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EXCHANGING VISIONS: READING A *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

BY DAVID MARSHALL

I

“Spirits and fairies cannot be represented, they cannot even be painted,—they can only be believed.”¹ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems designed to engage the issue at stake in this assertion of Charles Lamb's. Lamb makes his claim after drawing the conclusion that “the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever.”² Although he is writing about the fitness of Shakespeare's tragedies for stage representation, one often has the sense that he is describing the problems presented by producing Shakespeare's “dream play.”³ As spectators to stage representations, writes Lamb, “we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood. We have to let go a dream. . . .”⁴ Five years after the publication of Lamb's essay, in 1816, William Hazlitt took Lamb's position; while watching a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hazlitt realized that the play could not be represented on the stage. His review for the *Examiner* begins: “We hope we have not been accessory to murder, in recommending a delightful poem to be converted into a dull pantomine. . . . We have found to our cost, once for all, that the regions of fancy and the boards of Covent Garden are not the same thing. All that was fine in the play, was lost in the representation.”⁵ Hazlitt's rehearsal of this review in the

pages of his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* shows that he was responding not to a particular performance but to what he saw as the character of the stage: "Poetry and the stage do not agree well together. . . . The *idea* can have no place upon the stage, which is a picture without perspective; everything there is in the foreground. That which was merely an airy shape, a dream, a passing thought, immediately becomes an unmanageable reality. . . ."6 As a play of rare visions, airy shapes, and dreams, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages the dilemma of how to marry poetry to the stage.

Of course, Lamb and Hazlitt could be accused of reading Shakespeare from the standpoint of English Romanticism—of trying to turn public plays into private poems. Both are also reacting to the conventions of the nineteenth-century stage: what Lamb calls "contemptible machinery" and "the elaborate and anxious provision of scenery."⁷ Clearly, these are not the conditions of dramatic illusion that the prologue to *Henry V* figures in its invocation of the audience's powers of imagination. Their responses, however, should not be disregarded. Lamb and Hazlitt have realized that in the theater a vision of a play is expounded and imposed upon them. Each finds to his cost that some impression of his fantasy has been stolen. I will argue that the experiences of these spectators—these points of view—begin to represent a reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; they reflect the play's presentation and dramatization of the conditions of theater. Hazlitt, in particular, asks us to see that the question of the *Dream's* fitness for the stage is posed by the play itself; he frames a double simile: "Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted; and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine*."⁸ Hazlitt's allusion to the mistaken enterprise of the play within the play suggests that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might contain a dangerous acknowledgment: a threat that the representation of the play itself might be undone. By *undone* I mean not only the senses of incomplete, ruined, negated, and expounded, but also the sense in which the scene that Shakespeare refused to represent before the audience of *The Winter's Tale* is said to be undone by its mere narration: Shakespeare withholds from our sight an encounter which, we are told, "lames report to follow it and undoes description to do it."⁹ Hazlitt asserts that the attempt to present Shakespeare's *Dream* on the stage would be as counter-productive and literal minded as the mechanicals' attempt to figure moonshine; and he implies that the play within the play, in reflecting and figuring the problems of

representing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, might undo Shakespeare's impossible enterprise.

Hazlitt's perspective is an extreme manifestation of what was to become a commonplace in nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism. ("It has often been remarked," wrote Maginn, "that it is impossible to play the enchanted scenes of Bottom to any effect.")¹⁰ But most critics have presumed that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is in fact fit for stage representation. Dowden, for example, admits that the mechanicals "serve as an indirect apology for [Shakespeare's] own necessarily imperfect attempt to represent fairy land" but claims (with Gervinus) that the play's acknowledgment of the limitations of theatrical illusion really differentiates Shakespeare from inept attempts "to leave nothing to be supplied by the imagination."¹¹ This has become the predominant point of view in the twentieth century: C. L. Barber attacks Hazlitt and declares, "Shakespeare, in *his* play, triumphantly accomplishes just this hard thing, 'to bring moonlight into a chamber.'"¹² David P. Young agrees: "Where the mechanicals fail at dramatic illusion . . . *A Midsummer Night's Dream* succeeds."¹³ Perhaps the conventions of the modern stage—a physical and imaginative space which has been transformed by film, stylization, Brecht, and the magic of technology—have returned us to the sensibilities suggested in the prologue to *Henry V*. Today, representing Shakespeare's dramatic illusions on the stage doesn't strike us as a problem.

However, it may be that, enchanted with the play, we too easily assume that any comparison it makes between itself and the mechanicals' play is self-congratulatory. Lamb and Hazlitt's perhaps perverse or anachronistic points of view—their visions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its problems—might teach us another way to look at Shakespeare's play. The point is not to take sides in the debate about whether the play can be represented but to recognize how seriously the play addresses and is addressed by the specter of moonshine. Let us return to the terms and the scene of Hazlitt's double simile: "Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted; and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine*." Readers and spectators have agreed that this moonshine can be seen as a figure for all that is shining, magical, and dream-like in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, even if they have disagreed about how it reflects upon Shakespeare's enterprise of picturing on the stage a night-world of visions and imaginary characters. The mechanicals have been seen as placing

both too much and too little faith in theatrical illusions (hence their fears about the audience's belief in lions and walls). Their comedy lies partly in their literalization of what should remain figured and figurative. But we need to see that this literalization becomes a figure for the dilemma of the play—a dilemma that Hazlitt figures in terms of figurative language. To embody fancy and to personate moonshine are like trying to paint a simile, to map out or spell out what cannot be pictured as such; and a figure cannot be figured in this sense without becoming literalized—or lost.

This predicament becomes more clear if we look at the language of Shakespeare's text at the famous moment when the mechanicals arrive at the proper prop to stand for moonshine. After Bottom suggests that real moonshine be allowed to play itself, Peter Quince replies: "Ay; or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine" (III, ii, 59-61). The verb *to disfigure* in this line is always glossed as a characteristic malapropism, a humorous mistake made by Quince as he means to say *to figure*; that is, *to represent*. But this verbal mistake, this moment of misspeaking, can be read as a "Freudian slip" on the part of the play's unconscious—or as a signal that the problem of the play may appear in a play of words. We must read Quince's line not just as an appropriate mistake but as something Shakespeare meant to say. What then, is the status of the *or* in the formulation "to disfigure, or to present"? Is Quince juxtaposing two alternate possibilities or is he using the terms synonymously? The possibility of representing the play resides in the answer to this question. For the threat of the mechanicals' literal-mindedness would be its reflection of the inevitable *disfiguring* inherent in presenting moonshine. Looking at Quince's terms from Hazlitt's perspective we see that *to present is to disfigure*. The question of the play is whether presenting and representing must mean misrepresenting; whether *figure* must be synonymous with *disfigure*; whether *figure* must mean or even might mean *literalize*, or literally, *de-figure*.

Hazlitt's and Lamb's views about the fitness of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for stage representation may or may not be persuasive, but they can teach us that one way to see the play is to recognize in this comic moment a figure for the possibility of the play's impossibility. This would allow us to realize the senses in which the play is about problems of representation and figuration: not only whether the play can be staged but also what it means to

present a vision or an image to someone else's mind, to ask another person to see with one's eyes, to become a spectator to someone else's vision. Such questions themselves raise questions about the conditions of theater: the power of one imagination over others; the power to enchant and transform vision; the possibility of autonomous minds or imaginations sharing dreams and fantasies; the difference between picturing a text in private reading and attending a public, collective spectacle. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* asks us to take seriously the dilemma of joining poetry and the stage. In adopting this perspective we will find ourselves considering yet another question: the possibility of what Shakespeare elsewhere called "the marriage of true minds."¹⁴

II

In the first part of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, the Count delivers a short lecture on comedies and marriage, as if he were a cynical Northrop Frye:

The comedies which we see so often are misleading; they tempt our imagination away from the realities of the world. In a comedy we see marriage as an ultimate goal, reached only after surmounting obstacles which fill several acts; and at the moment when this goal is achieved, the curtain falls and a momentary satisfaction warms our hearts. But it is quite different in life. The play goes on behind the scenes, and, when the curtain rises again, we would rather not see or hear any more of it.¹⁵

Goethe's novel is about points of view, perspectives, and spectacles. In it characters are reduced to interchangeable pairs of A, B, C, and D; lovers are substituted for one another by mysterious and altering affinities. I can imagine that *Elective Affinities* is in part a parodic translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and I introduce the Count's speech here to read it as an ironic commentary on Shakespeare's play.¹⁶ The Count's remarks make Charlotte "uneasy" and eventually "determined to stop this sort of talk once and for all"; but I hope they will remind us that plays that end in marriage are not necessarily comedies. In fact, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which raises the curtain on a parody of *Romeo and Juliet* after its marriages have been performed, seems to invite speculation about what will go on—and what has gone on—behind its scenes. Is it asking too much of an antique fable and a fairy toy to be skeptical about the "gentle concord" created by the sudden reconciliation and rearrangement of the lovers at the end of the play?

