The Darker Purpose of
A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Along with our recognition of the obvious innocent delights of A Midsummer Night's Dream's dream world, we should also recognize an unfestive reality whose constituents are human pettiness and its concomitant, a stubborn intractability. In ironic fashion both the "good" and the impish fairies reflect not only the play's "gossamer web" charm, but are anthropomorphized in such a manner as to be equally human in their concern for petty triumph—hence the acerbity of the quarrel between Oberon and Titania. Their "jangling" is similar to that of the human lovers Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius. Even the more noble and, in a sense, ideally representative human lovers, Theseus and Hippolyta, are touched by complacency and irrationalism, modifying somewhat our delight in the perfect harmony of their union. Out of this discord, however, like Helena's "comforts from the East," comes concord, a harmony which in retrospect the play makes seem inevitable. An awareness of the presence both of disharmony and of concord is essential to a full understanding of Shakespeare's purpose, particularly to make relevant its darker aspect (the disharmony of human triviality).

IT WOULD BE ABSURD to deny the gaiety of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, especially as their mishappenings are transparently conventional. In all of them the lovers' purgatory is comic, and it is impossible to imagine any other outcome than the restoration or establishment of harmony among them. However, this is not to deny that at times bitterness, even ugliness, impinges upon their lives, or is at least present in the world of the play even if they are not directly affected by it. Occasionally, these plays reveal a dour kind of scepticism, not completely subsumed in the harmony of the close. Jaques, for example, is excluded from the prenuptial celebrations which climax As You Like It, for his intent is to retire from the world of such frivolities to a private one of contemplation. He ends where Love's Labour's Lost begins. We find it difficult to give credence to his excesses, but his position is strengthened when his criticism is repeated in Touchstone's commonsense cynicisms. Similarly, we agree that Orsino's melancholy in Twelfth Night is best handled ironically, but find it particularly difficult to approve of the "fun" made of the gloomy Malvolio. In both these plays we are offered a glimpse of a harsh, unfestive reality where
even "virtues" may be "sanctified and holy traitors" or where "unregarded age" may be "in corners thrown."

Recently, criticism has been at some pains to point to the suggestion of tension in the maturer comedies As You Like It and Twelfth Night.¹ However, although the fragility of the comedy of A Midsummer Night's Dream has sometimes been noticed,² this play is generally regarded as one of the happiest of Shakespeare's comedies where the "truth of love," to use John Russell Brown's phrase,³ is firmly established, despite the scepticism voiced by Theseus. It is certainly true that the two pairs of lovers in this play, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, are finally disentangled by Oberon in such a way that each gets the partner which makes for the happiest conclusion, and it is also true that the final reconciliation is one which we know from the first scene will eventually come about. In comedy the "happy ending" is inevitable. However, inevitability can be a provocative convention, for the very notion that the happy ending must prevail can enable the playwright, in the process of arriving at it, to glance just a little sourly at preceding events, and it is this sourness in A Midsummer Night's Dream which I would like to isolate for the purpose of this essay.

Critics have frequently commented on the skill with which Shakespeare interweaves the four strands of his plot: the impending marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, which enables us to experience the play's events in a festive framework; the Mechanicals' play; the tribulations of the four lovers, and the intervention in human affairs, both those of the lovers and the Mechanicals, by the fairies. Such is Shakespeare's presentation that we cannot discuss, for example, the trials that the lovers undergo without reference to the function of Theseus's and Hippolyta's marriage or, of course, to the amusing interference in their lives by Oberon and Puck. We cannot take the lovers' mistakes too seriously (for it is in their scenes that the tendency to sourness seems most pronounced)

¹See, for example, Clifford Leech's latest book on Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night" and Shakespearean Comedy (Toronto, 1965).
²C. L. Barber glances at it in his book Shakespeare's Festive Comedy (Princeton, 1959). He notes, for example, that Lysander and Hermia look "for just a moment at the tragic potentialities of passion" (p. 126), and that there is a "scepticism in solution throughout the play" (p. 142).
³Shakespeare and his Comedies (London, 1957). The phrase is used as the title of his chapter which deals with A Midsummer Night's Dream.
simply because their confusion is not their own fault. They cannot help being unpleasant to each other for the two men are under the metamorphic influence of Oberon’s pansy-juice. Indeed, the mere fact of the fairies’ presence in the human world has a transmuting effect on the inhabitants of that world. The diminutive, airy spirits have sufficient fragile grace to change the lovers’ crassness into something rich and strange.

