point, wherever that is, it is evident that the course of true love does not run smooth.

In his exasperation, Demetrius prepares to 'run' into the wood and hide himself from her, even if – un gallantly – it means leaving her 'to the mercy of wild beasts'. At this point, Helena –

The story shall be changed:

Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase⁴

– anticipates the future. Her prediction – that Demetrius will in due course reverse his emphatic decision to reject her/spurn her – belongs entirely to the topsy-turvy world of comedy in which, no matter what preposterous ills befall human mortals, ‘all things shall be well’. For the time being, Helena takes no notice of Demetrius’ dire warnings and chases him into the midsummer night.

It turns out that Puck – in his haste to find this aphrodisiac flower – has ‘put a girdle round about the earth’ in fewer than ‘forty minutes’ and has returned to Oberon’s side with the very flower. First, Oberon directs Puck to the beauty-spot where Titania will be sleeping. Descriptive poetry – for which the plot does not specifically call – continues to set the scenes of the play. Here is Titania’s Bower:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania some time of the night,
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight,
And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.

These rhyming couplets create the floral paradise in which the fairies live their dainty lives – never mind that Titania, only 160 lines earlier, was describing an English summer in which ‘every pelting river’ had flooded its banks and every ‘quaint maze’ [= network of pathways] was a quagmire! Shakespeare chooses his flowers – thyme, primrose, violet, honeysuckle, briar-rose – for their colours and their fragrances, but also for their mellifluous names. To mark his close affinity with the natural world, Oberon parades his botanical knowledge: as King of Fairies, he is familiar with the taxonomy of English flora. The texture of his verse-catalogue adds to the scene of luxuriant growth: in each case, the vowel-sounds of these polysyllabic names open like the tiny blossoms themselves, emphasising just how ‘luscious’ this dimension is. Consistently, Shakespeare returns to the diminutive size of the fairy kingdom: here, Oberon implies that fairies wear snake-skin coats.

Then, Oberon has a second thought, a bright idea: following his ‘invisible’ observation of Demetrius and Helena, he can see how the magic pansy – with which he intends ill towards Titania – may also do some good. Oberon’s perception of the altercation is that Demetrius is ‘a disdainful youth’ and that Helena is ‘a sweet lady’ who deserves better from him; consequently, he decides to intervene. He instructs Puck to take a sprig of the flower, find the sleeping youth and ‘anoint his eyes’ with the squeezed juice – so that, when he awakes, ‘the next thing he espies’ will be the unhappy woman who was chasing him. What could be simpler?

Of course, Oberon’s description of Demetrius – recognisable ‘by the Athenian garments he hath on’ – is necessarily imprecise; worse still, neither Oberon nor Puck yet knows that Lysander, *another* youth wearing ‘Athenian garments’, is *also* wandering about the moonlit wood on this midsummer night. A comedy of mistaken identity is about to begin: if Puck were instead to anoint Lysander’s eyes with the love-juice, then he – not Demetrius – would fall in love with Helena ...

ACT II Scene 2

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the supernatural world in which the fairies live is a reduced version of the natural world in which the Elizabethans live. In this scene, Shakespeare continues to describe the ‘fairy kingdom’ with such verisimilitude that his superstitious Elizabethan audience will remain in no doubt about its existence.

The musical verse works hard to create a concrete impression of this parallel universe. Indeed, Titania’s iambic instructions to her train – “Come, now a roundel and a fairy song” – choreograph this

⁴ Here, Shakespeare is relying on his audience’s knowledge of Greek mythology in which Eros [= Cupid in Roman mythology] shoots different arrows through the hearts of Apollo and Daphne: as a result, Apollo is condemned to an amorous pursuit of Daphne who despises him.

dimension in further detail. For her fairies, she sets tasks that reinforce the exiguous scale of this microcosm: for instance, she orders them to tussle with bats ('war with reremice') for the leathery coats on their backs and to ward off 'the clamorous owl' whose sharp eye perceives their antics and 'wonders' what they are doing. The song to which the fairies dance –

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen.
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our Fairy Queen

– seeks to throw a charmed circle round the Fairy Queen: to this end, Titania's tiny attendants (Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed) aim their imperatives at those very agents of evil which the Second Witch (*Macbeth* Act IV Scene 1) will expressly invoke: 'hedge-pig', 'snakes', 'newts', 'blind-worms'. The song-and-dance is a protective rite, performed deliberately to scare all such creepy-crawlies from Titania's Bower.

At the same time as it keeps her safe from 'harm', the 'lullaby' that the fairies sing succeeds in sending their 'lovely lady' to sleep. No sooner has he reinforced the atmosphere of Fairyland than Shakespeare re-activates his plot. No sooner have Titania's fairy attendants departed than Oberon enters and *squeezes the flower on Titania's eyes*. As he does so, he chants a magic rhyme:

What thou seest when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy true love take ...

Wake when some vile thing is near!

Eight lines, each of seven syllables, suggest an intriguing development of the plot that the plot itself proceeds at first to confound. Shakespeare creates suspense, but frustrates the obvious and immediate expectation: rather than 'some vile thing', Lysander enters, hand in hand with Hermia ... If there is a proleptic irony, then these two lovers – neither of them 'a vile thing' – appear ill equipped to supply it ...

Rather than wake Titania, Lysander and Hermia settle down quietly for the night. Before they do so, they address each other in trite couplets of iambic pentameter:

LYSANDER One turf shall serve as pillow for us both;
 One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.
HERMIA Nay, good Lysander, for my sake, my dear,
 Lie further off yet; do not lie so near.

By expressing such idealistic sentiments, Lysander confirms his allegiance to the tradition of romantic love that the play sets out to mock: according to him, their two hearts beat as one! For his part, Lysander is a sweet-talking youth, eager to take advantage of the isolated setting in which he and his fiancée have found themselves. For her part, Hermia is prim and proper: although she is betrothed, she rejects his proposition of sex before their marriage and insists twice that he 'lie further off'. For the sake of decency, out of 'human modesty', Hermia argues that 'such separation' is what 'becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid'. More to the point, 'such separation' facilitates the next development of the plot. Out of Hermia's modest, maidenly character grows the circumstance that ensures the next turn of events ...

Puck has been 'through the forest' in vain search of a man wearing 'Athenian garments'. When he finally comes across such a young man, his relief turns to rhetorical delight:

 Who is here?
Weeds of Athens he doth wear.
This is he my master said
Despisèd the Athenian maid.

Because Oberon's description of Demetrius was not specific, Puck naturally assumes that 'weeds of Athens' are sufficient to identify the man; because Lysander (also wearing 'weeds of Athens') is sleeping at some distance from an 'Athenian maid', Puck has a second reason for concluding that he must be the youth whom Oberon described and consequently *squeezes the flower on Lysander's eyes*.⁵

Even before Lysander falls asleep, Shakespeare is preparing the dramatic irony that Puck's understandable mistake will cause. Before he nods off, Lysander says a hubristic 'amen' to Hermia's prayer that he will love her till death do them part; he utters fine words ("And then end life when I end loyalty") little suspecting that Puck's use of the 'charm' is about to embarrass them.

In this scene, the coming-and-going is brisk and entertaining. Immediately upon Puck's exit, Demetrius, the very Athenian for whom he was searching, enters, pursued by Helena; both are 'running'. They exchange only two couplets before Demetrius outpaces Helena and leaves her behind: 'out of breath', she is left standing adjacent to the spot where Lysander and Hermia are curled up. Dramatic irony occurs because Helena –

Happy is Hermia, wheresoe'er she lies,
For she hath blessed and attractive eyes

– does not know that Hermia 'lies' *so* close to her that, as she wanders about, delivering her disconsolate soliloquy, she is in real danger of treading on her! Only at this point can the audience predict with pained amusement what will happen next ... Helena, in an agony of self-loathing, concludes her speculation as to Hermia's whereabouts with the inevitable shock-discovery, not of Hermia herself, but of Lysander. There ensues a moment of pure pantomime:

HELENA	Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake!
LYSANDER (<i>wakes</i>)	And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake!

Because Puck has anointed his eyes, Lysander falls 'madly' in love with 'the next live creature that he sees': Helena. Here, the eighth couplet of Helena's speech is completed by Lysander who, reacting instantly to the power of the flower-juice, transfers his affection to Helena and consummates his sudden love for her in rhetorical verse. Love looks with the eyes; bright things come to confusion. In this context, it is especially ironic that Lysander –

Not Hermia but Helena I love.
Who will not change a raven for a dove?
The will of man is by his reason swayed,
And reason says you are the worthier maid

– should attribute his instant 'change' of affection to his 'reason'. Stanley Wells comments that "the comic confusions of the lovers are caused by the failure of their reason to keep pace with their emotions." This is not strictly true. The lovers "are in an adolescent whirl" (Wells) because Puck's application of the love-juice to Lysander's eyes – *not* something within the character himself – has affected him artificially; an external agent has effected a transfer of his favour from one woman to another. It would therefore be truer to say that Shakespeare has here arranged a dramatic enactment of his thesis that lovers make errors of judgement/behave foolishly when they rely solely on the promptings of their senses. Reason, so Shakespeare demonstrates, has nothing to do with it.

Here is a place where the irony is expressly at the expense of Helena's confident assertion (Act I Scene 1) that lovers look 'with the mind': that is, act upon their sound judgements. Here, her hubristic belief – that Cupid is blind – meets its nemesis in Lysander's positive reaction to her own appearance, a visual reaction which parodies the common cause of all romantic entanglements in the mortal world. Consistently, Helena finds such irrational behaviour perplexing:

⁵ From this moment, all four lovers become victims of this case of mistaken identity. *In both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare's comedy likewise emanates from cases of mistaken identity, there involving pairs of twins.

Wherefore was I to this keen mockery born?
When at your hands did I deserve this scorn?

Comical and dire are the straits in which the lovers suddenly find themselves: whilst Lysander is being serious, Helena – knowing nothing of magic flowers – thinks that he must be joking. She thinks that he is trying to make fun of her and goes off in high dudgeon at his 'disdainful manner', his ungentlemanly conduct.

Over Hermia's sleeping form, Lysander speaks a soliloquy in which he renounces her for Helena in strong terms. The sentiments that Lysander expresses (of 'deepest loathing', of hatred) compose Hermia's worst nightmare. It is therefore appropriate that Hermia then 'wakes' from a nightmare in which she was being attacked by a 'crawling serpent' while he stood idly by. Upon waking up, Hermia – "Lysander – what, removed? Lysander, lord?" – discovers that her bad dream has come true: not that she has been attacked, but that she has been deserted. At the end of the scene, she becomes the fourth of the four lovers to 'exit' alone and scurry after a hostile partner.

* * * * *

ACT III Scene 1

Enter the clowns: Bottom, Quince, Snout, Starveling, Flute and Snug

In his stage-direction, Shakespeare's choice of noun 'clowns' implies that, even though they dwell in the city of Athens, the six craftsmen are of rustic stock; they are country bumpkins, yokels. Stephen Greenblatt comments that the trades which Shakespeare assigned to these Athenian workmen were "not chosen at random", but selected from the stage crew on which his metropolitan theatre company depended: "Shakespeare's London theater company depended on joiners and weavers, carpenters and tailors."