How are we to take Demetrius' recovery from the "sickness" of abandoning Helena and loving Hermia since it is just as much the product of enchantment as Lysander's abandonment of Hermia and love for Helena? Are we to be pleased by the success of Helena's subjection of herself to Demetrius or Titania's sudden and manipulated surrender to Oberon? What about Hippolyta's marriage to the soldier who vanquished her? These are questions that are not presented by the traditional view of the play as a "wedding present" and an epithalamium in which there is a "festive confidence that things will go right."¹⁷ They raise the possibility that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not "one of Shakespeare's happiest comedies"¹⁸ but rather a "most lamentable comedy" (I, ii, 11-12) and "very tragical mirth" (V, i, 57).

We don't need to imagine another act, however, to doubt the play's status as a happy comedy. Indeed, as the curtain rises on the first scene, despite some elegant poetry, we have no reason to believe that the conflicts unfolding before us will be resolved any more comically than those of, say, *The Winter's Tale* or even *King Lear*. Even before Hermia is threatened with death in order to force her to marry against her will, the stage is set with an exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta that could be played as tense rather than as festive. Hippolyta speaks only once in the first scene—and she doesn't speak again until the fourth act—yet critics have usually acted as if they knew what was going on in her mind. C. L. Barber describes the characters looking toward their wedding in this way: "Theseus looks forward to the hour with masculine impatience, Hippolyta with a woman's willingness to dream away the time."¹⁹ I don't know how Barber manages to assign genders to these feelings, but, more important, I fail to see any sign of either happiness or willingness in Hippolyta's response to Theseus' expression of impatience. Hippolyta speaks with dignity, reason, and diplomacy—as is appropriate for a queenly prisoner-of-war—but her words are restrained and noncommittal:

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.

(I, i, 7-11)

Theseus, in his opening speech, has figured the moon "Like to a stepdame or a dowager, / Long withering out a young man's reve-

nue" (5-6), thereby inaugurating the play's pervasive imagery of gain and loss and prefiguring Lysander's plan to "steal" Hermia by fleeing to his "widow aunt, a dowager / Of great revenue" (I, i, 156-157). Hippolyta's response pictures the moon as a "silver bow / New-bent": under this sign will an Amazon warrior marry the prince who admits to her, "I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (16-17). Theseus' "nuptial hour" (1) becomes Hippolyta's "solemnities" (a term that will echo throughout the play, conveying a sense of gravity as well as ceremony). But the most telling interpretation of Hippolyta's revision of these figures comes from Theseus himself. He replies by telling Philostrate to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments, / Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth, / Turn melancholy forth to funerals; / The pale companion is not for our pomp" (12-15). Theseus addresses Philostrate but clearly he is responding to Hippolyta, as if she were playing Hamlet to his Claudius. He has heard and seen a mournful melancholy in his bride-to-be, not a happy willingness, and he reminds her that they are going to a wedding and not a funeral. Then he thinks to acknowledge that he has wooed her with his sword and done her injuries—one critic calls this a "ravishment disguised in [an] oblique courtesy"²⁰—but he assures her: "I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (18-19). It has been argued that Theseus "prizes harmony,"²¹ but how will the key of this wedding be different from the key in which he won Hippolyta's "love" (his word, not hers) in combat?²² Pomp, revelling, and particularly triumph sound as much like a military celebration as a wedding; and we should note the possibility of a textual pun produced by the orthography which rendered "reveling" as "reueling"—which on the page "sounds" like "ruling."²³ Characteristically, Hippolyta does not respond to this half-apologetic assertion of will; nor does she break her silence when Theseus turns to her and says, "Come, my Hippolyta. What cheer, my love?" (122) after he has faced Hermia with the choices of marrying according to her father's will, "death, or . . . a vow of single life" (121). What cheer, indeed, would Hippolyta express in response to this scene of wooing with a sword? It is hard to imagine her in the first scene as "a tamed and contented bride,"²⁴ particularly since Theseus seems to have trouble picturing her in this way.

Hippolyta stands as more than an ornament for a masque; her silence is an important key to the conflicts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The problem of how to read her silence—and what it means

to imagine what is going on behind the scenes, as it were, in the privacy of her mind—is one of the problems the play can teach us about. As readers who must imagine Hippolyta represented on a stage, we must first hear her silence; we must recognize that she does not speak. Traditionally, however, critics seem to have identified with Theseus at the beginning of the play. They have adopted his point of view, and, in imposing his sentiments upon his bride, they have read happiness in her silence, thus reenacting the telling mistake of Peter Quince in scene ii when he speaks of playing before “the Duke and Duchess on *his* wedding day” (I, ii, 6-7, my emphasis). David P. Young, who dedicates a chapter about order to Theseus, agrees with other critics about the limits of Theseus’ vision in Act V, but sees the first scene with Theseus’ eyes: “It is appropriate that Theseus, as representative of daylight and right reason, should have subdued his bride-to-be to the rule of his masculine will. That is the natural order of things.”²⁵ This *may* have been the ruling ideology in the sixteenth century or in 1966—I don’t see that it has ever been the *natural* order of things—but it is not necessarily the ideology of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. We should be willing to consider Hippolyta’s fortunes as the curtain rises, in the same way that she perhaps weeps Hermia’s fortunes in the first scene; to do this, we must take her eyes.

Hippolyta is not silent for the reasons that Cordelia decides to “love, and be silent.”²⁶ Nor is she performing the “perfect ceremony of love’s rite” in which one must “learn to read what silent love has writ.”²⁷ Hippolyta is, I believe, tongue-tied, as if she were the serious reflection of Bottom at the moment when Titania comically ravishes him with the command to her fairies: “Tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently” (III, i, 186). Theseus (who has “heard” of Demetrius’ inconsistency but “being over-full of self-affairs” [I, i, 111-113] manages at least twice to forget about it) can therefore hear in Hippolyta’s silence what he likes. He describes himself meeting frightened subjects who, unable to speak,

dumbly have broke off,
 Not paying me a welcome. Trust me, sweet,
 Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome,
 And in the modesty of fearful duty
 I read as much as from the rattling tongue
 Of saucy and audacious eloquence.
 Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity
 In least speak most, to my capacity.

(V, i, 98-105)

These are noble sentiments; but if Hippolyta is tongue-tied (and she is silent after this speech as well), it does not necessarily follow that one should read love in her silence. Part of Theseus' judgment against Hermia's advocacy of her own will cites that she is "wanting [her] father's voice" (52); that is, she lacks her father's consent *and* she wants to speak in her father's voice, to speak with his authority. Theseus tells Hermia that her voice has no standing in his court; her appeal is overruled because her plea must fall on deaf ears. I suggest that both Hermia and Hippolyta are in effect tongue-tied in the same way: their fate is to have others dictate their sentiments while they are silent or silenced.

The dispute over Hermia is after all the real drama of the first act—to which the brief monologues of Theseus and Hippolyta stand as a prologue. This dispute is figured as an economic one: Egeus insists that his daughter is private property ("she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius" [97-98]) which Lysander is trying to "filch" (36). (We might imagine that Hermia is named after Hermes: the master thief, the god of commerce and the market place, and the god of dreams.)²⁸ However, the struggle over Hermia is also pictured as a conflict over control of her imagination and vision. Egeus accuses Lysander: "thou hast given her rhymes . . . / Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung / With feigning voice verses of feigning love, / And stol'n the impression of her fantasy . . ." (28-32). This is not the same accusation as when Hermia calls Helena a "thief of love" who has "stol'n my love's heart from him" (III, ii, 283-4). Egeus is complaining that Lysander with his voice and poems and fictions and trinkets of love has inscribed his own figure upon Hermia: in the paraphrase of one editor, "stealthily imprinted thine image upon her fancy."²⁹ This is a kind of theft because the act of imposing or imprinting upon her imagination, as Theseus figures it, belongs to Egeus. *Her* impression is seen as rightfully *his*, which is why Hermia's claim to think and speak for herself is also a crime against her father. Theseus pictures the situation for Hermia in this manner:

To you your father should be as a god,
 One that composed your beauties; yea, and one
 To whom you are but as a form in wax,
 By him imprinted, and within his power
 To leave the figure, or disfigure it.