An awareness of the fairies’ delightfulfulness, however, should not blind us to the suggestion of equivocation in their presentation. There seem to be fine lines drawn between fragile charm, impish mischief, and trivial malice. Puck, for example, seems to be spiritually closer to the Witches in Macbeth than to the good fairies of fairy-story. C. L. Barber begins his chapter on A Midsummer Night’s Dream with an interesting quotation from the Puritan, Stubbes:

Against May, Whitsunday, or othertime all the young men and maids, old men and wives run gadding over night to the woods, groves, hills, and mountains, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes. . . . And no marvel, for there is a great Lord present among them, as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sports, namely, Satan, prince of Hell.4

In its way, this is a clever piece of writing in the manner in which Stubbes lulls our suspicions by emphasizing the apparent innocence of “gadding over night to the woods, groves, hills, and mountains” while he delays his sardonic comment that these “pleasant pastimes” are presided over by “Satan, prince of Hell.” The sting in the tail is nicely calculated, for it is true that what first attracts us to accounts of these “sports” is their pastoral innocence and gaiety, just as in A Midsummer Night’s Dream what is most immediately seductive is the innocent charm of the fairy world.

There may be some truth in Stubbes’s sceptical withholding of approval for jaunting around the countryside at night (though not, I trust, for the reason he gives); equally, there may be some justification for hesitation before accepting unconditionally the benevolent ethos of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. However, to suggest that there is anything satanic in Puck’s mischievousness would be an exaggeration worthy only

4Barber, p. 149. Taken from Stubbes’s The Anatomie of Abuses . . . in Ailgna (1583), edited by F. V. Furnival (London, 1877-1882).
of a modern Stubbes. The closest he comes to the strain of Sycorax is in his ogreish descriptions of "black-browed night":

And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger;  
At whose approach ghosts, wandering here and there,  
Troop home to churchyards; damned spirits all,  
That in crossways and floods have buried,  
Already to their wormy beds are gone.  
For fear lest day should look their shames upon,  
They wilfully themselves exile from light,  
And must for aye consort with black-browed night.  

(III.i.380-387)

Puck chooses, here, not to celebrate "Aurora's harbinger," which heralds those "comforts from the East" that Helena so ardently desires, nor does he spend time on the ghosts who after "wandering here and there / Troop home to churchyards," where both "wandering" and "Troop home" suggest benignity: these ghosts, at least, have a home to go to. Instead, after only passing references to the morning star and the free spirits, he elaborates upon the night as the natural time for "damned spirits," the ghosts of suicides who have either drowned themselves or been buried in unsanctified ground. Despite Oberon's reminder that "we are spirits of another sort" (III.i.388) and that, because of this, he has often "made sport" with "the Morning's love," we associate the fairies with the night. Puck explicitly states, later, that the fairies avoid the day-light, for they

run

By the triple Hecate's team  
From the presence of the sun,  
Following darkness like a dream,  

(V.i.390-393)

The night of A Midsummer Night's Dream has its terror (pantomimic though it may be), and the dream that the darkness induces has a nightmarish potential. Even though the play's finale emphasizes the establishment of harmony (best expressed by Oberon as he pronounces the fairies' blessing on Theseus's palace), Shakespeare chooses to make Puck, in the speech which immediately precedes Oberon's, rehearse the night's ominousness where the hungry lion roars, the wolf "behowls the moon" and the screech owl "Puts the wretch that

lies in woe / In remembrance of a shroud” (V.i.384-385). It is only proper in comedy, however, that the bear of the night is the bush of the morning, although its terrifying aspect may linger in the memory. Certainly, the lovers, wandering in the darkness, feel that they are the night’s victims, that they have “fallen in dark uneven way”—unaware of the bush’s transmogrification. As Helena says: “O weary night, O long and tedious night, / Abate thy hours; Shine comforts, from the East,” (III.iii.431-432). Inevitably, the comforts come, and the play ends on a note of rejoicing as the marriages are celebrated.