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a fast-moving comedy. At the start of this scene, Shakespeare preserves the three unities of Aristotelian drama in that the action takes place outside Titania's Bower immediately after Demetrius, Helena, Lysander and Hermia have left that spot and disappeared into the wood. There is no time-lag before 'the clowns' arrive upon the sylvan scene that the four lovers have just vacated.

Act III Scene 1 carries on where Act I Scene 2 left off: as appointed, the Athenian craftsmen – with their English names – reconvene in the wood where, by the light of a gibbous moon, they will be able to rehearse *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*. According to Peter Quince, this moonlit plot is 'a marvellous convenient place': significantly, there is 'hawthorn brake' to which an actor can retire to change his costume ..! The first half of this scene takes the form of this chaotic rehearsal.

Greenblatt points out that Shakespeare derives the comical title of Quince's play from the oxymoronic title of an actual play written in 1569: Thomas Preston's *A lamentable tragedy mixed full of pleasant mirth, conteyning the life of Cambises, King of Persia*. To begin with, Shakespeare makes merry with the amateurish composing and ham-fisted performing of such a work. Before the rehearsal itself commences, the workmen hold a script conference. What concerns Bottom is the risible possibility that Quince's script will be too realistic for the audience of Greek aristocrats to stomach: although there is no chance of any such thing, he fears that its terrifying lifelikeness may frighten 'the ladies'. First, he himself picks out the moment 'in this comedy' where 'Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself' and decides that Quince must write a prologue to the action which will serve two purposes:

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 better
assurance tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver.

Second, he responds to Snout's fear that the ladies will also 'be afeard of the lion' (whom Snug is to play) by proposing that Snug be given lines which will reassure them that he is not a lion: not only is Snug to say, "No. I am no such thing. I am a man as other men are", but he must also 'name his name and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner'.

Third, Peter Quince raises the issue of lighting: although the moon will be shining on the night of the performance, he proposes that 'one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure [sic] or to present the person of Moonshine'. Fourth, Quince raises the issue of scenery: because Pyramus and Thisbe 'did talk through the chink of a wall', he maintains that they will need to import a wall into the Great Chamber of Duke Theseus' Palace. Once again, the solution is as comical as it is clumsy:

Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam,
or some roughcast about him, to signify Wall; and let him hold his fingers thus,
and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper.

The four problems that the workmen perceive stem from a single worry: that an audience will not be able to suspend its disbelief and use its imagination. Bottom's assumption is that his audience will be literal-minded; consequently, the solutions to the problems (all quoted above) become laboriously explicit, being designed – as they are – to help such literal thinkers follow the enacted events without undue alarm. Bottom and his fellow workmen are naïve realists: as such, they assume that everybody else is and therefore worry that an audience will not be able to tell the difference between a theatrical illusion and a reality. At such naiveté, Shakespeare's audiences laugh: to theatre-goers, the failure to tell such a difference is inconceivable. Here, however, is Shakespeare preparing his audiences for the second half of this scene in which Titania fails to tell the difference between a romantic illusion and a reality. Under the moon of love, she cannot tell man from beast.

Enter Puck. At once, he asks himself a rhetorical question:

What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here
So near the cradle of the Fairy Queen?

The workmen, wearing home-spun garments of hemp, invite Puck's immediate derision. At the same time as he cringes to discover such oafish creatures in the vicinity of Titania's bed, he decides to play an impish trick on one of them. Shakespeare so arranges things that Bottom arrives at a place in his script where Pyramus is required to make a brief exit and then return to Thisbe:

BOTTOM (as Pyramus)
But hark, a voice. Stay thou but here awhile,
And by and by I will to thee appear

Exit

PUCK A stranger Pyramus than e'er played here.

The line of iambic pentameter with which Puck completes Bottom's scripted rhyme can do no more than hint at the outrageous spectacle which he has conceived. Certainly, no line would be equal to the stage-direction that accompanies Bottom's subsequent re-entrance with a transformed head. For this great moment, Quince's call – "Pyramus, enter – your cue is past" – has the effect of concentrating all gazes on the brake from which 'a stranger Pyramus' then emerges:

Enter Puck, and Bottom with an ass's head

BOTTOM (as Pyramus)
If I were fair, fair Thisbe, I were only thine.

QUINCE O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted! Pray, masters!
Fly, masters! Help!

Exeunt Quince, Snug, Flute, Snout and Starveling

Whilst ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** is rare among Shakespeare's plays in that it does not borrow its story from an earlier source, it owes this sensational moment to Ovid's ***Metamorphoses*** (Book XI) in which King Midas undergoes a metamorphosis into an ass.⁶ As a poet, Shakespeare resorts to dramatic irony: as everybody but Pyramus himself can see, he is anything but 'fair'. As a playwright, he organises a series of hectic comings and goings that reflects the impact of this magic trick upon the mortal world. Puck commentates on these frantic to-ings and fro-ings – *Enter Snout/Exit Snout/Enter Quince/Exit* – with a self-congratulatory glee. He chants a six-line rhyme in which he prepares to undergo his own series of metamorphoses ("Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound") and thereby frighten this motley crew from Titania's sleeping place:

And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire at every turn.

He will turn himself into a fearsome variety of creatures, utter a fearsome variety of monosyllables and then chase these upstarts through the forest at a furious pace.

Peter Quince is certain that he and his fellow craftsmen have received a visitation from an alternative dimension; it is clear from his language ("O monstrous!"/"We are haunted!"/"Thou art translated") that he sees their best endeavours as having been dogged by a supernatural force. Before they flee, both Snout and Quince gawp at Bottom's translation to this other dimension. Bottom's answer to Snout's question ("You see an ass head of your own, do you?") and his reaction to Quince's blessing ("This is to make an ass of me ...") are heavy with a dramatic irony at his ignorance of his transformation. Bottom carries on regardless of his friends' terrified flight. In fact, he keeps his composure and ee-aws this silly song:

The ousel cock so black of hue,
With orange tawny bill,
The throstle with his note so true,
The wren with little quill.

Humour is incongruity: the more tuneless Bottom's singing, the more incongruous and more humorous is the moment when Titania 'wakes' from her beauty-sleep and sets eyes on him. Although his second plan may have gone awry, Oberon's first plan works perfectly: exactly as he had hoped, she wakes 'when some vile thing is near' and, under the influence of the love-juice, falls madly in love with it. In an iambic pentameter, Titania –

What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?

– responds to an image ('angel') which is totally at variance with the reality in front of her. This, argues Shakespeare in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, is what all lovers tend to do.

Ernest Schanzer (1958) comments that, in the love-scenes between Bottom and Titania, Shakespeare "shows us the *reductio ad absurdum* of this love-madness":

Here, in the infatuation of the Queen of Fairies for a weaver metamorphosed into an ass, we have displayed the full absurdity of the kind of love which is engendered in the imagination only, uncorrected by judgment and the senses.

Schanzer's thinking is muddled and wishful. According to him, Shakespeare's criticism is of a specific 'kind of love': namely, "the kind of love which is engendered in the imagination only, uncorrected by judgment and the senses." It is baffling that Schanzer can argue in this way when the very scene

⁶ For this play, Ovid (43 BC-17 AD) is Shakespeare's single known source. This work (of 15 books) was translated from Latin to English by Arthur Golding and published in 1567; it is from Book IV that Shakespeare takes the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. One hundred years later, Apuleius' story ***The Golden Ass*** recounts that Lucius stole a magic ointment and rubbed himself with it in the hope that he would change into a wise owl, but turned instead into a stupid donkey; the moral of this story is that hempen mortals must not meddle with the supernatural: eg. steal magic potions or swagger near the cradle of the Fairy Queen.

that he is discussing contradicts his argument. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the song (III.2) states that fancy is 'engendered in the eyes', the sensors which – according to him – are required to correct flawed judgements; here, Titania has fallen in love at first sight, mistaking a monster for a paramour precisely because she has believed her untrustworthy eyes. What all lovers tend to do is adore an image totally at variance with the reality in front of them; it is *this* tendency that the scene reduces to absurdity – or worse ...

Nowhere in his romantic comedies does Shakespeare differentiate between kinds of love or attempt a rehabilitation of love, concluding (as I wrote in Introduction) that 'love is *merely* a madness' (*As You Like It*, III.2) and 'a very *midsummer* madness' (*Twelfth Night*, III.4). My italics point to his concern with a single kind of love [= 'a madness'] in which the imagination is comically excited by the senses – especially the sense of sight – to make impaired and preposterous judgements.

Act III Scene 1 is an emblem of the mistake that lovers make: that is, they mistake appearances (which they are quick to admire) for realities (which they are slow to discover and judge). Here, the prominent contrast is between Titania's verse and Bottom's prose:

TITANIA	I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again! Mine ear is much enamoured 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 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 –

Whereas Titania expresses her feelings in impassioned verse, Bottom expresses his thoughts in plain prose; whereas she speaks the verse of love, he speaks the prose of common sense. As befits a weaver, Bottom is an unsophisticated purveyor of home-spun wisdom: specifically, he can see no 'reason' why she should have fallen in 'love' with him at first sight/'on the first view';⁷ more generally, he can appreciate that reason has 'little' to do with love. It is ironic that, on the subject of love, it takes an ass to talk sense/'say the truth'.

Shaping this play is Shakespeare's idea that to be in love is to be in a dream or under an illusion: here, the Queen of the Fairies ("Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful") is under the illusion that the object of her affection is *not* some sort of an ass or monster. Demonstrated here is what happens when the eyes make decisions without the backing of a clear-sighted judgement. Titania ("And I do love thee") declares her affection for this gross mortal in rhapsodic language and prepares to garland him 'like an airy spirit'. To be in love is to be in an emotionally charged/heightened, but ephemeral condition – for which the title of the play is a metaphor. To be in love is to be in a midsummer night's dream, nothing more enduring or substantial than that; it is (to coin a phrase) to be away with the fairies.

Shakespeare supplements this exchange with an even more ludicrous spectacle. Titania orders her hand-maidens – Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed – to wait on Bottom hand and foot; the spectacle is therefore of these four delicate fairies attending to this asinine figure, pampering him and feeding him the fruits of the forest: 'purple grapes, green figs and mulberries'. Titania's last order is that her fairy hand-maidens then escort the bloated donkey to her bed:

The honey-bags steal from the humble bees,
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs
And light them at the fiery glow-worms' eyes
To have my love to bed and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.

⁷ Already, Lysander – for no *apparent* reason – has fallen in love with Helena at first sight.

As a poet, Shakespeare continues to create the fairy kingdom: consistently, it is a miniaturised world of natural plenitude in which the most fragile of creatures perform the most exquisite of functions: eg. lighting candles made from the wax of bumblebees' thighs, fashioning fans from butterflies' wings. No figure could be more out of place in this dainty company than this gruff and uncouth weaver, transformed/'translated' into a hairy animal. As usual, Bottom proves unflappable and quite equal to his altered circumstances. He is a magnificent buffoon who, by virtue of his naïve realism, remains totally oblivious to these extraordinary circumstances: at no stage does he acknowledge either his companions' fairness⁸ or his own additional hairiness. Instead, he adjusts to his elevated status ('gentleman') with aplomb. In turn, he grants each fairy an audience – "I shall desire you of more acquaintance" – and then laps up the attention which they lavish on him as if it were his natural entitlement, as if he were to a polite manner born.