(47-51)

Hermia, in Theseus' eyes, first seems her father's creation: a mixture of Eve and Galatea; but then in Theseus' revision of his figure (which makes more ominous his reference to his wedding with Hippolyta as "the sealing day betwixt my love and me" [84]), Hermia becomes a character stamped upon blank wax. It is her father's right to impress his own image upon this wax, to imprint a figure or disfigure it, to dictate what she represents and what she represents to herself: how she looks. "I would my father looked but with my eyes" (56), complains Hermia. Theseus insists: "Rather your eyes must with his judgment look" (57). Hermia is told to "choose love by another's eyes" (140), to see what others have figured for her fantasy—just as Hippolyta is asked (or assumed) to see her wedding from Theseus' point of view.

This struggle over vision and imagination also characterizes the dispute between Oberon and Titania. Oberon's response to Titania's denial of his question, "Am I not thy lord?" (II, i, 63) is to seek control over her sight, to steal the impression of her fantasy. His strategy and revenge is to "streak her eyes / And make her full of hateful fantasies" (II, i, 257-258). With his magic he dictates how she will look and love, enthralling her eyes to Bottom's deformed shape until the moment he decides to "undo / This hateful imperfection of her eyes" (IV, i, 61-62) and let her "See as thou wast wont to see" (71). The changeling boy is ostensibly the object of contention between Oberon and Titania, an occasion for both jealousy and disobedience. But it also represents an impression of Titania's fantasy that has been stolen from Oberon; when he says, "I'll make her render up her page to me" (II, i, 185), we can hear a play on words which resonates in the context of the images and figures we have been juxtaposing. Just as Egeus insists on imprinting his own figures upon Hermia, Oberon wants to be the author of Titania's page. Egeus says that Hermia is his to "render" (I, i, 96); Oberon is determined to make Titania render up the blank page of her imagination, surrender the rival image impressed on her fancy. It is within his power to replace the image of her love with the disfigured head of Bottom, to command her sight and fancy, to "leave the figure, or disfigure it." As a god, by the authority of his magic, Oberon enacts literally what Egeus and Theseus can perform only figuratively (or by coercion) when they tell Hermia to "fit your fancies to your father's will" (I, i, 118).³⁰

The cost of fitting one's fancy to someone else's will (or vision or representation) is the issue with which I began this account of A

Midsummer Night's Dream. This issue returns us to the scene of the playhouse; but in the terms of Lamb and Hazlitt, we are speaking of what was from the outset the price of admission to the theater. As we become spectators to a representation of the play, we must exchange our privately imagined readings for a publicly shared spectacle and allow ourselves to be silenced and impressed by someone else's vision and point of view. It is fitting, then, that the play should raise its curtain on the imposition of a point of view on tongue-tied Hippolyta, the stealing of Hermia's fantasy and the imprinting of a character on her imagination, and the transformation of Titania into a blank page to be written and figured upon by someone else's fancy. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents a political question: whether these women will be authors of their own characters or representations upon which the voices and visions of others will be dictated and imprinted. The dramatization of this situation, however, simultaneously presents us with a figure for the conditions of theater.

This double vision is focused by the parallel formulations which we have seen as figuring what is at stake in each of these situations: the mechanicals' scheme "to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine" and Theseus' view of Hermia as a "form in wax" which her father has "imprinted" with the "power / To leave the figure or disfigure it." We remarked that Quince's supposed malapropism raised the possibility that to present or figure moonshine (the figure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) might mean to disfigure it. We took seriously the way that Quince's formulation may mean its "or" to join synonyms rather than separate alternatives. Obviously, Theseus in his phrase doesn't *mean* to appose the acts of figuring and disfiguring as synonyms; but how stable is the "or" which stands between imprinting a figure and disfiguring? The parallel situations of Hermia, Hippolyta, and Titania should make us wonder how the figuring and imprinting pictured by Theseus would be *different* from disfiguring. From Egeus' capacity to claim Hermia as his own printed character—and his reading of that character's autonomy as the imprint of another man—to Oberon's more literal (if not more real) tyranny over Titania's vision and imagination, the play shows impressing a figure and point of view upon someone else's imagination as disfiguring. These terms, then, reflect and are reflected by the dilemma of staging the play, which is also the dilemma of watching the play represented, as well as the problem of reading and writing about the play. By making these

claims I do not mean to neutralize the political conflicts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (here dramatized in terms of the domination of women) by translating them into problems of representation. Rather, I hope to show that the realm of politics and the realm of poetry and theater here should be seen to figure each other. As spectators to these scenes we must acknowledge our roles as men and women *and* our roles as actors and spectators in a theater. This, too, is the price of admission.

III

Reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the lights I am proposing makes it difficult to imagine that even with its comic scenes the play would have made a very suitable wedding present. (This is assuming, of course, that the play or some version resembling the text of the First Quarto was indeed performed at a wedding—something we do not know.)³¹ It often seems as appropriate as the play that Philostrate describes to Theseus as “against your nuptial” (V, i, 75); and just as the prologue to that play excuses, “If we offend, it is with our good will” (V, i, 108), Puck’s epilogue acknowledges the possibility that “we shadows have offended” (V, i, 413).³² Lovers are not presented in a very sympathetic light, even if one allows them their follies. This is reflected in the question Bottom asks when, in the scene following the dispute over Hermia, he is assigned the part of Pyramus: “What is Pyramus? a lover or a tyrant?” (I, ii, 19). Bottom’s pairing of these stock roles is perhaps a logical, if comic, question; but it offers yet another formulation in which the status of an “or” is ambiguous. For in Theseus, Demetrius, and Oberon (and indirectly in Egeus, who takes Demetrius’ part) we see men who are lovers *and* tyrants. Again, we wonder if the play will show us a difference between these two choices. The tyranny of the two kings in response to women who would control their own vision might authorize one to read a textual pun or hear the echo of a psychological association between the phrases “If he come not, then the play is marr’d. It goes forward, doth it” (IV, ii, 5-6) and the phrases ten lines later “. . . there is two or three lords and ladies more married. If our sport had gone forward . . .” (IV, ii, 16-17). Whether one imagines an association between the two lines or not, the play suggests that getting *married* might mean getting *marr’d*, especially if we hear in *marr’d* its sense of “disfigured.”

I should acknowledge again that the point of view I have been expounding goes against what seems to be the predominant as-

sumption that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play which makes "luminous a traditional understanding of marriage."³³ I quote this phrase from an impressive and scholarly article that I will take to be representative of this assumption, Paul A. Olson's "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Meaning of Court Marriage." Professor Olson sets out to present "a cursory survey of Renaissance thought concerning the function of festival drama and the significance of wedlock"³⁴ and then reads *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in this context. He commands an array of sources to claim that marriage, for the Elizabethans, "maintained the patterned hierarchy of society" and "fulfilled its part in the concord of things when the male ruled his mate in the same way that reason was ordained to control both will and passions."³⁵ However, when the article imposes this ideology, and its twentieth century legacy, upon the play, I want to object on two related grounds. First, we should understand both the uses and the limits of entirely circumstantial evidence. Information about historical and intellectual context can help us to locate where the play takes place and what ideologies it must depend upon or resist as it stakes out a position. However, with such an understanding we may discover in the play a scene of struggle—either a reflection of, or an engagement in, struggle—and not necessarily a display of power: a representation of power relations which confirms or reinforces a particular world-view. This leads to my second point: in considering *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the recognition of traditional views or relations should not be substituted for a reading of the conflicts that are acted out in the play.