Perhaps more significant, because less exaggerated, in Shakespeare’s treatment of the fairies is the way in which they are anthropomorphized. Puck, himself, is less ogreish in disposition—despite his bloodcurdling descriptions of the summer night—than mischievous. His sense of superiority over his human victims is human in its pettiness. “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (III.ii.115) he sighs disparagingly, as he enjoys the rather pitiable “jangling” of the four lovers: “And so far am I glad it so did sort, / As this their jangling I esteem a sport” (III.ii.352-353). And his description of Bottom as censorious as Titania’s when she regains her normal, superior sense of values (“O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!”—IV.i.82). Puck describes Bottom cuttingly as “The shallowest thickskin of that barren sort” (III.ii.13), and this criticism is echoed by Oberon—“this hateful imperfection of her eyes” (IV.i.66). It is not just Puck, then, who is anthropomorphized in this manner. Oberon and Titania seem more typical of a husband and wife in the real than in the fairy world. Their squabbling is trivial: a dispute over Titania’s “changeling” boy whom Oberon desires. The king and queen are only reconciled through Oberon’s subduing Titania to his wishes, and it seems that masculine hegemony is as traditional in fairy-land as it is in the human world. This comparison between the two worlds is even more ironically exact when Oberon accuses Titania of an improper interest in Theseus; while she in turn accuses him of harboring base thoughts about Hippolyta. No doubt this anthropomorphic bickering between spirits, paralleling the “jangling” of the human lovers, is part of the play’s comic effect. It is amusing to see fairies behaving as foolishly and predictably as human beings. It follows, then, that the fairies are delightful in at least two
senses of the word. They delight us in the way a gossamer web does with its beauty and fragility, but they also delight us in the broader comic way of Bottom and his cohorts. They are both apart from and a part of the trivial humanity they criticize. And this means that our attitude towards them is ambivalent, for the two ways in which they entertain us, though not mutually exclusive, are interestingly incompatible.

Even so, this incompatibility is not serious enough to make us dislike them. Oberon's and Titania's quarrel is comic and private. It appears not to have consequences beyond the purely local situation, just as, normally speaking, any minor flare-up between husband and wife is a personal matter only. But we are dealing here with spirits not humans, and even their petty feuds may have abnormal consequences to be experienced in an environment very different from their own. In A Midsummer Night's Dream the fairies' quarrel affects the weather, as Titania (blaming Oberon of course) angrily indicates:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents.
(II.i.88-92)

Her description continues for another twenty-five lines and the function of such an extended treatment of the climate's inconsistency is to remind us that the effects of Titania's and Oberon's bickering are not confined to the metaphysical world. Their quarrel causes hardship in a world that is more real than fairy-land, even than Theseus's world. As a result of flooding, the corn has rotted, the fold stands empty, and only the crows are well-fed as they have surfeited on the flocks of sheep smitten with disease: this is the world of reality. Titania's and Oberon's bickering does not merely create minor hardship but has a sufficiently powerful effect to anger the moon so that she "washes all the air, / That rheumatic diseases do abound."6 Such is their power that the seasons themselves

"The moon and moonlight in A Midsummer Night's Dream are as equivocally presented as the fairies. Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta is to take place at the time of the new moon which "like to a silver bow/New-bent in heaven" (I. i. 9-10) will shine benevolently on the celebration, and Bottom's "merry" play has Moonlight as one of its characters. On the other hand, the moon is a symbol of frigidity and discord. If Hermia does not marry Demetrius, her father's choice, she
seem to have been made to “alter” and that

this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and original. (II.i.115-117)