At the same time, Shakespeare, as a playwright, is doing darker work. Although its language is poetic, the quintain with which Titania concludes the scene – "Lead him to my bower" – implies that she is preparing to engage in an act of gross depravity, of sexual deviancy: an act of bestiality. For the BBC TV production of the play, made for the BBC Shakespeare series in 1981, Stephen Oliver (1950-1992) composed a memorable theme to accompany Bottom's adjournment from the forest floor to Titania's flowery bed: ironically, the grand sweep of the music suggests a royal progress completely out of keeping with its purpose ... That the Queen of Fairies is about to put an end to her 'enforced chastity'⁹ and have sex with an animal is an obscene joke which would not have been lost on Elizabethan groundlings. In all probability, Shakespeare chooses such a consummation so that his criticism of romantic love can be damning *in the extreme*: after all, a human metamorphosis – *or no metamorphosis at all* – would still have made his point powerfully. In the end, his illustration of romantic folly is chosen not so much to delight an audience as to disgust it.

For modern audiences, this is a timely reminder that the play was written in 1595 and shaped by a post-mediaeval imagination/a sixteenth-century sensibility. What an irony: that the play, used regularly and in all innocence to introduce our children to Shakespeare's work, should centre *not* – as it may at first appear – upon a humorous mismatch, but upon a grotesque and unnatural coupling.

ACT III Scene 2

Act III Scene 2 is a skilfully organised scene (of 463 lines) in which Shakespeare satirises the ridiculous extent to which lovers judge by appearances. In this scene, both Demetrius and Lysander look exclusively 'with the eyes' – eyes which, having been doused by the love-juice, mislead them and make 'fools' of them.

In modern productions, Act III Scene 2 is the scene with which the performance restarts after the Interval. In couplets of iambic pentameter, Puck embarks upon a recapitulation of the spectacular events in Titania's Bower: "My mistress with a monster is in love." Such a long résumé (28 lines) suggests that there was an Interval here in contemporary performances – after which the audiences then required a reminder of the story so far ... So it is not only to inform Oberon that Puck recounts this sensational chain of events: that 'a crew of patches, rude mechanicals' arrived on the green plot adjacent to Titania's Bower and began there to rehearse a play ... that 'the shallowest thickskin of that barren sort' (his epithet for Bottom) was 'translated' into a donkey ... and that Titania, immediately upon waking up, set eyes on him. Puck's final couplet –

When in that moment – so it came to pass –
Titania waked, and straightway loved an ass

– resounds with his self-satisfaction at having put his master's plan perfectly into practice. Of course, Puck's sense of triumph is hubristic and short-lived: no sooner has he assured Oberon that he has

⁸ It is worth considering what Shakespeare gets away with: having just taken ten more lines to detail the miniature dimensions of the fairy world, he stages Bottom's liaison with Titania on a different scale altogether.

⁹ Diana, the moon goddess, is the Goddess of Chastity: in this stanza, she is pale and tearful ('looks with a watery eye') because Titania, having refused to share her bed with her husband, is preparing to resume her sex-life with a beast.

'latched the Athenian's eyes with the love-juice' than an Athenian enters. It is not 'the same Athenian', but Demetrius ...

Demetrius remains in dogged pursuit of Hermia who continues to spurn him. Because they are invisible, Oberon and Puck ("This is the woman, but not this the man") are able to eavesdrop upon the ensuing dialogue between the two arrivals. First and foremost, the four lovers are agents of Shakespeare's plot; inquiring into their characters will therefore yield little in that they appear emotionally and psychologically distinct from one another only in so far as the dramatic situation requires it. All are without personality and, as these couplets illustrate, are given their attitudes and their moods by the developing situation:

HERMIA	What's this to my Lysander? Where is he? Ah, good Demetrius, wilt thou give him me?
DEMETRIUS	I had rather give his carcass to my hounds.
HERMIA	Out, dog! Out, cur! Thou drivest me past the bounds Of maiden's patience.

For her part, Hermia believes that Demetrius – in his jealous rage – must have dragged Lysander from her side and done away with him in the dark wood; for his part, Demetrius, not knowing even that Lysander is missing, genuinely wonders what she is talking about. J. H. Walter (1964) confirms that the four lovers are "very lightly characterised" and concedes that, except for the heights of the two women, there is not much to distinguish between them; he concludes that they are not "attempts at realistic portraits", but "dramatic pieces playing out a foolish pageant." What they say to each other in this situation does not matter very much; all that matters is that Hermia should remain so hostile to Demetrius that he becomes despondent and suspends his chase. Conveniently, he concludes that there is 'no following her in this fierce vein' and gives up. *He lies down and sleeps ...*

At this point, Oberon ("What hast thou done?") steps forward and clarifies Puck's mistake. So that it can be rectified at once, Oberon sends Puck in search of Helena of Athens.¹⁰ The couplet with which Puck departs –

I go, I go – look how I go –
Swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow

– emphasises his exact role in the plot: that of a 'servant' who takes pride in carrying out the instructions of his 'captain' with a superlative alacrity. In the Nottingham Playhouse production of 1981, Puck was played by the Olympic Figure Skating Champion, John Curry (1949-1994). It was decided that Curry, a gay man, as effeminate as he was graceful, should speed off, but then stop mid-line in order to demand Oberon's admiration of his stylish exit-movement. By his camp delivery, Curry's Puck – "look how I go" – insisted that Oberon recognise him for the fastest fairy in the kingdom.

At this point, the entrances and the exits occur at the pace of a farce: as soon as one door closes, another door opens.¹¹ While Puck is away, Oberon kneels beside the sleeping Athenian and administers another dose of purple eye-drops: that is, *he squeezes the flower on Demetrius's eyes* and thereby seeks to 'remedy' the confused situation. Within eight lines, Puck is back to report that 'Helena is here at hand' in the company of the other Athenian; his trimeters –

Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be!

– show that he cannot wait to watch what happens next. Puck's certainty that there will be a skirmish to behold ('when two at once woo one') proceeds from his reading of human nature; his scornful generalisation – that all mortals are 'fond'/'foolish' – is based upon his knowledge that men

¹⁰ Oberon's specific reference to 'Helena of Athens' is unlicensed in that no earlier mention has supplied him with her name; in Act II Scene 1, Oberon hears the names Lysander, Hermia and Demetrius, but not Helena.

¹¹ In Elizabethan theatre, stage-directions – see Act II Scene 1 – often refer to the various 'doors' at which an actor is to enter and exit.

and women are very easily led by appearances and therefore guarantee good 'sport'. In this instance, Lysander is easily led into the clearing by Helena with the guaranteed result that things do indeed 'befall preposterously'.

Lysander and Helena enter at loggerheads and exchange cross words, each speaking a six-line stanza of rhymed iambic pentameter. For his given part, Lysander ("Why should you think that I should woo in scorn?") addresses Helena's understandable accusation that he is making fun of her; for hers, Helena accuses him of being a fickle and insincere gigolo whose word to a woman weighs 'nothing'. Given their parts in this play, it is not at all surprising that they fail to make psychological sense of each other's behaviour. When Helena wants to know what has happened to Lysander's love for Hermia, his iambic answer –

I had no judgement when to her I swore

– is determined not by any character-trait, but by the ironic pattern of the play. The irony is that Lysander did have judgement when he swore to love Hermia, but has subsequently had his clear-sighted judgement clouded by Puck's inadvertent application to his eyes of the flower-drops.

For the given situation, the exchanges between Lysander and Helena are suitably fractious. Once 'the noise they make' wakes up Demetrius, the confusion of the bright things becomes total and utter. Inevitably, Demetrius spies Helena. His immediate reaction –

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine –
To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?

– is no less dramatic/no less effective for having been eagerly anticipated. What an audience enjoys is the advantage that it holds over the lovers, its awareness – *which they do not share* – that two of them (Lysander and now Demetrius) are under the influence of a magic charm, an entrancing optrex.¹² For his romantic couplets, Demetrius finds epithets ('goddess, nymph') and metonyms ('kissing cherries') that suddenly rediscover Helena's beauty: in answer to his rhetorical question, he could perhaps have compared her to a summer's day. Given his ruthless rejection of her up to this point, such hyperboles are deployed to illustrate not only how capricious and irrational lovers are, but also how they rush to exaggerate the mortal qualities of their paramours.

To this development, Helena is required to react with high emotion. Both because she is of noble birth and because she is expressing feeling, she speaks verse. Her couplet –

O spite! O hell! I see you are all bent
To set against me for your merriment

– is the first of seven couplets (+ a concluding triplet) in which she tries to make sense of her extremely sudden and unexpected popularity with the men. Helena's seventeen-line speech is a tautologous rant in that her rhymes repeatedly rehearse the explanation that the guys have ganged up on her: originally rivals to 'love Hermia', 'now both [are] rivals to mock Helena'. Part of the entertainment comes from listening to the predictable chimes of her monosyllabic rhymes. Most of the entertainment comes from the dramatic irony created by the discrepancy between the characters' awareness of the situation and the audience's superior awareness ...

Bertrand Evans (1960) explains in comprehensive detail that Shakespeare's comedies owe their enduring entertainment-value to the playwright's control of dramatic irony; he argues that audiences enjoy their advantages over characters who are operating at lower levels of awareness. In ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***, seven of the nine scenes (II.1– V.1) rely for their dramatic effectiveness on Shakespeare's handling of conflicting levels of awareness. Dramatic irony intensifies when Hermia, having heard Lysander's raised voice, arrives upon the scene:

¹² It is worth re-stating here that Demetrius continues to worship the sight of Helena because his eyes remain under the influence of the love-juice; because Oberon never removes the charm, it cannot be argued that Demetrius undergoes a natural change of heart and reverts to her of his own free will.

Dark night that from the eye his function takes
The ear more quick of apprehension makes.

As Hermia herself is about to discover, the dark of a midsummer night does affect the efficient functioning of 'the eye'. Upon her entry, she is immediately shocked to learn from Lysander that he did indeed abandon her of his own accord and rush in pursuit of 'fair Helena':

LYSANDER Why seekest thou me? Could not this make thee know
 The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?
HERMIA You speak not as you think. It cannot be.
HELENA Lo, she is one of this confederacy.
 Now I perceive they have conjoined all three
 To fashion this false sport in spite of me.

To Helena, it is inconceivable that Lysander should have rejected Hermia: consequently, Hermia's contradictory reply ("It cannot be") suggests to her that her school friend must be a party to 'this confederacy' against her. Hysterical and increasingly paranoid, she concludes that Hermia too must be playing a role in an elaborate charade ('false sport') at her expense.

Helena perceives herself as a victim of an unkind conspiracy; this perception – of some 'foul derision' – informs her twenty-five lines of blank verse that follow. During this turgid speech, Helena stands aghast and accuses 'injurious Hermia' of an unsisterly disloyalty: in particular, of an unmaidenly readiness 'to join with men' in mocking her. Dramatically, Shakespeare has already shown how 'quick bright things come to confusion' and 'what fools these mortals be', but he extends the scene and prolongs the comic agony. For 222 lines, Act III Scene 2 (Lines 122-344) takes the shape of an almighty row between the lovers. At this point, the rhythm of the scene is of repeated accusations and restated suspicions. For instance, the third question with which Helena cross-examines Hermia –

Have you not set Lysander, as in scorn,
To follow me and praise my eyes and face?