To claim, for example, that "the movement toward an orderly subordination of the female and her passions to the more reasonable male" is "epitomized" in the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta³⁶ is to turn one's eyes from the contrast, as the play begins, between Theseus' impatience for his wedding night and Hippolyta's reasoned patience. It is also to be as forgetful as Theseus is of Demetrius' seemingly unreasonable and (dare I say) wanton conduct.³⁷ Simply to assume that Shakespeare adopted conventional models of Theseus as "the reasonable man and the ideal ruler" and Hippolyta as the Amazon who stood for "a false usurpation of the duties of the male reason by the lower female passions"³⁸ is to insure that the conflicts of the first act—Hippolyta's silence and Hermia's desire to speak with her father's (that is, her own) voice—will fall on deaf ears. Olson quotes from Celeste Turner Wright's survey of "The Amazons in English Literature"

but ignores her too brief speculation on risks and possibilities involved in portraying an Amazon on the English stage while Elizabeth played the role of Virgin Queen. Furthermore, who is Theseus, that he should overrule Kent's lessons about blind respect for the authority of kings? There is more to take issue with: Oberon is assumed to be justified in seeking sovereignty over Titania, who becomes a representative of "the forces of the lower passions in man" and "princess of sensual passion."³⁹ Oberon's behavior is ignored as male critics indulge their fantasies about Titania's supposedly "erotic games with Bottom and the changeling."⁴⁰ However, my aim here is not so much to refute Olson's position as to suggest what it must ignore and, more important, to propose that the terms and context that Olson construes may indeed be present in the play, but not as a representation of the "Renaissance concept" of marriage (a concept too easily assumed to be stable, known, and even "natural").

Suppose that we opted not to see the play and its marriages through the eyes of Theseus. Critics have recognized that the famous fifth act monologue in which Theseus opposes reason and the imagination serves to mark the limits of his rationality. I think that the struggles between men and women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also place his embodiment of order, reason, and power in an ironic light. One way to picture this (in addition to the readings I have proposed) would be to imagine Theseus as a relative, as it were, of another Greek tyrant: Pentheus in the story of the Bacchae. (Scholars tell us that Shakespeare did not read Euripides, whose works were a standard part of school curricula in Greek but were not translated.⁴¹ Shakespeare would have known the story of the Bacchae, however, at the very least from Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.) Imagine a play in which a tyrant takes it on himself to defend male order and hierarchy against female rebellion and sexual frenzy, in part by seeking to imprison the women of his city. Suppose this ruler stands as a symbol of rationality, that his will to reason tries to explain away the irrational, that he denies the possibility of a collective hallucination. In this world the gods are not exempt from human passions; one god transforms and distorts the vision of a woman so that she takes a man's head for an animal's—or an animal's head for a man's. People wake from dreams and find everything seeming double. Is this the frenzy of Dionysus or a midsummer night's dream?⁴²

My purpose in proposing this double vision is to suggest that A

Midsummer Night's Dream might parody and transform some elements of the Bacchae myth. To consider that story as an almost hidden model for Shakespeare's play would be one way to allow that if one *were* to read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a conflict between "masculine" principles of rationality and order and "female" principles of sexuality and passion, it would not necessarily follow that one should privilege these terms according to the values of traditional Christian hierarchies. The story of the Bacchae provides a model in which these values are reversed. It reflects an image of the limits of Theseus' imagination and vision as he (like Oberon) tries to repress "female" passion with "male" reason. At the least, we are reminded of a dialectic in which the poles are less than stable and alternative visions of the world are set in struggle. Furthermore, we should note that in Ovid's text the story of Pyramus and Thisby is told by a weaver as a story within the story of the Bacchae; just as, of course, the play of Pyramus and Thisby is presented by a weaver (and company) as a play within the play of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

IV

My quarrel with those who would see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a traditional celebration of marriage is not simply that they refuse to read parts of the play closely; it is that they act as if it were clear what marriage means to the play. I am claiming that the play swerves away from festive comedy as it radically places in question a social institution that embodies relations of power and stages conflicts of imagination, voice, and vision. However, to say that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is "anti-marriage" also would be to stop short of understanding the different senses of marriage that the play is concerned with. On more than one level it meditates on the terms of marriage by considering the conditions of being sundered and being joined. From the outset we see lovers who want to be joined but who find themselves sundered: Demetrius has parted from Helena, Hermia and Lysander are threatened with separation and then divided; in addition, Oberon and Titania are divided because Titania will not part with the changeling boy. The situations which separate, divide, part, and mismatch these various pairs provide the comedy of errors of the middle acts. Then, after the supposedly "gentle concord" which occasions Theseus to command that the "couples shall eternally be knit" (IV, i, 184), we become spectators to the comic and tragic sundering of Pyramus and

Thisby: questionable entertainment for a questionable wedding feast.⁴³

However, even if we want to believe that these marriages end the play happily, we must admit that all that has been sundered has not been joined. In particular, there remains the problem of Helena. Helena is a problem, to begin with, because she often seems to embody the opposites of the qualities shared by the other women in the play: defiance, self-respect, independence, dignity. Could it be to emphasize by contrast the paths that Hippolyta, Titania, and Hermia have not taken that Helena is made to tell Demetrius: “I am your spaniel; . . . The more you beat me, I will fawn on you . . . spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me . . .” (II, i, 203-206)? One way to understand this love would be to suppose that it is not love at all, or at least not love for Demetrius, or desire for his love. The speech I have just quoted from is a response to Demetrius’ question: “do I not in the plainest truth / Tell you I do not nor cannot love you?” (II, i, 200-201). Before begging that she be treated “as you use your dog” (210), Helena answers: “And even for that do I love you the more” (202). Is Helena’s pursuit of Demetrius founded in an expectation that he will not love her? When Demetrius suddenly appears to love her after being transformed by Oberon’s magic, she refuses to take his declarations seriously, to accept his claim of love. Indeed, her strategy to win “thanks” by the “dear expense” (I, i, 249) of informing on Hermia and Lysander could hardly be designed to better her position in regard to Demetrius. Whereas their flight might have left Helena as a logical alternative for Demetrius to fall back upon—both Hermia and Lysander wish her luck with this as they say goodbye—Helena’s betrayal can serve only to prevent the union (and escape) of her two friends.

Suppose, however, that it is Hermia and not Demetrius that Helena hopes to catch. Recall the love poem contained in the expression of jealousy that Helena speaks to Hermia as her first lines in the play:

Your eyes are lodestars, and your tongue’s sweet air
More tuneable to lark than to shepherd’s ear
When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.
Sickness is catching. O, were favor so,
Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go;
My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye,
My tongue should catch your tongue’s sweet melody.
(I, i, 183-189)

Helena’s declaration, with increasingly ambiguous possessives,

moves away from a conceit about wanting to attract Demetrius. She would catch Hermia's favor, too; and, in another sense, she has caught this favor, like the "sickness" that Demetrius describes as his love for Hermia. From Helena's point of view, stopping Hermia and Lysander would not necessarily result in the marriage of Hermia and Demetrius. By law Hermia has three choices and rather than marry Demetrius or die she may choose "a vow of single life" (I, i, 121). Theseus describes this "maiden pilgrimage" (I, i, 75) as the life of a "barren sister" (72), insisting, "But earthlier happy is the rose distilled / Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn, / Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness" (76-78). Hermia vows, "So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord, / Ere I will yield my virgin patent up / Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke / My soul consents not to give sovereignty" (79-82). These choices and characterizations should be kept in mind because, for Helena, Hermia's "sister's vows" (III, ii, 199) are precisely what is at stake. They are what has been lost and what might be gained.

When Helena rejects Lysander's "vow" (III, ii, 124) of love, she declares in response to his oath: "These vows are Hermia's" (III, ii, 130). She means they are meant for Hermia, they belong to Hermia; but also, these are Hermia's vows, these are the vows that Hermia made, I recognize them. Lysander has just spoken of his "badge of faith" (127), figuring his tears as an identifying family crest. A few moments later, Hermia appears on the scene and Helena bitterly reproaches her for forgetting the "sister's vows" (199) they shared, comparing their former union to "coats in heraldry . . . crowned with one crest" (213-214). Weaving a complex fabric of images, Helena figures the past state of "childhood innocence" (202) which characterized their shared vows:

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

(203-211)

We can see this densely poetic emblem of female sexuality as a revision of Theseus' figuring of the maiden vow of single life: his "barren," "fruitless" state, his flower "withering on the virgin

thorn” are transformed into a persuasive picture of “single blessedness” in which two “grow” as one, flowering and fruitful. “So will I grow,” vows Hermia to Theseus; so did we grow, insists Helena with her vision of what is “maidenly” (217), with her picture of the “virgin patent” Hermia must exchange to “join with men” (216).⁴⁴

Hermia responds to Helena’s long and intense monologue: “I am amazed at your passionate words” (220). She is amazed, I take it, both at Helena’s paranoid assumption that there is a conspiracy to persecute her and at the passionate expression of her love; the latter passion forms and informs the bulk of Helena’s speech. Hermia has allowed that “Before the time I did Lysander see, / Seemed Athens as a paradise to me” (I, i, 204-205); but as she and Lysander prepare to “turn away [their] eyes” from Athens (218) and enter exile, she barely looks back at the “playfellow” (220) with whom she acted Adam and Eve in a garden of “childhood innocence . . . like two artificial gods.” Helena, in contrast, surprises Hermia by describing this paradise with the pain of loss and the joy of recollection. What she describes is a kind of marriage, and we can hear her words echo as a version and inversion of the Church of England’s wedding ceremony. Dwelling on the word “one,” Helena declares herself to have been joined with Hermia as “one,” “incorporate.” (Her “We, Hermia . . .” sounds almost like a “royal we” rather than a first-person plural and direct address—as if the one name named them both.) She reproaches: “will you rent our ancient love asunder, / To join with men in scorning your poor friend?” (III, ii, 215-216). The wedding ceremony from the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* states “that it should never be lawful to put asunder those whome [God] by matrimonie haddeste made one”; or, to quote its better known declaration: “Those whome God hath joynd together: let no man put asunder.”⁴⁵ Helena’s appeal reworks these terms; she “chides” (218) Hermia for having sundered their union by joining with men—just as formerly they “chid the hasty-footed time / For parting us” (200-201).