Titania’s accusation that their quarrelling has given birth to “a progeny of evils” is, like Puck’s rhetoric, presumably intended as comic exaggeration. Or we may agree with John Dover Wilson that Shakespeare is describing the wet and chilly English summer of 1594. To accept both of these explanations does not mean that we have to reject a third: namely, that Shakespeare is showing us an aspect of the fairies which links their world in a serious and disturbing way to the world as we know it. The presence of the fairies, then, does not automatically preclude the presence of unhappiness and even catastrophe. Consequently, critics who affirm that the delightful nature of the fairy world permeates the atmosphere of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, leavening the dull dough of the human entanglements, are only seeing half the truth. For this leavening itself has sometimes a bitter euphoria, and to ignore this paradox is to do an injustice to the play’s complexity. We cannot, in other words, say that the rancour we find in the human relationships is overborne by the fairies’ innocent gaiety. In effect, the fairy-world parallels the human and, if anything, intensifies that suggestion of a harsher and more unfestive reality which is present in the play.

This reality is at its harshest and most unfestive in the scenes with the lovers, Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius. Not only do the lovers have to flee from an alien situation at the beginning of the play (common enough in Shakespearean comedy), but they continue to be beset by doubts and fears, to make mistakes and suffer unhappiness. In this respect, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is more like The Comedy of Errors than As You Like It or Twelfth Night. Although the unpleasantness between them is caused by Puck’s mistake, their quarrelling is much less dignified than that between

will live “a barren sister all your life, / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon” (I. i. 72-73). According to Egeus (the Brabantio of A Midsummer Night’s Dream) Lysander has bewitched Hermia: he has “by moonlight at her window sung / With faining voice verses of faining love” (I. i. 30-31). When Oberon encounters Titania he says: “ill-met by moonlight, proud Titania” (II. i. 60).

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Cambridge, 1924), p. 95.
Oberon and Titania. Even before the introduction of Oberon's pansy-juice, the vituperation that is to come is indicated in the relationship between Helena and Demetrius. Helena, at one point, asks to be used as Demetrius's dog: "The more you beat me, I will fawn on you" (II.i.204), reminding us of Phoebe's masochism in As You Like It. Demetrius replies: "Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit, / For I am sick when I do look on thee" (II.i.211-212). Demetrius's vicious reply sets the tone of the humans' "debate," and it is important that he should be presented in this manner before the lovers' crassness can be blamed on the metamorphic effects of a drug. It is as though Shakespeare, while wishing to lessen the intensity of the lovers' conflict by introducing an outside catalyst, is indicating to us also that the situation is not entirely beyond the responsibility of the human agents. Demetrius, undrugged, is as irrational as Demetrius drugged. This is a point I wish to return to later.

Puck throws the pansy-juice into Lysander's eyes and when he awakes the first person he sees is Helena who is looking for Demetrius. The effect of the pansy-juice causes him to fall in love immediately with Helena, to whom he has previously been indifferent. The pansy-juice does not wash away the past. It does not induce amnesia. Shakespeare, had he so desired, could have avoided much of the lovers' bitterness with each other by making them forget the fact that they had previously been in love with someone else. The manner of Lysander's rejection of Hermia indicates that the past is still remembered, thus intensifying the degree of spitefulness in his attitude:

I do repent
The tedious minutes I with her have spent.
Not Hermia but Helena I love.
Who will not change a raven for a dove?

(II.ii.111-114)

The inclusiveness of Lysander's disgust with Hermia is emphasized:

For as a surfeit of the sweetest things
The deepest loathing to the stomach brings,
Or as the heresies that men do leave
Are hated most of those they did deceive,
So thou, my surfeit and my heresy,
Of all be hated, but the most of me!

(II.ii.137-142)
It is not sufficient that he alone should detest Hermia's having been his "surfeit" and "heresy" but that she should be hated by all. When they meet, Lysander turns on her: "Could not this make thee know, / The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?" (III.ii.189-190). "Away, youEthiope!" (III.ii.257) is his way of dismissing Hermia, and when she, in her bewilderment, remains, he turns on her once more: "Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing, let loose, / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!" (III.ii.260-261). "What change is this? / Sweet love,—" asks Hermia piteously, to which Lysander replies: "Thy love! Out, tawny Tartar, out! / Out, loathed medicine! 0 hated potion, hence!" (III.ii.263-264).