– merely re-states her deep suspicion that there is a plot against her in which her friends, Lysander and Hermia, are unaccountably implicated. She suspects that Hermia has put Lysander up to a cruel game; in the absence of any other explanation, she jumps to the conclusion that they have been scheming behind her back. For this duplicity, she turns on them with such an animated ferocity –

Ay, do. Persever, counterfeit sad looks,
Make mouths upon me when I turn my back,
Wink at each other, hold the sweet jest up

– that an audience may temporarily forget that it is listening to a comic dialogue, a humorous talking at cross-purposes. Temporarily, it is possible to moralise that Helena, who betrayed Lysander and Hermia's trust by divulging to Demetrius that they had eloped to the wood, is simply receiving her come-uppance.

Only at this stage does Shakespeare raise the tempo of the scene. For the next 73 lines, the dialogue (Lines 257-330) resounds with the sound of hurled insults; the exchanges reverberate with a roll of called names. For Hermia, Lysander finds a vocabulary that abuses her brunette complexion: "Away, you Ethiopel!"/"out, tawny Tartar, out." He seeks physically to shake her off as if she is a clawing cat or a clinging fungus/spoor: "Hang off, thou cat, thou burr. Vile thing, let loose ..." For good measure, he pours out two metonyms – "Out, loathèd medicine! O hated potion, hence!" – which finally convince Hermia that he is not in 'jest', but 'in earnest'. So vituperative are his epithets that Hermia stands incredulous:

Am I not Hermia? Are not you Lysander?

For the first time, she begins to question her own sense of identity, her sense of reality. Like Helena, Hermia may "hold advantage" over Lysander and Demetrius "in realizing that the situation is unnatural, in distrusting and refusing to accept what Lysander and Demetrius view without surprise", but this advantage is neither of consolation nor of use to her (Evans). Instead, she is compelled to revise her interpretation of the situation.

In no uncertain terms, Lysander reiterates that he hates Hermia and loves Helena. Without an explanation for this rejection, Hermia concludes that Helena must somehow have stolen her boyfriend and starts to counter-accuse her. From this point, there ensues a cat-fight in which the name-calling becomes louder and shriller. In her new incarnation, Helena is a 'juggler', a 'canker-blossom' and 'a thief of love' who has 'used her height' ('her tall personage', her graceful bearing) to entice Lysander away and seduce him.

In retaliation, Helena focuses on Hermia's short stature. First, Helena – "You counterfeit, you puppet, you!" – comes out with a vindictive metaphor for Hermia's height; at such a personal remark, Hermia turns into a harridan, finding for Helena her own rich epithet – 'thou painted maypole' – which scoffs in a strident tone at her rival's lankiness. Physical comedy confirms this point because Hermia cannot then reach up far enough to scratch out Helena's eyes. To Demetrius, Helena explains that Hermia's behaviour is only to be expected because she is little better than a cunning animal ('a vixen') notorious for her 'fierce' nature; in return, Hermia ("Let me come to her") flies at Helena again. Lysander steps in, not only to protect Helena, but also to dismiss Hermia with four more epithets –

Get you gone, you dwarf,
You minimus of hindering knot-grass made,
You bead, you acorn

– which tell her again how 'little' and insignificant she is. In another context, such sustained bad-mouthing would be no laughing matter; in this context, an audience laughs because it knows – whereas Lysander does not – that he would not be talking to Hermia in such abusive terms if he were not under a spell. Put another way, the audience knows that he doesn't mean what he says and has relaxed in the knowledge that Oberon is close at hand, able and ready at any moment to restore order. In this situation, Oberon is impresario to a happy ending: "Given a perspective that includes Oberon," we can – according to Evans – "maintain ... a sense that all is really well."

The lovers leave in different directions: whereas Lysander and Demetrius go 'cheek by jowl' in order to fight a duel, Helena uses her long legs to run away from Hermia's sharp nails. As soon as they have gone, Oberon ("This is thy negligence") breaks cover and blames Puck for having smeared the eyes of the wrong Athenian; this is your fault, he says in effect. Oh no, it's not, retorts Puck in pantomime mode: you gave me an inadequate and incomplete description, assuring me that I 'should know the man by the Athenian garments he had on'. In any case, 'king of shadows', what's the problem? Impish sprite that he is, Puck –

And so far am I glad it so did sort,
As this their jangling I esteem a sport

– has enjoyed every minute of the confusion that he has inadvertently caused; such a brouhaha ('jangling') is his idea of good fun/'sport'. Bertrand Evans comments further: "an environment in which comic effects can flourish even in dark moments ... is a hall-mark of Shakespearean comedy." The end of this scene proceeds to prove this point:

When they next wake, all this derision
Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision.

When they 'next wake', the four lovers will rub their eyes and conclude that this quarrelsome episode ('this derision') was nothing more substantial than a midsummer night's dream. This is because

Oberon¹³ is a benevolent master of ceremonies who is determined to reconcile the estranged and warring parties to each other: as such, he seeks to ensure that, after the bitter 'jangling' is over, 'all things shall be peace'. At the same time as he issues further instructions to Puck, he himself prepares to 'release' Titania from her spell and make his 'peace' with her.

The natural element of the fairies is night; night is 'fairy time' (V.1). Puck – "My fairy lord, this must be done with haste" – therefore advises Oberon to hurry; his advice reminds us that the action of the play (II.1–III.2) occupies a midsummer night and that he and Oberon must 'effect this business' before they vanish with the daylight. Already, Puck (whose magic powers include x-ray vision) can see the infra-red ghosts of the damned who 'troop home to churchyards' where they take again 'to their wormy beds'. Undoing the damage that the love-juice has done has become a matter of urgency ...

Shakespeare continues to enhance the superstition that fairies are special creatures, gifted with supernatural powers. At the end of this scene, his numerous stage-directions create scope for the kind of stage-business in which Puck's magic powers revel: not only is Puck an invisible man, but he is also a ventriloquist ... As Lysander and Demetrius search for each other in the moonlit wood, he keeps his promise to lead them a merry dance: that is, he 'will lead them up and down ... up and down'. In order to do so, he impersonates first Demetrius (*in Demetrius' voice*) and then Lysander (*in Lysander's voice*): "Ho, ho, ho, coward! Why comest thou not?" Puck's aim is to tire them out and he accomplishes it: after twenty lines, Lysander *lies down*; ten lines later, Demetrius *lies down and sleeps*.

Despite the hectic comings and goings, the scene concludes with a formal symmetry: no sooner have the two Athenian youths fallen asleep than the two Athenian maids re-enter. First, Helena ("O weary night!") speaks a six-line stanza in which she comments on the demoralising effects of the 'long' night and succumbs to her fatigue: *She lies down and sleeps*. It is at this point that Puck changes his tone and reflects philosophically on the consequences of love-madness:

Cupid is a knavish lad
Thus to make poor females mad.

Like Cupid, Puck is 'a knavish lad' in that he has enjoyed high jinks at the expense of the lovers; here, he ends his amusement with mortal folly and commutes it to a feeling of regret. Observing Helena, he grows suddenly more wistful; he tires of rejoicing in his own knavery and expresses pity for her – as if such 'poor females' were no longer fair game. Second, Hermia ("Never so weary ...") speaks a six-line stanza in which she too comments on the lacerating effects of the night and then succumbs to her fatigue: *She lies down and sleeps*. In readiness for the reconciliation of Act IV Scene 1, she will presumably settle in close proximity to Lysander ...

Once more, Puck's choice of adjective – "Gentle lover, remedy" – expresses pity for a benighted lover: *He squeezes the juice on Lysander's eyes*. Puck administers an antidote¹⁴ to Lysander's eyes, thereby correcting his original mistake and removing 'the threat of disaster' (Harold Jenkins). His rhymed incantation culminates in a confident expectation that this 'remedy' will work and that, in accordance with 'the country proverb', both couples – Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena – will be happily re-united:

Jack shall have Jill;
Naught shall go ill.
The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

The end of this scene confirms that **A *Midsummer Night's Dream*** is a comedy: although things may go temporarily awry, 'naught shall go ill'. Shakespeare thus reassures his audience that it can

¹³ In this role, Oberon (as Evans points out) is a 'spirit of another sort': as such a benevolent force, he prefigures Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest*.

¹⁴ Oberon's specific instruction to Puck is not to re-apply the pansy juice, but to 'crush this herb into Lysander's eye': in other words, he produces out of nowhere a second flower ('this herb') endowed with the 'virtuous property' to counteract/reverse the effect of the first flower (Lines 366-367).

look forward to Act IV and Act V in the certain knowledge that 'all shall be well'. In the end, the course of true love *will* run smooth.

* * * * *

ACT IV Scene 1

Duly assured that 'all shall be well', an audience wants now to know what has happened in Titania's Bower ... For this scene, the setting is 'a bank where the wild thyme blows' adjacent to that area of the forest floor [= of the stage] where the four lovers lie sleeping. On this bank recline Titania (an exiguous Queen of Fairies) and Bottom (an overweight weaver 'translated' into an ass). It remains an incongruous spectacle designed to excite both high amusement and low disgust. *Oberon behind them* observes it with an air of sweet satisfaction ...

Titania is keenly aware of the 'luscious' surroundings in which she is entertaining her asinine beau. Lying on a bank which wild flowers overhang, she speaks a verse-quatrain in which she refers once again to her 'flowery bed':

Come, sit thee down upon this flowery bed
 While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,
 And stick musk-roses in thy sleek, smooth head,
 And kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy.

Each of Titania's adjectives ('amiable', 'sleek, smooth', 'fair', 'gentle') is ironic in that it is based upon her impaired perception of Bottom's head. For this reason, there was a design-flaw in the Nottingham Playhouse production of the play in October 1981. Design for that production had a futuristic look: as a result, Bottom wore a head of golden plastic which was 'sleek' and 'smooth' when it shouldn't have been; it was made of a shiny material in which it was not possible to 'stick musk-roses'. Throughout that production, Shakespeare's poetry, by which the fairy kingdom is created, became meaningless because its floral images could find no reflection in the material world presented on the stage. It was difficult to see how 'musk-roses' or 'a red-hipped humble bee on top of a thistle' (which Bottom instructs Cobweb to 'kill') could flourish in such an artificial environment. Finally, it was impossible to imagine the scent of summer flowers ('the sweet honeysuckle') and the sound of summer trees ('barky elm') in a place where only man-made fibres were visible.

For her part, Titania is so 'enamoured' of her ass that she remains comically oblivious to Bottom's monstrous appearance; for his, Bottom (an 'angel', a 'gentle mortal', a 'gentle joy') reacts to his altered circumstances with complete equanimity, addressing each fairy with an uncommon civility ("Monsieur Cobweb, good Monsieur") and expressing an awareness of his transformation ("I must to the barber's, Monsieur, for methinks I am marvellous hairy about the face") without any appreciation of its full and gross extent. The ironic references to his changed state ("And I am such a tender ass ...") are there not to suggest any growth in his self-awareness, but to emphasise his ignorance.

During these forty lines of conversation, Titania's verse and Bottom's prose alternate. Whilst the royal fairy speaks lines of verse, the common workman speaks sentences of prose. This stretch of dialogue –

TITANIA What, wilt thou hear some music, my sweet love?
 BOTTOM I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs
 and the bones.
 TITANIA Or say, sweet love, what thou to eat?
 BOTTOM Truly, a peck of provender. I could munch your good dry oats.
 Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay

– illustrates the dramatic contrast. When Titania asks questions of her 'sweet love' in passionate iambic pentameters, Bottom answers her as if he is a common fellow who has been turned into a

donkey. Accordingly, he has no 'ear for music' and opts for a form of percussion notable only for the cacophony that it is likely to produce; ironically, such 'music' would echo only the disharmony in this pairing. Accordingly, he is no gastronome, no gourmet, but simply orders 'hay' with everything.