The sense of Helena’s characterization of their vows as the vows of marriage is underlined by a speech of Lysander’s which strongly prefigures Helena’s language and imagery. When Hermia and Lysander meet at the prearranged place in the woods where Hermia and Helena “Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie, / Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet” (I, i, 215-216), Lysander declares: “One turf shall serve as pillow for us both, / One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” (II, ii, 41-42). Already these

lines, spoken on the “beds” that Helena and Hermia used to lie on, anticipate the imagery that Helena will use when she describes the same scene. Lysander continues:

O, take the sense, sweet of my innocence.
Love takes the meaning in love’s conference.
I mean that my heart unto yours is knit,
So that but one heart can make of it;
Two bosoms interchained with an oath—
So then two bosoms and a single troth.

(II, ii, 45-50)

We can read Lysander’s oath as a double paraphrase: it takes the language of the wedding ceremony (which also speaks of God “knitting” the couple together and calls for each of the betrothed to “plight” to the other his or her “troth”) and practically constitutes an official vow of marriage, and it doubles the figures Helena will speak—from the “cushion” to the single, incorporate body that two people seem to share. Helena’s recital of the scene of her vows with Hermia is thereby turned into an echo of Lysander’s secret ceremony, although the spectator learns retrospectively that Lysander is echoing the sister’s vows. These juxtapositions of speeches and texts further identify the sundering Helena laments with the breaking of the vows of marriage: vows which (imagined or not) she appears to take much more seriously than those which Demetrius has broken.

Helena’s monologue is one indication that sundering and joining appear as more than comic devices in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Her speech acts like a meditation on joining: moving from an association of words which are prefixed by *con* (“confederacy . . . conjoined . . . conspired . . . contrived . . .”) to the stunning series of figures which culminate in the “double cherry, seeming parted, / But yet an union in partition” (III, ii, 209-210). We can further measure the seriousness of these images, as well as what they say about the conditions in which we find the play’s characters, if we recognize in Helena’s portrayal of an “ancient love” (III, ii, 215) and subsequent state of loss a picture of the emblem and story of love which Plato has Aristophanes present in *The Symposium*. Aristophanes’ myth (which was extensively summarized in Ficino’s popular commentary on *The Symposium*)⁴⁶ proposes that we live in a fallen state, each of us a half of an original whole person from which we have been severed. Love, then, both heterosexual and homosexual, “restores us to our ancient state by attempting to weld

two beings into one . . . this is what everybody wants, and everybody would regard it as the precise expression of this desire . . . that he should melt into his beloved, and that henceforth they should be one instead of two.”⁴⁷ Helena’s vision of her lost union with Hermia, “As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds / Had been incorporate” (III, ii, 207-208), evokes both this mythical, original condition and the restoration that love means in its sense of mending what has been sundered. Here Christian, classical, and mythic imagery seem to come together to figure Helena’s perception that what had been joined together in her ancient love has been put asunder. These terms imply that Helena will be left apart, parted, denied the marriage in which she felt united, unless we are willing to see her enchanted reunion with Demetrius as a fitting compensation. In that case we could read Helena’s last expression of sentiment in the play as the completion envisioned in the myth from *The Symposium*: “I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own and not mine own” (IV, i, 190-191). Helena has just agreed with Hermia that “everything seems double” (189) and she perhaps regards newly affectionate Demetrius with a look of dazed recognition, as if he were both familiar and strange, both a part of herself and not herself. (This might authorize the possibility proposed in the *Variorum* that “jewel” should read “gemell”—that is, twin.)⁴⁸ However, in light of the context of this marriage—both the events leading up to it and the utter silence of Helena and Hermia throughout the last act—it is hard to imagine that such a union would adequately repair what has been sundered or restore what has been lost.

v

It makes sense to recall at this point that all of the mechanicals are concerned with some form or manner of joining. Carpenter, joiner, weaver, bellows mender, tinker, tailor; their occupations enact the preoccupations of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Two construct or put together, two mend and repair, one weaves and one sews. All join together what is apart or mend what has been rent, broken, or sundered. It is appropriate, then, that after Peter Quince assigns the roles of his play, he instructs the mechanicals: “But masters, here are your parts; and I am to entreat you, request you, and desire you to con them by tomorrow night” (I, ii, 88-90). The newly appointed players are told to con their parts, which we know means to learn their roles by heart; but in juxtaposition with “parts” we

might also read *con* as the prefix that Helena mediates on in her monologue about sundering and joining—the letters that add the sense of “something joined together” to a word. For a moment vocation and avocation appear to coincide as these men who join and mend together are called upon to “con” their parts.

To be an actor, however, is to play a part, to create it, to become it on stage. To be an actor is to double and divide oneself, to discover oneself in two parts: both oneself and not oneself, both the part and not the part. The mechanicals feel compelled to acknowledge this on their stage: “tell them that I Pyramus am not Pyramus” (III, i, 19), says Bottom the weaver; and so Snout the tinker declares himself Snout and a wall, and the lion insists that he is the lion and Snug the joiner, as if Brecht and not Peter Quince had produced this play. This is the world of the theater but its conditions also characterize the world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. There Hermia asks, “Am I not Hermia? Are you not Lysander?” (III, ii, 273) upon finding herself divided from her partner and replaced by someone else who had been assigned to her role. We have remarked that in the mirror image of this moment Helena calls Demetrius (her twin or not) “mine own and not mine own.” It is with these double visions in mind that I want to imagine that scene (in which the lovers awaken from their dream-filled slumber) as an acknowledgment of the perpetual coming together of the world of the play and the world of the theater. Picture Demetrius saying, “These things seen small and undistinguishable / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds”; Hermia, too, beholds this vision—“Methinks I see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double”—as does Helena: “So methinks; / And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own, and not mine own” (IV, i, 186-191). What, however, are “these things”? The characters and events that they have woken up to, perhaps; or those that they have “dreamed.” But imagine the actors speaking these lines in the direction of the audience, as if they were actors who had woken to find themselves on the playhouse stage. The effect would be similar to the moment of unconscious self-consciousness when, in another context, the audience watches Helena ask, “Then how can it be said I am alone / When all the world is here to look at me?” (II, i, 225-226); or like the epilogue which Puck speaks to remind the audience that they have dreamed and slumbered in a theater. (In a sense, this exchange stands as the lovers’ epilogue.) Hermia’s double vision of these things, her parted eye, comes from her parted I:

the doubling and dividing of her “I” into two parts—Hermia and not Hermia, the part and the actor before us. This is the *dédoublement* that Diderot recognized as the actor’s mode of being. Diderot also recognized that actors must see these things with parted eye because they must face the audience across an imaginary partition, an invisible wall, whether they pretend to speak across it or not. As actors they are kept apart, separated by the parts they play and the partitions they deliver across a distance. As spectators we must face the fact that they—and consequently we—are sundered.