Later, Lysander, taking his cue from Helena's emphasis on Hermia's slightness, describes Hermia as a "dwarf," a "minimus, of hind'ring knotgrass made," a "bead" and an "acorn." When Hermia realizes that Lysander is quite serious in his attitude towards her, she imagines that Helena is in collusion with him:

O me! you juggler! you canker-blossom!
You thief of love! What, have you come by night
And stolen my love's heart from him?
(III.ii.282-284)

To which Helena replies: "Fie, fie! You counterfeit, you puppet, you!" (III.ii.288). At this point the possibility of physical violence shifts from that between Lysander and Demetrius to that between Helena and Hermia. Comically, although both Lysander and Demetrius offer to protect Helena, they are so absorbed in their feud with each other that they exeunt leaving the two women alone. The character of these exchanges of pleasantry makes John Russell Brown's comment on the lovers' dialogue seem a little inadequate: "the dialogue of the lovers is light and agile so that we are not allowed to dwell upon frustration or suffering."

It seems to me that we can hardly defend the lovers' irritation with each other in these terms. There is nothing light or agile in their heated exchanges. There is, however, an element of the grotesque which may go some way towards mitigating the savagery of their utterances. Unfortunately, this savagery has an edge of truth, just as Puck's does. For we cannot completely separate (as Russell Brown would have

*Brown, p. 84.
us do) love from the lovers. He would argue that the lovers’ bickering is remote from the real quality of their love: their bickering is love’s appearance; their eventual happy union is love’s reality or “truth”:

If one wished to describe the judgement which informs A Midsummer Night’s Dream, one might do so very simply: the play suggests that lovers, like lunatics, poets, and actors, have their own ‘truth’ which is established as they see the beauty of their beloved, and that they are confident in this truth for, although it seems the “silliest stuff” to an outsider, to them it is quite reasonable; it also suggests that lovers, like actors, need, and sometimes ask for, our belief, and that this belief can only be given if we have the generosity and imagination to think ‘no worse of them than they of themselves.”

It is not impossible both to agree and disagree with Russell Brown. The way in which A Midsummer Night’s Dream ends does, indeed, suggest that, despite the difficulties in the way of the lovers’ union, the happiest possible conclusion has been inevitable. Hence the jangling of the lovers is an appearance which conceals the reality of a concord between them. We suspect that part of Shakespeare’s purpose is to suggest that their marriages will be like Theseus’s to Hippolyta “in another key.” At the same time, I would argue that Shakespeare’s “darker purpose” is to suggest that the appearance of discord among the lovers is not appearance only but does, in fact, hint at a more brutal reality which I have already attempted to explore in Shakespeare’s presentation of the fairies. In other words, the metamorphic function of Oberon’s pansy-juice is an irony, for it may not be metamorphic at all; it may, in effect, reveal a permanent aspect of love’s

*Brown, p. 90.

10Paul N. Siegel in his article “A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the Wedding Guests,” SQ, 4 (1953), 139-144, has a just comment on the elevated nature of Theseus’s marriage: “About to be married, Theseus is free of the sighs, the silences, the variable humors of the lover of romances who has not yet won his mistress. His passion is controlled, his love dignified and elevated” (p. 140). Even with Theseus, however, Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of a sterner, less elevated reality. At the beginning of the play Theseus admits:

Hippolyta, I woed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.

(I. i. 16-19)
truth somewhat less reassuring than Russell Brown’s.