It is at the end of this dialogue that Bottom finally begins to feel sleepy. Titania's verse symbolises the moment at which the relationship between Fairy Queen and Donkey is consummated:

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.
Fairies, be gone and be all ways away.

Exeunt Fairies

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!

They sleep

Titania gives herself a stage-direction that her language proceeds to endorse: that is, she 'will wind' the gross creature in her arms – rather as 'woodbine' [= bindweed/columbine] winds itself around the stems of 'the sweet honeysuckle'. Encoded into her description is a portrayal of sexual intimacy in which 'the female' (as here) takes the lead: being female, she will 'enring' his fingers with her vagina* and then whisper sweet nothings ("O, how I love thee! How I dote on thee!") into his floppy ear.¹⁵

At this point, Oberon *comes forward* and greets Puck with his good news: "Seest thou this sweet sight?" Then, Oberon delivers thirty lines of blank verse in which he sets out the denouement of the plot. Especially as Titania has now relinquished to him the 'changeling child' about whom they had originally quarrelled, Oberon is happy to release her from her spell: now that he has the boy, he will 'undo this hateful imperfection of her eyes'.¹⁶ His choice of adjective ('hateful') gives a clear indication that the joke on Titania has never been altogether funny [= even by contemporary standards, more disgusting than amusing]. At the same time, he points to Bottom and commands Puck to 'take this transformèd scalp from off the head of this Athenian swain'. The intention is that Puck should release this 'rude mechanical' from his spell as from a period of hypnosis:

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.

Like the four lovers/'the other', Bottom – if he recalls any details of the night at all – will recall them only as if they were fragments of a vivid 'dream'/a midsummer night's dream.

Stanley Wells (New Penguin, 1967) hooks himself up to Harold Jenkins' definition of a satisfying comedy and maintains:

We are, too, made to feel that the events of the night have been a significant experience for the lovers, teaching them something about themselves; that they come out of the wood more mature than when they went into it.

Once again, some wishful thinking about Shakespeare's intentions is at odds with the text: if the lovers are to 'think no more' of the events in the wood than of a vexatious dream, then they are unlikely to undergo consequent character-changes. "Lord, what fools these mortals be": in this scene, Shakespeare, more probably, is concluding his **first** demonstration of the extent to which mortals are foolish for relying on the unreliable evidence of their senses.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is not a comedy that Shakespeare's fellow playwright Ben Jonson (1573-1637) would have written: it does not aim to correct errors and mend manners by a didactic

¹⁵ At the very end of *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano makes a coarse joke about Nerissa's 'ring'.

¹⁶ It is not possible to see how Titania could have made this concession to Oberon because there is no gap in the narrative in which the reported negotiations between them could have taken place.

demonstration of human folly. Shakespeare's titles (*As You Like It, What You Will*) indicate what his method is: he will present his characters in a certain light and then let his audience make up its own mind about them. It might be said that, in this play, he is especially harsh on his characters: that is, he leads them up the garden path, but refuses to show them the fairies playing at the bottom of the garden ..!

When Oberon wakes her up, Titania's immediate reaction is to dismiss her weird experience of the midsummer night. Her first thought is that she must have been dreaming:

My Oberon, what visions have I seen!
Methought I was enamoured of an ass.

She rejects her vague impression that she 'was enamoured of an ass'/making love to a donkey because she has to stray too far from her understanding of reality to fetch it to mind. Only when Oberon ("There lies your love") directs her attention to the transfigured mechanical does she see that her 'visions' were not far-fetched and realise what a fool she was to trust the untrustworthy evidence of her senses. It is important to note that no such insight is granted to the four lovers and that they (no matter what Stanley Wells says) return to Athens as unreconstructed romantics.

Usually, a Shakespearean comedy ends when its central characters are let into a secret; finally, they draw level in awareness with the audience which has been enjoying a range of dramatic ironies at their expense; in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this does not happen. The gap – between Bottom's awareness and ours/between the four lovers' awareness and ours – is never closed. "This gap," observes Bertrand Evans, "is unique in Shakespeare's comedies in that it remains open even at the end of the play." The purpose of this 'open' gap is to suggest that, although they may not know it, 'mortals' (being 'fools') cannot take credit for solving their own problems: if 'the course of true love' is to 'run smooth', then it will do so only as a result of a major intercession by a Fairy Godfather [= Oberon]. The play proceeds to this sobering conclusion: in human love-affairs, 'all shall be well' only by magic.

To prove this point, Shakespeare illustrates the extent to which Oberon and Titania are superintendents of the mortal world. Oberon commands Puck to remove the hideous/loathsome 'visage' from Bottom's head: as he does so, Puck ("Now when thou wakest with thine own fool's eyes peep") makes clear that Bottom, upon waking, will continue to look at the world through the foolish eyes of a mere mortal. To signal the restoration of harmony, Oberon calls for music rather more melodious than 'the tongs and the bones':

Sound, music! (*Music*) Come, my Queen, take hands with me
And rock the ground whereon these sleepers be.
They dance
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.
There shall the pairs of faithful lovers be
Wedded with Theseus in all jollity.

The dance signifies that Oberon and Titania 'are new in amity'; at the same time, the eight couplets (which share a single rhyme) announce that 'tomorrow midnight' these reconciled royals will – as originally intended – enter the palace and 'bless' the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. The function of this formal passage is to prepare us for the 'jollity' of Act V.

No sooner have Oberon and Titania left the stage than Duke Theseus and Hippolyta enter.¹⁷ Bright and early on May Day, his wedding day, Theseus is out hunting with his hounds. For this development, there are two explanations: first, it provides an opportunity to bring on stage a

¹⁷ For the two actors doubling in these roles, Oberon and Titania's exit and Theseus and Hippolyta's entrance will involve only quick and simple costume-changes.

spectacular pack of hounds; second, more significantly, it facilitates an instructive irony at Theseus' expense. For the hunting party, the plan is not to hunt, but to climb to the top of a nearby mountain and there set the dogs barking at the echoes of their own voices; both Theseus ('musical confusion') and Hippolyta ('so musical a discord, such sweet thunder') coin oxymorons which express how much they enjoy listening to the campanological effect of such barking; significantly, the 'mutual' agreement between barks and echoes is reached as if by magic ... The blank verse which describes this canine campanology ('matched in mouth like bells') supplies the ironic context for Theseus' remarks to the four lovers ...

Given his appreciation of his barking hounds, it is ironic that Theseus struggles to imagine how the two pairs of lovers can have ceased jangling and made peace; because he is a man of 'cool reason', it does not occur to him that there may exist magical/supernatural forces which see to it that differences can be reconciled. Instead, Theseus affects puzzlement ... *He sees the sleepers* and, conscious of the date, remarks feebly and idly that they must have got up 'early' and come to the woods in order to 'observe the rite of May': that is, to watch the sunrise together and then perform some kind of fertility rite in advance of his wedding. It escapes him that 'a May morning' is a metaphor for the 'midsummer madness' of love¹⁸ and that, if the lovers have regained a degree of sanity, then an alternative power/an outside agency must have been at work.

After *the lovers wake*, Duke Theseus makes an equally feeble joke: "Saint Valentine is past." It's 1st May, he tells them: don't they realise that St Valentine's Day – on which love-birds are meant to 'couple' – was months ago ... In any case, what – he asks Lysander – are 'rival enemies' such as Demetrius and yourself doing here, sleeping cheek by jowl in the same neck of the woods? "How," he wants to know, "comes this gentle concord in the world"? Clearly, he believes that such harmony can be achieved only by some sort of divine intervention – which, as his incredulous tone reveals, he has mistakenly ruled out ...

It is Demetrius who answers Theseus' question. In an effort to quell Egeus' anger, he tries to communicate the nature of the nocturnal experience which he has undergone. So bewildering was this midsummer night that it takes him twenty-six lines of blank verse to deliver his account of it:

But, my good lord – I wot not by what power,
But by some power it is – my love to Hermia
Melted as the snow ...

And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,
The object and the pleasure of mine eye,
Is only Helena.

Demetrius' diction is instructive: although he does not know 'what power' has been at work, he is rightly convinced that some external agency ('some power') must be responsible for the literal switch-back of his affections from Hermia to Helena. What is more, his wordy metonym – 'the object and the pleasure of mine eye' – expressly reminds us that, although Demetrius has changed his mind, he is not a changed man, for he has reverted to Helena only because his 'eye' remains affected by the magic juice of the pansy.

Duke Theseus – "Fair lovers, you are fortunately met" – chooses words which, at the same time as they recognise how 'fortunate' foolish lovers need to be, complete the pattern of events: now that May Day has dawned, no lovers are any longer 'ill met by moonlight'. Of course, there is another irony at Theseus' expense in that he, in announcing that 'these couples shall eternally be knit', has no inkling of the good fortune that it actually takes to 'knit' mortal couples together forever: that is, an intervention by the King of the Fairies. Stephen Fender (1968) confirms that, "when Theseus appears to solve the lovers' problems at the end of Act IV, he is really only ratifying in human terms a solution already established by the supernatural powers." When Theseus sounds off at the start of Act V, it is important to remember how inexpert and unaware he is: after all, his own union with Hippolyta is destined to succeed only because Oberon and Titania give it their blessings. What in effect the play

¹⁸ It is in *Twelfth Night* (Act III Scene 4) that Fabian, on re-encountering the foolish and lovesick knight Sir Andrew Aguecheek, remarks that here is 'more matter for a May morning'.

is saying is that a successful union between man and woman [= a course of true love that runs smooth] is a supernatural achievement.

When the four lovers are left to themselves, they try again to make sense of their nocturnal experiences, but speak as if they have been under a hypnosis which has induced a collective amnesia. Demetrius' simile –

These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds

– alludes to 'these things' [= their quarrels of the night] and indicates quite literally that he has only a cloudy memory of them. He cannot recall them with any clarity: hard though he tries, he cannot bring them closely into focus. Likewise, Hermia claims to 'see these things with parted eye', complaining in effect of 'double' vision; she too cannot distinguish between two conflicting realities, her clear apprehension of things by daylight not quite able to sublimate a hazy recollection of things by moonlight. Such is the confusion to which these bright young people came that Demetrius' response –

Are you sure

That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream

– takes the form of 'the fierce vexation' that Oberon (III.2) predicted: he cannot be 'sure' that his recent encounter with Duke Theseus was not part of his continuing 'dream'. It takes the other three to assure him that he was not dreaming and is 'awake'. Significantly, the line with which he leads them back to Athens – "And by the way let's recount our dreams" – signals that the 'accidents'/altercations of the night will continue to be subjected to analysis, thereby supplying an ironic context for Act V.