Against this background, this theatrical representation of a world where people appear sundered from themselves and each other, we see the men who join things together try to con the parts of actors. Their play, “conned with cruel pain” (V, i, 80), is of course about sundering: the story of two lovers who are parted first by their families and last by death—but most palpably by a wall. This wall is referred to in the prologue as the “vile Wall which did these lovers sunder” (V, i, 80); and in language that also echoes and parodies key words from the lovers’ speeches, Thisby apostrophizes:

O Wall, full often hast thou heard my moans
For parting my fair Pyramus and me.
My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones,
Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.
(V, i, 186-189)

It has often been remarked that the play within the play reflects the comedy of errors that the lovers enacted in the woods, or the tragedy they might have produced; and that the newly married couples do not appear to notice this, although we might read their mixture of joking, interruption, silence, and impatience as an indication if not an acknowledgment of this recognition. However, we need to recognize as well the serious echoes that these terms and images of parting should recall by the fifth act: in particular, the ridiculous image of sundering that is presented and personated by one of the mechanicals. Separating the lovers but also providing a medium of communication, binding them in a union in partition, this wall stands both as a comic, literal-minded device *and* as a literalization of one of the play’s key figures. The wall acts as a visual metaphor, a “translation of a metaphor in its literal sense” (to borrow Schlegel’s description of Bottom’s transmutation).⁴⁹ The tragedy of Pyramus and Thisby that is told by Ovid’s weaver is metamorphosed into a farce for the couples who, for better or for worse, have been “knit.” However, at the center of this play within

a play is a picture of what has been sundered: a partition that should also remind us of our place. Here is what has faced us throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, what will face us still when we wake from the play and find ourselves in the theater.

These reflections should lead us to wonder about what we are laughing at when we find the mechanicals ridiculous. (This is where the play might be laughing at us.) What, after all, is more ridiculous: to personate the wall that stands between us, thereby insisting that we see it, or to act as if the wall is not there? We are told that the mistake of the mechanicals is to leave nothing to the spectators' imaginations, but *can* we be trusted to see the invisible walls that confront us? Are we so much more observant than the spectators to the play within the play? Throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* they figure beholders who can hardly see what is before them: each other or themselves. What is more ridiculous: to have someone "signify wall" or to "let him hold his fingers thus" (III, i, 60)—as if either partitions or the people standing for them allowed us openings to see through; as if, like Lysander, we could wake from a death-like slumber and exclaim: "Transparent Helena, Nature shows art, / That through thy bosom makes me see thy heart" (II, ii, 104-105)? He is, of course, enchanted: dreaming. The theater presents itself as an imaginary "wooden O" (*Henry V*, I, i, 13) through or in which we may see its spectacles. But the theater must end by teaching us how to see—not only how to see through—the invisible wall that creates its architecture. This is a wall that we have to imagine to see, yet it won't disappear if we won't see it. Theater shows us both partitions and how we personate partitions. It allows us to hear "partitions discourse," to repeat the play on words Demetrius makes as he watches a man simultaneously present a text and a wall (V, i, 165-166). This reminds us that texts, too, are walls that keep us asunder, although we might wish to deliver them, deliver ourselves from them, and thus present ourselves.

The theater sunders us and shows us how we are sundered, turning us into spectators of its world and our own. However, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends with the promise of mending, as if its actors really would join, construct, repair, and weave together rather than just teaching us the parts they have conned. Puck's epilogue in its sixteen short lines twice offers to "mend" and twice promises "amends." We should consider the interplay of these words, how they rhyme with each other and with the ends of the play:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended—
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding than a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.

(V, i, 412-419)

How could the theater mend us, join us together as it shows us that we are parts and apart? Could it form a union in partition, as if what kept us separate hinged on what assembled us? In one sense it is the place of theater to transfix its spectators in one spot, to make them stand together—both literally and through its figures by joining their minds in a common vision and point of view. This collective stance is what is strange and admirable about what passes for a dream one midsummer's night. Theseus denies the “fantasies” (V, i, 5) the lovers wake up with, but Hippolyta remarks on the strange “compact” of imagination the lovers seem to share:

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

(V, i, 23-26)

Hippolyta's description of a concord of minds that seem to stand together is also the dream of theater: that we could be joined together in a collective hallucination, that figures could be carried across and visions shared. The dream of theater is that particular stories, images, and minds could “grow” “so together” that they would seem like Hermia and Helena, who “grew together . . . seeming parted, / But yet an union in partition” (III, ii, 208-210).

After the lovers awaken into a double world that still has the air of dreaming about it, Demetrius proposes, “let us recount our dreams” (IV, i, 198). According to Hippolyta, they recount them and add them together. However, Demetrius' proposal is also Bottom's cue to awaken from his dream and declare his famous lines: “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of any man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream” (IV, i, 203-205). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* leaves open the question of whether we can recount or expound our

dreams; perhaps it was the threat that Bottom and not Demetrius was right that caused Freud to practically ignore this play in his writing.⁵⁰ But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both reminds us and asks us to forget about the epistemological problem that dreams raise and stand for. We might be able to tell our dreams (or translate them into ballets or plays; this may mean to act them out), but we cannot know the dreams of other people. The magic of the play is that separate minds appear to be transfigured together; dreams (or what seem like dreams) appear to be shared. This is the dream that will mend the spectators of the play if they think that they have slumbered and witnessed the same visions and dream.

Yet Puck ends by reminding us that this is also a dream that calls for amends: "We will make amends ere long; . . . Give me your hands, if we be friends. / And Robin shall restore amends" (V, i, 423-427). Why must he restore amends? The play, in part, has recounted our losses, but it has also robbed us. Recall that when Theseus prefigures the opening of Puck's epilogue by calling actors "shadows," he says that "the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them," to which Hippolyta rejoins, "It must be your imagination then, and not theirs" (V, i, 209-211). We have seen the willfulness of Theseus' imagination, the power of his projections. Hippolyta's revision of her husband's claim recalls that the interplay of imaginations in the play is often portrayed as a struggle. Spectators are expected to work their imaginations upon a play (this is what the prologue to *Henry V* requests of us), but at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we are faced with the possibility that we have been worked upon, that we are owed amends because *our* imaginations have been amended: changed, altered, revised. Have we found to our cost that a vision and a dream have been reduced to an unmanageable reality? Or have we found to our cost that a vision has been imposed upon us, that impressions of our fantasies have been stolen? What does it mean that we have slumbered? When Puck causes Helena to slumber, she speaks of "sleep" as that which will "steal me awhile from my own company" (III, ii, 436). What does it mean that the dream we are told we have witnessed is said to have an "idle theme" (V, i, 416)? It is with the flower called "love-in-idleness" (II, i, 168) that Oberon makes Titania render up her page to him by streaking her eyes and filling her with fantasies. Have we lost ourselves or the figures we imagined for ourselves? What are we to think of this dream that for a while has reduced us to silence and filled our minds with airy shapes and fantasies? As

spectators—and as readers—we must wonder what happens when we see with someone else’s eyes, allow ourselves to become the blank page upon which an author imprints characters, a play representations. The marriage of true minds that is the dream of theater presents the double prospect that it might mar us as it mends us, steal as it restores. What does theater’s figuring or disfiguring add up to? Can theater’s “transfiguring” mediate between or synthesize figuring and disfiguring? What do we exchange for our visions?

VI

We have seen that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* dramatizes an economy of exchange, as if, like the *Sonnets*, its figures marked various registers with the expenses of loss and possession. The terms and imagery of theft are set down in the first scene, which pictures the “traffic in women” (to use Emma Goldman’s phrase)⁵¹ upon which men for so long have founded their societies; and throughout the play, characters are figured as merchandise or stolen goods. (Hermia, Lysander, Helena, Demetrius, Egeus, Oberon, and Titania each “steal” or are stolen from or are stolen in the course of the play.) The figure for these character-commodities is the child who rivals Hermia as the most contested “property” in the play: the changeling boy that Titania is accused of having “stolen” (I, ii, 22). (According to folk tales, fairies stole lovely children and left deformed “changelings” in exchange; this boy is the changeling the fairies took, not left behind.) When Titania insists to Oberon that “the fairyland buys not the child of me” (II, i, 122), she is perpetuating rather than rejecting terms that inscribe people in a system of economic relations. Her monologue pictures the boy as “merchandise” which his mother’s womb, like a trader’s ship, was “rich with” (II, i, 127-134). The changeling comes to represent all of the characters in the play who are traded or fought over as property. It also shows us that the other characters are changelings in the sense that the play’s plot revolves around their exchanges: their substitutions and their interchangeability. Demetrius, Lysander, Hermia, and Helena all exchange one another (are exchanged for one another) in almost every possible switch and combination. Bottom, too, is “changed” and “translated” (III, i, 103, 107). In becoming a disfigured substitute for Titania’s changeling boy, he becomes both a changeling for himself (a monster left in his own place) and a changeling for the changeling (which Titania has been tricked into exchanging). The changeling boy is mysteriously ab-

sent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but in a sense he is everywhere; the play casts its characters as changelings.