Romantic love, however mature the lovers, always seems to be excitingly precarious. The term itself suggests passion, which, in turn, suggests fragility and impermanency. While it may lead to the stability of marriage, it may also lead to the lovers’ destruction, or to both, as in Othello. Oberon’s pansy-juice makes the lovers of A Midsummer Night’s Dream swear and foreswear, hurl insults, reverse long-standing attitudes, plead that they are being reasonable when they are being at their most irrational and, in general, behave like lunatics. This is a face of love of which none of us is unaware. Early in the play, Lysander talks of love in a way that would be appropriate from Juliet:

Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,  
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,  
Making it momentany as a sound,  
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,  
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,  
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,  
And ere a man hath power to say ‘Behold!’  
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:  
So quick bright things come to confusion.  
(I.i.141-149)

In the play’s context, this is more than just the lover’s conventional lament for love’s mutability. In its piling up of qualifying clauses it is not unlike Puck’s style in his descriptions of the night. Lysander’s and Hermia’s situation is such that we can see the justice of Lysander’s fear that love is like a flash of lightning doomed to be swallowed up by the jaws of darkness as, comically and in play, the lovers themselves are swallowed up by the night in the wood near Athens. As he points out, he and Hermia are struggling against blind prejudice and harsh law. If Hermia does not marry her father’s choice, Demetrius, she must either suffer death or enforced chastity. The “blessedness” of the chaste life is equivocally celebrated:

Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood  
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;  
But earthlier happy is the rose distill’d  
Than that which withering on the virgin thorn  
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.  
(I.i.74-78)

Moreover, Egeus’s demand that Hermia should obey him is
completely irrational, as Lysander points out:

I am, my Lord, as well deriv'd as he,
As well posses'd; my love is more than his;
My fortunes every way as fairly rank'd,
If not with vantage, as Demetrius’;
And, which is more than all these boasts can be,
I am belov'd of beauteous Hermia.  

(1.1.99-104)

Not only is he beloved of Hermia, but Demetrius has formerly

Made love to Nedar's daughter, Helena,
And won her soul; and she, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry,
Upon this spotted and inconstant man.

(1.1.107-110)

Neither Egeus nor Theseus, at this point in the play, is concerned with the justice of Lysander’s position. The law must take its course. Egeus’s tyranny must be obeyed.

In the world of Shakespearean comedy, of course, quick bright things finally come not to confusion but to felicity. Inevitably the daylight’s comforts shine. A Midsummer Night’s Dream more than hints, however, that this inevitability is the dream of love and that love’s reality is more malignant, just as the fairies are more than their charm, and the lovers less than their devotion. In all of Shakespeare’s comedies we sense this presence of the jaws of darkness, recognizing, with Shakespeare, that comedy itself is a quick bright thing which miraculously and conventionally escapes chaos. Shakespeare’s recognition of this unfestive reality is what makes his comedies both significant and precious: significant because we are not allowed to escape altogether from the world of pain; precious because an acknowledgement of this makes us so much more thankful for the kindliness which is their benison.

The presence of both kindliness and pain as complementary aspects of love’s reality, invests the famous and central dialogue between Theseus and Hippolyta in the fifth act with great importance. Here, Theseus denies the validity of the lovers’ story on the grounds that lovers, like madmen and poets, distort reality. They all have “shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends” (V.-i.5-6). The fragility of his denial is conveyed, ironically, by his emphasis upon the workings of the poet’s imagination. We soon realize that his denial, in its beauty and accuracy,
is essentially a poetic statement of the poetic process:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.i.12-17)

Typically, Shakespeare is defending the poet through the manner in which he attacks him. That Theseus is wrong about the lovers' story is, of course, witnessed by ourselves who, with them, have experienced their bizarre adventure.

In other words, what the lovers have experienced is true. Not only is their "joy" a real fact (which Theseus never denies), but the way in which that joy has been brought about is also "real" (that is, as real as a suspension of disbelief in fairies and magic juice can make it—and Theseus vehemently denies these). Hippolyta's defense of the lover's account is interesting:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (V.i.23-27)

Her literal mind finds the consistency of their account convincing. What is of "great constancy," however, is not just the unreasonable, unreasoning, and childish aspect of their relationship. The "story of the night" has that double reality in the way it reveals that love is both superior to and a victim of life's trivial harshness. The violence of their quarrelling is as real as the happiness of their union.