Meanwhile, nearby, Bottom has remained asleep (his lumpen shape apparent to the Elizabethan audience, if not to the Athenian aristocracy). As soon as the four lovers disappear, he rises and delivers a soliloquy. To begin with, Bottom ("When my cue comes, call me, and I will answer") does not know where he is – or, rather, he supposes that he is in the middle of the rehearsal that Puck interrupted and he cannot understand where his fellow actors have got to. Then, abruptly, he comes to his senses (such as they are) and, rather than struggle to remember his sexual encounter with Titania, seems to enjoy a total recall of it:

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.¹⁹
Methought I was ...

Stanley Wells states that this soliloquy is a "masterly piece of prose", but does not say why. Clearly, this passage owes its strength to the syntactical parallels ("I have had ..."/"Man is but ..."/"Methought I ...") that structure it. For the fourth of these parallels, Bottom relies on a foreground knowledge of St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. In this scripture, St Paul (Chapter 2 Verse 9) is informing the citizens of Corinth that, although they may think that their eyes have already seen the 'glory' of the coming of the Lord, they ain't seen nothing yet:

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into
the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

Likewise, Bottom is convinced (and with good cause!) that he has *not* had a 'fruitless vision'. On the contrary, he has had things prepared for him which are without any known precedent: that is, things

¹⁹ The dramatic irony at Bottom's expense repeats an earlier joke and thereby confirms that he remains without any idea of his metamorphosis: as far as he is concerned, the Queen of the Fairies loved him for his rude self.

of which his fellow mortals will not have seen the like. His attempt to echo St Paul's dramatic words

—
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!

— founders upon a confusion both grammatical and physical. On five occasions, Bottom fails to match a sense-organ with the verb that belongs to it; in doing so, he passes an unwitting comment on the mistakes of the midsummer night. The verbal mismatches confirm that, as we saw in the wood, man's senses are not consistently fit for their purposes. Ultimately, the muddled language serves to reinforce the major contention of the play: that man is but an ass if he relies for any guidance on the flawed findings of his senses.

In that Nottingham Playhouse production of 1981, Don Fellows, an American actor, played Bottom, but did so without gusto: he spoke in a dead-pan tone of voice which failed to communicate the 'rare' delight that this character would have felt upon recalling his bizarre and wondrous interlude. The accents of Bottom's prose ("God's my life – stolen hence and left me asleep!") suggest that, instead of an unsmiling American, a jovial Englishman would be more appropriate for the role.²⁰ The cadences of his prose ("It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream' because it hath no bottom") suggest that he should respond with a sense of triumph to his traumatic realisation, speak with unbridled enthusiasm about the ballad that he is planning to sing and then trot off to rejoin 'his fellows'.

ACT IV Scene 2

If Act I Scene 2 took place in a Greek tavern, then Act IV Scene 2 returns to the same setting where the Athenian workmen [= the 'rude mechanicals'] have re-assembled, but this time without Nick Bottom. For the start of this scene, the situation is created by Bottom's troubling absence. Peter Quince – "Have you sent to Bottom's house? Is he come home yet?" – reminds the audience that his fellow workmen have not set eyes on him since he appeared to them in the moonlit wood in the likeness of a donkey. Since he underwent his magical translation, the remaining five have had no news of him and are in utter dismay. Both literally and metaphorically, the bottom has fallen out of their world ...

Versed in Elizabethan superstition, Robin Starveling fears that Bottom may have been 'transported' out of their earthly dimension into another and that their play will not now 'go forward'. Quince ("You have not a man in all Athens able to discharge Pyramus but he") and Flute ("No, he hath simply the best wit of any handicraft man in Athens") agree, thereby indicating the comical height of esteem in which the craftsmen of Athens continue to hold the hefty weaver. It might be said of them (albeit not in 1596!) that they are actors facing the prospect of having to put on *Hamlet* without the prince ...

As becomes clear, the function of this short scene is to set up the business of Act V: when Snug enters, it is with the news that the three marriages – Theseus to Hippolyta, Lysander to Hermia, Demetrius to Helena – have been solemnised in the temple and that the newly-wed couples are returning to the palace for the wedding supper. These tidings are not altogether glad ... Flute ("O sweet Bully Bottom!") mourns Bottom's absence at lugubrious length, not least because he has calculated that, if their play 'had gone forward', then they would all have been 'made men' [= so richly rewarded by the Duke that they would have been established on a sound financial footing for the rest of their lives]. Of course, it is at this desperate moment that Bottom ("Where are these lads? Where are these hearts?") makes his grand re-entrance and promptly effects a reversal of their fortunes.

²⁰ In September 1971, the BBC chose *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for its Play of the Month and assembled a stellar cast in which Ronnie Barker (1929-2005) played Bottom.

Whereas Bottom's fellow actors greet him ecstatically, he greets them phlegmatically. No sooner has he started to tell them about his otherworldly encounter with the Fairy Queen ("Masters, I am to discourse wonders ...") than he stops and turns his full attention to their amateur dramatics. Bottom is imperturbable and irrepressible, more concerned with re-starting their rehearsals ("Every man look o'er his part") than with recounting his wondrous dream. Somehow, he has learned that their play 'is preferred'²¹ and briskly resumes his role of actor-manager, bossing his 'dear actors' about, giving them detailed instructions, issuing one imperative after another, nine in all. They are to meet at the palace and be ready to perform ...

* * * * *

ACT V Scene 1

The final scene of the play begins *in media res* ... Newly wed, Theseus and Hippolyta enter a chamber of the palace in mid-discussion: clearly, Demetrius has found time to give them his promised account of the previous night and has got them talking. For her part, Hippolyta is intrigued by the 'strange' story. Theseus is more sceptical:

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 ...

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.

Although he is an aristocrat, Duke Theseus represents the common man: to his way of thinking, the story is not 'true'; rather, it is one of those mythological stories which he has always struggled to 'believe'. At once, Shakespeare puts into Theseus' mouth a phrase ('these fairy toys') by which his scepticism is embarrassed: we know, whereas Theseus does not, that the sense in which the four lovers' story is a 'fairy story' is not metaphorical [= a tall story, a fiction] but literal [= literally true]. On the one hand, this dramatic irony at Theseus' expense is there to signal instantly that he is wrong: that, when it comes to comprehending the full complexity of human experience, 'cool reason' (which Duke Theseus, Governor of Athens, exercises) has its limits. There *are* more things in heaven and earth – such as fairies at the bottom of the palace garden – than are dreamt of in his Horatian philosophy.

On the other hand, Duke Theseus' criticism of lunatics, lovers and poets (whom he lumps together) is right: that is, 'lovers and madmen' *are* alike. With equal force, the action of the play asserts that 'the lover' is a midsummer madman (Lysander, Demetrius) or a midsummer madwoman (Titania) in that he/she falls in love merely on the strength of an eye-jerk reaction.

In twenty-one lines of iambic pentameter, Duke Theseus makes ten declarative statements. Only as he makes these pronouncements does it become apparent that the love-juice squeezed from the pansy is an emblem of Shakespeare's idea: that, ***under the influence of passion, represented by the flower***, 'lovers' exaggerate the qualities of their paramours and convert them into 'fantasies'; 'frantic', they endow their paramours with a bogus/spurious glamour: eg. Helena became a 'goddess,

²¹ There is an inconsistency here. Bottom's announcement is premature: it is only after eighty lines of Act V Scene 1 that Theseus ("I will hear that play") expresses his preference for *A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe*.

nymph, perfect, divine' (III.2). The idea is that, under this influence, the lover's vision becomes impaired – with the result that the object of his/her affection alters shape; as a result, he/she ends up admiring a false impression/a distorted image/a changed shape. Bottom's translation/change of shape is a literal embodiment [= an emblem] of this central idea.

At the same time, Theseus' speech is a piece of literary criticism, for it does not escape him that, like lunatics, like lovers, poets too are in the alarming habit of altering or enhancing realities/of finding concrete images for abstract ideas. For abstracts, poets – by using their imaginations – can find colourful metaphors; for 'airy nothing', they are adept at finding 'a local habitation and a name'. Theseus, then, lectures both lovers and poets* on the dangers of letting their imaginations run away with them and fantasising: that is, of seeing ordinary people in an extraordinary and impossible light. Indeed, he warns them that a 'strong imagination' can play 'such tricks' that it can often mistake a good-looking person ('some joy') for a good person (a 'bringer of that joy').²²

With an air of aristocratic disdain, Duke Theseus continues to presume that the sum of human experiences can be calculated only by the exercise of 'cool reason'. The rhetorical question with which his speech ends –

Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear?

– resigns itself complacently to the conclusion that, like 'the lunatic' whose mood swings with the phases of the moon, 'the lover' is not competent to tell the difference between a wild illusion ('a bear') and a mundane reality ('a bush'). Like lunatics, who are literally influenced by the moon, lovers, who meet under the moon, are likely to imagine things; he has thus demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the story of the four lovers is not to be believed.

Hippolyta, however, clings tenaciously to her point of view. Her 'but' ("But all ...") butts into Theseus' tirade against men with over-active imaginations and initiates a statement of the opposite case: that, 'all' things considered, 'the story of the night', as narrated by 'all' four lovers, is more substantial than a juvenile flight of fancy and 'grows to something of great constancy'. Hippolyta's phrase – 'something of great constancy' – is an enigmatic and portentous phrase which invites expansive elucidation, but does not in fact deserve it; it means simply that the four lovers' story – of a testing experience in the moonlit wood – should be taken seriously and not brusquely dismissed. Now, the dramatic irony is at Hippolyta's expense, for we know, whereas she does not, that the lovers came through the test and were reconciled *only* by means of Oberon's magic. In the final analysis, this story of romantic reconciliation and marital 'joy' is nothing of great constancy, but a fairy tale.

Enter the lovers: Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia and Helena.

Now that they have arrived, Theseus turns his attention to the post-nuptial entertainment. What, he wants to know, is there to entertain them in the three hours between supper-time and bed-time? He calls upon Philostrate (a chamberlain, 'our usual manager of mirth') to tell him 'what revels are in hand' and to compère proceedings. Promptly, Philostrate presents Theseus with a scroll on which are listed four choices ... The fourth is *A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe*.

Because Peter Quince has described this play as 'tedious brief' and 'very tragical mirth', Theseus, confronted by such oxymorons, wants to know how they are going to 'find the concord of this discord'. Of course, this question is a conscious echo of Theseus' remark in Act IV Scene 1 where he had struggled – not unnaturally – to understand how such estranged lovers as Demetrius and Helena had come to kiss and make up and how such enemies as Demetrius and Lysander had become friends. Here, he is wondering how they are likely to derive any satisfaction from seeing such an unsatisfactory entertainment ... At the same time, Shakespeare is asking a question on behalf of his

²² Not for the last time, Shakespeare is ironic at the expense of his own craft: he is well aware that his own pen has given shape to this story, has given to the 'airy nothing' of his idea 'a local habitation' (an Athenian wood) 'and a name' ('a midsummer night's dream').

audience, puzzled by the relationship of Act V to the action which has just concluded with the three weddings: what does Act V, specifically the Workmen's Play, have to add ..?²³

Because he has seen the play in a rehearsal, Philostrate tries to dissuade Theseus from this option: in his informed opinion, 'there is not one word apt, one player fitted'; as a result, it is 'tragical' not because Pyramus 'doth kill himself', but because the actor playing Pyramus (Bottom) makes such a bad job of the role that he turns himself into a laughing-stock, thereby reducing his audience to tears of 'loud laughter'. When Theseus asks who the actors are, Philostrate applies to Bottom's company of 'rude mechanicals' an epithet that describes them even more accurately:

Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,
Which never laboured in their minds till now ...