We also could say that the play is performed by changelings because that is what actors are. For Shakespeare's spectators, the term "changeling" would have been a synonym for someone Protean who would not stay the same from one moment to the next. This is precisely the "ontological subversiveness" (as Jonas Barish has called it)⁵² that actors were condemned for in Elizabethan England. Actors take others' parts and places; they exchange themselves for others, substitute others for themselves. This is further compounded in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because characters often seem to be changed into actors: as parts and partners are exchanged and mixed up, individual characters seem reduced to parts or roles. We watch changelings portray changelings.

In another sense, changelings are everywhere in the play because they fill its pages and dialogue: they are its figures of speech. The figures that Titania employs to tell the changeling's story enact and figure exchange in various senses. Describing herself on the shore with the woman who is pregnant with the boy, she tropes the ships to see their "sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind" (II, i, 128-129). Then the metaphor doubles or reverses—it is exchanged—as Titania tropes the woman to see her "rich" with her own human cargo, just as the woman tropes herself to "imitate" the ships and "sail upon the land / To fetch me trifles, and return again, / As from a voyage, rich with merchandise" (II, i, 131-134). The woman and the ships stand for each other, exchanging properties in a double sense. If we recognize the act of carrying and trading cargo performed by these literal and figurative ships to be *transport* (as in *metaphérein*) then we see that these double metaphors both dramatize and figure *metaphor* as they transfer, transfigure, exchange, and carry across. Born of this mirror of metaphors, destined to be switched, substituted, and exchanged, the changeling is also a trope for tropes. It makes sense, then, that in *The Arte of English Poesie*, published in 1589, Puttenham invents a rhetorical category called "Figures of Exchange" and names one of those figures "the Changeling." Puttenham refers to exactly the sort of constructions the mechanicals make—"a play with . . . wordes, using a wrong construction for a right, and an absurd for a sensible, by manner of exchange"⁵³—but we can see that in a sense all tropes act as changelings. The changeling figures figures.

That Puttenham uses "changeling" to mean something ill-formed

which appears in the place of something fair reminds us that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the changeling is not the disfigured child. Appropriately, the play ends with a blessing by Oberon, who has authored many of the play's exchanges and deformations in pursuit of his page, to insure for the newly married couples that

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

(V, i, 398-403)

Prefacing Puck's appeal for our blessing and his promise of amends, Oberon's reprise of the figure of the changeling might remind us of the questions facing us at the end of the play. We might wonder again if we who have rendered up the pages of our imaginations in exchange for the play leave the theater free (or freed) from blots or disfigurement. This is what worried us as we let the play imprint its figures on us, risking change and amending. Have we been stolen and left as changelings? I asked the question: What do we exchange for our visions? I meant to suggest that we both give up visions in this exchange *and* get visions in return. In this sense the exchange of visions might be seen as an alternative to the theft of visions in the play. What is at stake appears to be our visions of ourselves: we would not be forced to look with someone else's eyes, to submit to the tyranny of someone else's view or imagination of us.

Yet how do we see ourselves? In the theater, we see ourselves as changelings: capable of seeing ourselves on the stage, substituted for by actors whose parts we take in acts of sympathy or identification. We allow actors to stand as changelings for us, whether or not we recognize them as they present or disfigure us, as they act our parts. In this sense we see with "parted eye" and "everything seems double"; we both take their eyes and see for ourselves. The theater is like the "dark night" that, in Hermia's words, "from the eye his function takes"; it may "impair the seeing sense," but it offers other senses "double recompense" (III, ii, 177-180). It keeps us in the dark, but it offers to show us ourselves—doubled. The double recompense in this play of double visions would be to learn how to see and to learn how to see others. It is this double vision that Theseus, Egeus, and Oberon in their single-mindedness cannot know. Recall that Hermia—whose eyes are "blessed and attractive" (II, i, 91) "lodestars" (I, i, 183)—is asked by Helena: "O, teach

me how you look” (I, i, 192). To teach one how you look might be the alternative to the tyranny that forces someone to see with another’s eyes or to assume a character that someone else figures and impresses. To learn how you look would be to learn what you look like and to learn how you see: both to take your eyes and to let you see yourself. This is the recompense if you let someone take your eyes and see the figure of yourself. If we risk seeing our visions disfigured—if we figure our visions in order to see them, despite the cost—this is only because we cannot be represented; we can only be believed. To learn this exchange of visions would be to release others from the roles we cast them in, to permit them to stop being changelings. Only when these visions are double—each of us learning how to look—will we be able to recognize disfiguring and provide it in exchange another sense. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* figures these relations as loss, and in a sense it inscribes us in it. The play, however, might teach us how to look. If we will let one of Bottom’s lines echo apart from its comic context, we can hear the admonishment, warning, and offer of vision that the play addresses to its spectators: “let the audience look to their eyes” (I, ii, 22).

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Charles Lamb, “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation,” in *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 140. I would like to acknowledge having benefited from many conversations with Margaret Ferguson throughout the various stages of this essay. I am also grateful to Thomas Greene, who generously read and commented on the manuscript.

² Lamb, p. 127.

³ The phrase is from Edward Dowden’s *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*, reprinted in part in the Signet edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Wolfgang Clemens (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 137.

⁴ Lamb, p. 126.

⁵ William Hazlitt, *Hazlitt on Theater*, ed. William Archer and Robert Lowe (New York: Hill and Wang, n.d.), p. 73.

⁶ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), p. 102. This essay is also reprinted in the Signet edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

⁷ Lamb, pp. 136 and 140.

⁸ Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*, p. 102.

⁹ All citations from Shakespeare’s works refer to *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969). *The Winter’s Tale*, V, ii, 55-56.

¹⁰ William Maginn, *Shakespere Papers: Pictures Grave and Gay* (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), p. 116. Maginn writes that Theseus’ comments about the play within the play serve “as an excuse for the want of effect upon the stage of some of the finer

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touches of such dramatists as [Shakespeare]. . . . His own magnificent creation of fairyland in the Athenian wood must have been in his mind, and he asks an indulgent play of fancy . . ." (p. 120).

¹¹ Dowden, pp. 139-140.

¹² C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 149.

¹³ David P. Young, *Something of Great Constancy: The Art of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 105.

¹⁴ The phrase is from Sonnet 116.

¹⁵ Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, trans. Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1963), pp. 82-83.

¹⁶ Compare Henry Alonzo Myer's typical discussion of the interchangeability of the lovers of Shakespeare's play with the discussion of elective affinities in chapter four of Goethe's novel. Myer describes the various pairings of the Athenian lovers as "A becomes B, and then becomes A again . . . A becomes B, and then becomes C, and then becomes D, and finally A again." ("*Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Tragedy and Comedy" in the Signet *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, p. 165.) Eduard turns the formula of elective affinities into a prefiguring "allegory": "You, Charlotte, represent the A, and I am your B; for, to be honest, I completely depend on you and follow you as B follows A. C obviously stands for the Captain . . . we should try to find a D for you . . ." (p. 43).

¹⁷ Barber, p. 131. Cf. W. Moelwyn Merchant: "What a wedding present! There is the fitness of the fable, the play's whole tone and atmosphere, the appropriate ending.' Few have found it necessary to quarrel with Granville-Barker's estimate of the play's suitability as an epithalamium." ("*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Visual Re-creation" in *Early Shakespeare: Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies* 3 [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961], p. 165.)

¹⁸ Madeleine Doran, Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Penguin *Complete Works*, p. 146. Cf. the refutation of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* by Thomas McFarland: "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the happiest of Shakespeare's plays, and very probably the happiest work of literature ever conceived . . . *A Midsummer Night's Dream* moves in dreamlike sequences as if on the brink of an eternal bliss." (*Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy* [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972], p. 78.)

¹⁹ Barber, p. 125. Frank Kermode refers to "a rational, patient pleasure like that of Theseus and Hippolyta," assuming that they share the same sentiments. ("The Mature Comedies" in *Early Shakespeare*, p. 215.) Harold F. Brooks, in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, writes that Theseus "is an ardent lover, and in her reply Hippolyta reciprocates his love." (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks, [London: Methuen, 1979], p. lxxxix.)

²⁰ Merchant, p. 165.

²¹ Young, p. 63.