Shakespeare seems to be saying, then, that love's irrationality is both glorious and obtuse. When Titania, again under the influence of pansy-juice, falls in love with Bottom, transformed into an ass, Bottom's comment is not only appropriate to her artificial condition but to the condition of lovers in general:

Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason
for that; and yet, to say the truth, reason and
love keep little company together now-a-days;
(III.i.145-148)

When the lovers are at their most unreasonable, they ironical-
ly affirm that their change of heart stems from the workings of the reason. When Lysander rejects Hermia, he says: “The will of man is by his reason sway’d; / And reason says you are the worthier maid” (II.ii.115-116). In reply to Helena’s perplexed questions, he says: “I had no judgement when to her I swore” (III.ii.134). In the first scene of the play, Helena seems to realize love’s irrational nature:

Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind,  
And therefore is wing’d Cupid painted blind.  
Nor hath Love’s mind of any judgement taste;  
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste;  
And therefore is Love said to be a child,  
Because in choice he is so oft beguild’d.  
(I.i.234-239)

As R. W. Dent puts it: “Love’s choices remain inexplicable, and the eventual pairings are determined only by the constancy of Helena and Hermia in their initial inexplicable choices.”

Does not the play, then, suggest that love is as much a dream as are the midsummer night’s happenings? And cannot this dream, comic though it may be in this play, very easily be rocked into nightmare? Shakespeare, of course, does not allow us to experience any more of this dream-as-nightmare than is sufficient to be grateful for the fact that it is not really dangerous. The ogres disappear with the coming of daylight. In case we may be too involved with the disturbing underlying reality, Oberon reassures us that the “night’s accidents” are “But as the fierce vexation of a dream” (IV.i.72). The play is sufficiently dark, however, to make Oberon’s reassurances seem a trifle glib, and Puck’s and the play’s last words seem not much more than mechanical: “And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream” (V.i.434-435). Like Bottom, Puck is cautioning us not to confuse comedy and tragedy. Indeed, Bottom’s words mock the critic looking for “significances”: “Man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream” (IV.i.211-212).

It is, however, Bottom’s scenes which provide the most effective reassurances. To begin with, their humor is unequivocal, unlike the scenes of the fairies and the humans. Not only this, the “interlude” of Pyramus and Thisbe which

they perform before Theseus and his court suggests a way in which A Midsummer Night's Dream's two realities of love may be reconciled. For Bottom's play treats a tragic theme comically, as we see from Quince's description of it: "The most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby" (I.ii.11-13). Bottom tells us that it is "very good" and "merry." In it (if he could play all the parts himself) he would play the lion so that it would "roar you as gently an any sucking dove" (I.ii.84-85) in order not to frighten the ladies. Mirth and tragedy are madly reconciled, and the madness of it is parodied by Theseus:

Merry and tragical! Tidious and brief! 
That is, hot ice and wondrous strange snow. 
How shall we find the concord of this discord? 
(V.i.58-60)

Yet in the curious scene between Theseus and Hippolyta where they talk of hunting, both of them seem to emphasize the possibility of finding concord in discord. Theseus begs Hippolyta to listen to the baying of his hounds for she shall hear "the musical confusion / Of hounds and echo in conjunction" (IV.i.114-115). And Hippolyta, not to be outdone, talks of the time she went hunting in a "wood of Crete" where she "never heard / So musical a discord, such sweet thunder" (IV.i.121-122). Perhaps we are meant to hear the "jangling" of the lovers in this way, and perhaps we are meant to read A Midsummer Night's Dream as a play primarily about summer with just a touch of winter in it to make us appreciate the mellowness of the sun. Nevertheless, clearly, albeit distantly, through the frivolity, we hear the iron tongue of midnight tolling twelve, and the clarity of this "iron tongue" is a quality to A Midsummer Night's Dream which brings in overtones of the darker comedies Troilus and Cressida and Measure for Measure. Shakespeare's darker purpose in A Midsummer Night's Dream, in fact, is to remind us that the delights of the fairy world are only a fragile concealment for the foolishness and errors of the human.

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