As far as Philostrate is concerned, Theseus will be able to enjoy the play only by laughing at it: unless he 'can find sport' in the amateurish acting of these 'hard-handed men', hardly a noble reason to engage them, he will not be entertained. Because he sees himself as a man of the people, Theseus is undeterred: far from being discouraged by his chamberlain's bad review of the play, he is moved by it and repeats his determination to 'hear it' on the grounds that such 'simpleness and duty' as motivate these ham-fisted actors ought to be rewarded. As we shall see, the Workmen's Play, the theatrical device of the play-within-a-play, is central to this scene ...

While they wait for the performance to begin, Theseus explains to Hippolyta why he has chosen to patronise such an inept production: "The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing." He emphasises to her that the good governor is distinguished by his empathy with the hard-handed man and by his all-embracing generosity of spirit. Theseus is a model governor, prepared to indulge and tolerate his subjects' shortcomings with a good grace: accordingly, he argues that there is much to be said for 'tongue-tied simplicity' of which Peter Quince's verse-prologue then provides a classic example ...

We do not come as minding to content you,
Our true intent is. All for your delight
We are not here. That you should here repent you
The actors are at hand ...

Comically, Quince's verse owes its incoherence not to his inability to craft iambic pentameters that scan, but to his inability to punctuate. As they strain to follow him, both Theseus ("This fellow doth not stand upon points") and Lysander ("he knows not the stop") notice that he pauses in ungrammatical places: in effect, he inserts full-stops where they alter the meanings of his sentences. Consequently, his prologue is 'like a tangled chain'.

Enter Bottom as Pyramus, Flute as Thisbe, Snout as Wall, Starveling as Moonshine, and Snug as Lion; a trumpeter before them Fortunately, Quince's introduction of his fellow players, one by one, is less garbled:

This man with lime and roughcast doth present
Wall – that vile wall which did these lovers sunder;
And through Wall's chink, poor souls, they are content
To whisper. At the which let no man wonder ...

Anon comes Pyramus – sweet youth and tall –
And finds his trusty Thisbe's mantle slain.
Whereat with blade – with bloody, blameful blade –
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast.
And Thisbe, tarrying in mulberry shade,
His dagger drew, and died.

²³ In this structural respect, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* anticipates *The Merchant of Venice* (1597): at the end of Act IV, Shakespeare brings the Shylock-plot to its conclusion and likewise leaves his audience wondering what to make of Act V.

As Quince sets out the narrative of the play, the five actors parade in front of Duke Theseus and his retinue. In Stephen Greenblatt's words, "the troupe of artisans ... is collectively an anthology of theatrical catastrophes." For instance, Bottom was a role almost certainly created for Will Kempe, the comic actor with Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men: since Kempe was neither 'sweet' nor 'tall', Quince's description of the Pyramus-actor permits a visual humour at his expense. In addition, the alliterative language that Quince uses (bl- x 5 and br- x 3) parodies the melodramatic language that contemporary dramatists used in order to sensationalise the action in their plays. Finally, Shakespeare's audience will realise that the narrative itself – in which Thisbe responds to Pyramus' suicide by killing herself with 'his dagger' – is the narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*, completed only a year earlier. Even before the performance begins, it is therefore safe to conclude that the Workmen's Play [= the 'interlude', the play-within-a-play] will be a 'lamentable comedy', not because the audience will 'lament' the deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe, but because it is actually a 'tragedy' – and especially 'lamentable' in the sense that it fails to conform to that genre.

Exeunt Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snug and Starveling

Before these actors re-enter to enact their parts, Shakespeare inaugurates a pattern: at intervals, Theseus and Hippolyta or Demetrius will pass a comment on the performance which will be ironic at their own expenses. This is unusual: by this stage of a Shakespearean comedy, the central characters tend to have learned from their experiences and thereby gained sufficient self-knowledge to insure themselves against any more dramatic ironies. Not here ... For a minor example, Demetrius, knowing nothing of Bottom's metamorphosis, will not be surprised to discover that, in this 'rude' play, the Lion has a speaking part: why shouldn't a lion speak 'when many asses do'? By 'asses', Demetrius is referring to the 'mechanical' actors, *not* to the less-enlightened members of the court (including himself) who know nothing of Bottom's recent life as an ass. For a major example, Snout *as Wall* has remained on stage and duly reiterates that "I – one Snout by name – present a wall":

This loam, this roughcast, and this stone doth show
That I am that same wall; the truth is so.

Because it takes more labour to establish this point than to build the wall, Duke Theseus – "Would you desire lime and hair to speak better?" – mocks Snout's best efforts for being too literal. He is critical of Quince (the writer) and Snout (the actor) for being unwilling to let him use his imagination. That's right: Theseus is complaining that Quince (the carpenter) and Snout (the tinker) have left nothing to his imagination, have not trusted him to imagine that a man is a wall ... Given his earlier speech, it is an immediate irony that he should be poking fun at a performance which makes no demands on his 'fancy'/on his imagination. Isn't such 'simplicity' what he advocates and admires? The irony is that Theseus, who has just railed against the fanciful thinking of lovers and madmen, poets and playwrights, is here jesting that the 'mechanicals' are being too 'rude', too prosaic! For his part, Demetrius – "It is the wittiest partition that ever I heard discourse, my lord" – encourages Theseus to broaden his vision and go on being scornful of such unimaginative stuff ...

Bottom's verse *as Pyramus* is another form of parody. According to J. H. Walter, its style parodies the worst of the contributions to *The Phoenix Nest*, an anthology of seventy-nine poems by various poets published in 1593. Writing as Peter Quince, William Shakespeare will enjoy demonstrating how well he can write badly. From the start of his speech, Bottom *as Pyramus* uses a total of eleven apostrophes ('O grim-looking night ... O sweet and lovely wall') in a ridiculous endeavour to suggest the grand intensity of Pyramus' passion. The passage concludes:

BOTTOM *as Pyramus*

And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,
That standest between her father's ground and mine,
Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
Show me thy chink to blink through with mine eyne.
Wall holds up his fingers
Thanks, courteous wall; Jove shield thee well, for this.
But what see I? No Thisbe do I see.
O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss;
Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me!

THESEUS The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again.
 BOTTOM No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisbe's cue.
 She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall.

At this juncture, Theseus observes that 'the wall' is 'sensible' [= a sentient entity who can see, hear and speak] and therefore suggests that it should stand up for itself (as it were) and answer back/'curse again'. Upon hearing this remark, but not its gently mocking tone, Bottom ("No, in truth, sir, he should not") steps out of the character that he is supposed to be creating and seeks to put Theseus right; he thereby engages in a dialogue with his audience that dissolves any remaining air of illusion. Stephen Greenblatt notes that, on the one hand, Shakespeare mocks "the amateurs who fail to grasp the most basic theatrical conventions by which they are to stay in their roles and pretend they cannot see or hear the audience," but adds that, on the other, he shows up "the sardonic rudeness of the aristocratic spectators." What, to be precise, Shakespeare aims to show up is the residual unawareness of the aristocratic lovers ...

It was in Act III Scene 1 that Peter Quince explained to Francis Flute that Pyramus' exit is Thisbe's cue to speak; it is at this point of Act V Scene 1 that Quince's explanation then – "he goes but to see a noise that he heard, and is to come again" – is echoed and amplified. No longer in rehearsal, but now in live performance, these exit-lines sound as follows:

BOTTOM *as Pyramus*
 I see a voice. Now will I to the chink
 To spy an [= if] I can hear my Thisbe's face.

Significantly, Quince's script confuses the senses of seeing and hearing: although Bottom *as Pyramus* does not utter these two sentences ('see a voice', hear a face) before he is 'translated' and whisked away by the fairies, he may be assumed to have committed them to his memory, thereby explaining his own failure to match verb and noun upon waking from his 'dream'. Here, Shakespeare starts to indicate how the Workmen's Play of Act V will relate to and impact on the Lovers' Confusion of Act III.

The Most Lamentable Comedy proceeds. After Pyramus and Thisbe have spoken through the crack in the wall, arranging a clandestine rendezvous at Ninus'/Ninny's Tomb, Snout *as Wall* collapses and announces his imminent exit in another redundant couplet: "Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so; And being done, thus Wall away doth go." It is this further unnecessary announcement that leads to the most instructive exchange between the Athenian aristocrats:

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 mend 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.

No passage in the play requires more careful exegesis. Clearly, Hippolyta is exasperated by the ponderous and unimaginative 'stuff' that she is watching. More tolerant, Theseus reminds her that even 'the best' actors in the business²⁴ are only pale imitations of real people [= 'but shadows']; what is more, the same – so he argues – can be said for 'the worst' actors (such as Bottom and Snout) who will come across as 'no worse' than their betters if they are viewed with a corresponding sufficiency of 'imagination'. Coming from Theseus, the man of 'cool reason', who mistrusts 'imagination', such an argument rings with a reflexive irony. So does Hippolyta's reply: left to Theseus' imagination, Snout *as Wall* would not have appeared any less 'rude' or less 'mechanical'. Theseus seems, however, to be calling not for an exercise of imagination, but for a show of sympathy. He will, he says kindly, be happy to take the stolid actors at their own mistaken estimations 'of themselves' – according to which they are 'excellent'.

²⁴ Not for the last time, Shakespeare issues a plea on behalf of actors: in both *As You Like It* (Jaques II.7) and *Macbeth* (Macbeth V.5), a role enacted on stage becomes a metaphor for a life lived; in *The Tempest*, Prospero (IV.1 and V.1) craves the indulgence of his audience for a part poorly played, a life inadequately lived.

Enter Snug as Lion and Starveling as Moonshine

Like Snout, Snug (the joiner) and Starveling (the tailor) presume that the members of the audience are entirely without imagination and will not therefore understand what roles the workmen are playing unless they explain themselves literally. When they enter, they too spell them out:

SNUG *as Lion*

Then know that as I Snug the joiner am
A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam ...

and

STARVELING *as Moonshine*

This lanthorn doth the hornèd moon present;
Myself the man i' th' moon do seem to be.

Stanley Wells concludes that "the performance ... shows literal-minded men trying to cope with a world of illusion and failing to do so." He should, of course, be extending his conclusion to embrace Theseus who, upon witnessing Starveling, remarks: "the man should be put into the lantern. How is it else the man i' th' moon?" By objecting that Starveling has not taken the preposition 'in' literally, Theseus – once more, ironically – confirms that he too is 'a literal-minded man trying to cope with a world of illusion and failing to do so'. When Lysander asks Starveling to 'proceed', Starveling, having no more lines *as Moonshine*, retorts in his own voice:

All that I have to say is, to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon,
I the man in the moon, this thorn-bush my thorn-bush, and this dog my dog.

Lest Lysander be in any doubt about his role, he re-states with prosaic simplicity what that role is. It might therefore be said that, in this limited world, there is very little danger that 'a bush' [= thorn-bush] will be 'supposed a bear'. Stephen Fender considers that Shakespeare invites us "to balance Theseus' dismissal of imagination as merely delusive against the opposite of imagination as a vision of a better world." The ending of the Workmen's Play suggests that Fender's analysis is incorrect: that a man will inhabit 'a better world' and a safer world if he stays within Starveling's limits and does not allow his 'strong imagination' to play 'tricks' on him ...