²² In discussing these lines, both G. K. Hunter and E. K. Chambers rather easily accept Theseus' alleged conversion: Hunter describes an "image of violence transposed into revelry" (*William Shakespeare: The Late Comedies* [London: Longmans, Green, 1962], p. 18) and Chambers refers to "deeds of violence" replaced by a "still loving and tender husband" (*Shakespeare: A Survey* [London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1925], p. 85).

²³ Cf. *A Midsummer Night's Dreame* (I, i, 23) in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, Vol. X, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1895).

²⁴ Celeste Turner Wright, "The Amazons in English Literature," *Studies in Philology*, 36 (1940), 437.

²⁵ Young, p. 99. He continues, "It is equally appropriate that Oberon, as king of darkness and fantasy, should have lost control of his wife, and that the corresponding

natural disorder described by Titania should ensue.” (The second chapter of Young’s book is “for Theseus” [p. 64].) George A. Bonnard offers another Thesean reading of Theseus and Hippolyta in the first scene: “there is no conventional lovemaking between them, they never even speak of their love. They remind us of Petruchio and Katherina in the latter part of *The Taming of the Shrew*. . . . But one thing is certain: their deep happiness, the strong quiet joy they find in each other. Every word of Theseus bespeaks his satisfaction at having found a true mate at last, one that he feels sure will be a good wife to him, a helpful companion through life, one also that will know how to keep her place, as her silence proves when he discusses Hermia’s marriage with Egeus and the young lovers. Throughout that scene the Duke acts the sovereign judge of course and Hippolyta knows she has no business to interfere, which is not only tactful but highly sensible of her.” (“Shakespeare’s Purpose in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 92 [1956], 269-270). Thomas McFarland writes, “It is difficult to imagine a comic opening to compare with this one in the benignity of its tone and in its absolute guarantee of gladness.” (*Shakespeare’s Pastoral Comedy*, p. 80.) Larry S. Champion refers to the “comic tone” which “is immediately established in the first scene through farcical repartee and action” (*The Evolution of Shakespeare’s Comedies: A Study in Dramatic Perspective* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970], p. 47). Harold F. Brooks, in his introduction to the Arden edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, sees Oberon’s enchantment of Titania as justified because “Titania is offending wifeness, as Hippolyta, formerly, did womanhood” (p. cvi). Cf. Freud’s use of Titania to exemplify a “punishment” in neurosis: “Titania, who will not love her rightful husband Oberon, is obliged instead to bestow her love on Bottom, the phantasy ass.” (“Extracts from the Fliess Papers,” *Standard Edition*, I, trans. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1906], 256.) A few recent critics have expressed discomfort at Theseus’ behavior in the first scene and noted Hippolyta’s apparent disquiet at the judgment of Hermia. Cf. Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 91-105; Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Comedy of Love* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 101-102; Stephen Fender, *Shakespeare: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), pp. 32 and 51; and Harold F. Brooks, p. civ. However, these critics set out to justify Theseus’ actions and to portray him in a sympathetic light; and they ignore Hippolyta’s view of her own situation.

²⁶ *King Lear*, I, i, 62.

²⁷ Sonnet 23.

²⁸ Cf. the discussion of Hermes by Jean-Christophe Agnew in “The Threshold of Exchange: Speculations on the Market,” *Radical History Review*, 21 (Fall 1979), 101. An issue only hinted at in my essay—the relation of theater to the marketplace—is the subject of Agnew’s “From Prayer to Performance: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1600-1900,” Diss. Harvard 1977.

²⁹ Doran, note for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, i, 32.

³⁰ Harold F. Brooks has a particularly benign interpretation of these events; he sees Oberon as Titania’s “mentor: he takes charge of her experience in order to guide her into a change in attitude. . . . His move against her is designed to reunite her with him; on his own terms, certainly, but it is of course she who is principally at fault . . .” (p. cvi). Again, I am suggesting that the play places in question such a Thesean point of view.

³¹ Cf. Alfred Harbage, “*Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the Early Shakespeare,” *Philological Quarterly*, XLI (1962), 19-20.

³² A masque presenting an ambivalent view of its occasion may have been considered appropriate in the Renaissance. My point is that many critics have considered *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* a fitting wedding present because they have discounted the play’s ambivalence; it is in this context that I question the play’s “appropriateness.”

³³ Paul A. Olson, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Meaning of Court Marriage," *ELH*, 24 (1957), 96.

³⁴ Olson, p. 96.

³⁵ Olson, p. 99.

³⁶ Olson, p. 101.

³⁷ The mythological Theseus was, of course, famous for his conquests of women. Thomas North's version of Plutarch's *Lives* includes a Life of Demetrius, in which Demetrius' "wantonnesse" is recounted. See Thomas North, *Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1928), VI, 254-255.

³⁸ Olson, pp. 101, 102.

³⁹ Olson, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Olson, p. 111. Donald C. Miller in "Titania and the Changeling," (*English Studies*, 22 [1940], 66-70), sets out to prove that Titania was a "wanton" who had made the changeling her lover. His glosses depend on Oberon's descriptions of Titania. Scholars appear to have felt such speculations went too far only when Jan Kott claimed that *all* of the characters of the play were engaged in a dark, sensuous world (*Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborsky [London: Methuen, 1965]).

⁴¹ See T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine & Leese Greeke* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944).

⁴² My understanding of *The Bacchae* was enhanced by an unpublished essay by April Alliston, "Eros and Dionysus: The Double Sun."

⁴³ Another look at Ovid suggests that Theseus' other choices of wedding entertainment are no more "sorting with a nuptial ceremony" (V, i, 55). "The battle with the Centaurs" (44) is the story of a wedding feast (at which Theseus was present) that ends in attempted rapes and violent warfare; Book XII of the *Metamorphoses* provides a gory description. (Theseus also seems less than pleased at the prospect of an "Athenian eunuch" [45].) "The riot of the tipsy Bacchanals, / Tearing the Thracian singer in their rage" recalls the destruction of Pentheus; it's no coincidence that this piece was played for Theseus when he "from Thebes came last a conqueror" (51). Theseus has just denigrated the "frenzy" of the poet's eye, that "Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" (12-13). We are more likely, especially with this signpost pointing to Thebes, to associate him here with Pentheus than with Orpheus.

⁴⁴ Margaret Ferguson has suggested that Helena's monologue recalls Polixenes' "twinned lambs" speech from *The Winter's Tale* I, ii, 67-74. Polixenes describes a lost state in which two boys are seen as doubles in "innocence"—until the apparent corruption of their world by women and heterosexuality. See also Orsino's description of the reunion of the twins Sebastian and Viola in *Twelfth Night*: "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons—" (V, i, 216).

⁴⁵ Churche of England, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administracion of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Churche of England* (London, 1549), n.p.

⁴⁶ Although neither *The Symposium* nor Ficino's *Commentary* was available in English to Shakespeare, Ficino's Latin translation of Plato and Italian and French translations of the commentary were widely reprinted in the sixteenth century. (Between 1484 and 1590, nineteen editions of the translation of Plato appeared; Ficino's complete works appeared in 1561 and 1576. An Italian translation of the *Commentary* was published in 1544.) See Raymond Marcel, Introduction to *Sur le Banquet de Platon ou De L'Amour* by Marsile Ficin (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1956), p. 114. The "Oratio Quarta" recounts the speech of Aristophanes. I am assuming that at the very least Shakespeare would have known of this myth. For a discussion of the relation of Ficino to Renaissance love treatises, see

John Charles Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love: The Context of Giordano Bruno's "Eroici furori"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 67-163.

⁴⁷ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 62-64. Marianne L. Novy hears an echo of Aristophanes' image of lovers split "like a sorb apple which is halved for pickling" in Antonio's description of Sebastian and Viola in *Twelfth Night*: "An apple cleft in two is not more twin / Than these two creatures" (V, i, 215-16). Cf. "'And You Smile Not, He's Gagged': Mutuality in Shakespearean Comedy," *Philological Quarterly*, 55 (1976), 91.

⁴⁸ *Variorum*, pp. 192-193.

⁴⁹ Quoted in *Variorum*, p. 323.

⁵⁰ Only four references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all of them practically "asides," appear in the *Standard Edition* of Freud's complete works.

⁵¹ Goldman's title also appears in the title of a compelling essay by Gayle Rubin, for which the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might have served as an illustration: "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210.

⁵² Jonas A. Barish, "The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice," *Critical Quarterly*, 8 (1966), 331.

⁵³ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Edward Arber (London, 1869; rpt. *English Reprints*, IV, [New York: AMS Press, 1966]), p. 184.