The plot of *The Most Lamentable Comedy* centres upon the moment when *Lion roars* and frightens Thisbe from her appointed meeting-place with Pyramus at Ninus' Tomb: *Flute as Thisbe runs off*. As she flees unharmed, Thisbe drops her cloak; after she has fled unharmed, *Lion tears Thisbe's mantle* [= her cloak]. This comic sequence of events creates the false and tragic impression that the Lion has gored and savaged Thisbe to death ...

It is therefore only a matter of time before Bottom *as Pyramus* enters, thanks the moon for its 'sunny beams' and, by the light of its 'gracious, golden, glittering beams', catches sight of Thisbe's discarded cloak, ominously 'stained with blood'. It is significant that Pyramus – "Eyes, do you see?" – leaps by moonlight to the false conclusion that Thisbe is dead and commits a melodramatic suicide:

Come tears, confound.
Out sword and wound
The pap of Pyramus;
Ay, that left pap,
Where heart doth hop.
Thus die I – thus, thus, thus.
He stabs himself
Now am I dead,
Now am I fled;
My soul is in the sky.
Tongue, lose thy light;
Moon, take thy flight;
Exit Starveling as Moonshine
Now, die, die, die, die. *He dies*

Here is that moment where the play-within-a-play relates directly to the action of the play itself; this is where Act V impacts heavily on Act III. Here is Shakespeare's **second** demonstration of the extent to which mortals are foolish for relying on the unreliable evidence of their senses: in fact, this episode – in which Pyramus believes his deceived eyes and, as a direct consequence, kills himself – is the second *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea that our senses can be trusted ... Demonstrably, they are liabilities.

If it takes its cues from Pyramus' lines, then a stage production of this death-scene can illustrate vividly how absurd it is. Given that Bottom is a flamboyant, but incompetent performer, opportunities for visual comedy abound: first, that hesitant locution "Ay, that left pap" suggests that he may first stab himself in the right breast and have then to stab himself again in the left; second, the repetition of 'thus' suggests three corresponding thuds of his sword; third, that imperative "Moon, take thy flight" raises the possibility that Starveling has stopped listening and needs telling again; and fourth, the five cries of 'die' enable the heroic ham-actor to stagger his death-throes – with the result that Demetrius, Lysander and Theseus keep starting to applaud only to be stopped by his second/third/fourth resurrection.²⁵ At one level, Theseus' quip – "With the help of a surgeon he might yet recover and prove an ass" – is a critical comment on this drawn-out death-agony ... At another level, it supplies the story with a moral: how ironic that Bottom as Pyramus – who, once, was literally 'an ass' – has now made a metaphorical ass of himself by taking his own life, precipitously and unnecessarily, because his eyes have deceived him.

Following Moonshine's exit, Hippolyta wonders how Thisbe, when she 'comes back', will be able to discover Pyramus' body. Still sanguine, Theseus – "She will find him by starlight" – excuses this unfortunate oversight and braces himself for the end of the play. When Thisbe re-enters, she spies Pyramus' body, but without at first realising that it is 'dead' ... At this point, it becomes apparent that the romantic language of the four lovers in the wood was actively anticipating the language of Thisbe's elegy for Pyramus. Because Lysander and Demetrius had received eye-drops from the flower of passion, both mistook Helena for an unearthly deity. Consequently, the style in which they eulogised her beauty –

LYSANDER (Act II Scene 2)

Not Hermia but Helena I love.
Who will not change a raven for a dove?

DEMETRIUS (Act III Scene 2)

Crystal is muddy! O, how ripe in show
Thy lips – those kissing cherries – tempting grow!

– was highly exaggerated and florid. Now, such figurative terms blend colourfully with the style in which Flute *as Thisbe* laments Pyramus' death, thereby inviting audience-members just to listen to themselves:

Asleep, my love?
What, dead, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise.
Speak, speak. Quite dumb?
Dead, dead? A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes.
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks
Are gone, are gone.
Lovers, make moan –
His eyes were green as leeks.

²⁵ One further touch is that Quince's script – "Tongue, lose thy light" – also struggles to find an unconfused language to describe the working of the senses.

Such language [= the rhetorical imperatives, the blunt rhymes, the agricultural images] implies an ironic criticism of the register in which lovers elevate their paramours: in this verse, lilies, cherries, cowslips and leeks are bunched together in order to show how absurd romantic hyperbole is and 'what fools these mortals be' for ever seeing one another in this over-stated way. The richest enjoyment results from our realisation that the mortal lovers are being invited to deride and jeer at their own earlier use of words.

Pyramus commits suicide because his eyes misread the signs that they saw at Ninus' tomb; here is a direct parallel with Romeo who committed suicide because he misread the signs that he saw at the Capulets' vault. When Thisbe discovers that 'her lover', overcome with grief, has killed himself, she, overcome with grief, also *stabs herself* and *dies*; here is an even more direct parallel with Juliet who, upon discovering Romeo's corpse, *stabs herself and falls*. Implicit in this ending is an even darker warning against the dangers which face lovers who look with 'sweet eyes'.

Like Bottom *as Pyramus*, Flute *as Thisbe* – "Adieu, adieu, adieu" – enjoys prolonging the agony, dragging and drawing out his dying moments. When the Workmen's Play finally ends, Bottom *as Pyramus*, ever alert to audience-reaction, rises from the dead and, still mixing up his verbs of sense-perception, offers Theseus a choice of finales: "Will it please you to see the epilogue, or to hear a Bergomask dance between two of our company?" It is not a difficult choice:

No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse. Never excuse;
for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blamed.

By this time, even Theseus [= "Oh no, not an epilogue, please!"] has no patience left for a Quincean 'epilogue' and opts instead for the Austrian/Italian folk-dance ('a Bergomask'). At the same time, he is to be heard expressing further sympathy for the amateur 'players': significantly, he selects words which extend the reach of his human sympathy from Bottom and Flute (the 'dead' players before him) to actors everywhere, thereby excusing them all [= pardoning them all on their deaths] for their inevitable inadequacies: eg. 'this palpable-gross play'. This quiet in-joke, Theseus' second plea of the scene on behalf of actors, looks forward to Puck's formal plea at the very end of the play ...

A dance

In Elizabethan iconography, 'a dance' represents the restoration of social/universal harmony: for this reason, Directors of modern productions often stage a merry dance in which the married couples (certainly, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena) take part. For some minutes, they join the 'hard-handed men' in a heavy-footed fandango ...²⁶ After *Bottom and his fellows* have danced themselves off stage, Theseus addresses the four lovers in eight lines of blank verse that remind them twice of their marital responsibilities:

The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.
Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time ...

Sweet friends, to bed.
A fortnight hold we this solemnity
In nightly revels and new jollity.

The irony in Theseus' speech ("tis almost fairy time") is there to remind us that, upon their reconciliation, Oberon and Titania had renewed their vows to enter Theseus' house and 'bless it to all fair prosperity'. Study Oberon's eight lines of blank verse in Act IV Scene 1 and it becomes clear from the shared language that these three marriages will be enjoying happy and fruitful consummations ("Lovers, to bed") only at his special dispensation.

Stephen Fender confirms that "Shakespeare limits the human characters in order to suggest the providential power of the supernatural." Accordingly, Shakespeare, at this 'midnight' hour,

²⁶ Of Shakespeare's festive comedies, only *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598) actually ends with a dance: "Strike up, pipers" (Benedick, V.4).

reintroduces the fairies, expressly to illustrate how much they *provide* for the mortals. To the very end, Puck's poetry –

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.
 And we fairies, that do run
 By the triple Hecate's team
 From the presence of the sun,
 Following darkness like a dream,
 Now are frolic: not a mouse
 Shall disturb this hallowed house

– contributes to the impression that the fairies are creatures who inhabit a nocturnal world which has a life of its own. In this trochaic verse, Puck describes the fairies ('we fairies') as being active throughout the midsummer night; they 'frolic' ubiquitously, ending up at Theseus' place in order to ensure that neither ghoul nor ghost – not even 'a mouse' – 'shall disturb' his wedding night.

Enter Oberon and Titania, with all their train

Oberon orders every elf and fairy from their trains to disperse 'throughout the house', but not before they have 'hallowed' it further with a 'song and dance'; now, it is a more formal dance (cf. Act IV Scene 1, Line 85) that symbolises the re-establishment of harmony. It is clear from the stage-direction – *Song and dance* – that Shakespeare intended to arrest the action at this juncture, but the lyrics of the song (which Oberon's elves and Titania's fairies are to 'sing' and thereby 'bless this place') are missing/have not come down to us; as a result, this song, if it is to be sung in modern productions, must be improvised. In this tale, Oberon is the Good Fairy. Accordingly, his final speech of rhyming couplets, also in trochaic metre, is not so much a poem as a heathen prayer:

Now until the break of day
 Through this house each fairy stray.
 To the best bride bed will we
 Which by us shall blessèd be;
 And the issue there create
 Ever shall be fortunate.
 So shall all the couples three
 Ever true in loving be,
 And the blots of nature's hand
 Shall not in their issue stand.

The function of this benediction is to secure the futures of 'the couples three'; it is to sanctify the three unions which – even as he speaks – are being consummated in the bed-chambers of the palace. By virtue of his blessing, they will live happily ever after ('ever true in loving be') without suspecting a thing; by the same token, their 'issue', the 'children' of their beds, will have the good fortune to be born healthy and whole. By Oberon's good grace, a pagan version of God's providence, all things in the mortal world will rest in 'sweet peace' and 'safety' ...

To end the play, Shakespeare clears the stage of every character but Puck who then speaks directly *to the audience*.²⁷ On behalf of Shakespeare's actors, the Puck-actor expresses a polite and self-deprecating concern that the play – not least, this ending – may not have been entirely to their liking. I'll tell you what, he says congenially:

If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended:

²⁷ The plays to which there is a similar epilogue are *As You Like It* (1599) and *The Tempest* (1612).

That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.

Of course, his metaphor ('we shadows') is chosen not only to acknowledge that fairies are shadowy figures, but also to go with Theseus' kindly definition of actors (Line 208). What an audience should do if it has been 'offended' by this satire of true love is to 'think' no more of it. Further disingenuous self-deprecation justifies this advice: since the play had 'a weak and idle theme', then dismiss it/don't take it too seriously. Say to yourselves that what 'you' saw in this theatre on a midsummer's evening was 'but a dream': it's from this defence that the title comes. Don't be cross ('reprehend'). Before you go, 'give me your hands' [= applaud the poor actors] and let us part as 'friends'. Of course, the sub-text of this apologetic epilogue is that an audience may well be resistant to this strong satire of romantic love. That's all right, says William/'Robin' ... You're entitled to your illusions, still free to live your lives under a foolish delusion [= in another kind of dream] if that's how you like it ...

Peter Cash was Head of English Studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire 1985-2009. He is an Emeritus Fellow of the English Association.

A Midsummer Night's Dream by Peter Cash is Number 7 in the Shakespeare Bookmark series, published by

The English Association
University of Leicester
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 229 7622
Fax: 0116 229 7623
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Ian Brinton

Primary Bookmarks
Children's Literature Group

Key Stage 3 Bookmarks
Gill Parker

Shakespeare Bookmarks
Kerri Corcoran Martin

Post-16, Dickens, Longer Poems and First World War Bookmarks
Ian Brinton