THE RITUAL AND RHETORIC OF *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM*

By James E. Robinson

*A MIDSUMMER Night’s Dream* concludes with a grand epithalamion in which several levels of society and the spirits of nature appear in festivity and celebration. Insofar as the play has proceeded in a magical context (the moonlit wood) with invocation of magical device (the personified spirits of love and their potions) to issue in celebration of the union of man and nature, it is processional, ceremonial, symbolical. In this sense it is comedy as ritual. And yet in the process the play has exposed folly and given perspective to love; it has interpreted human experience. In this sense it is comedy as argument, comedy as rhetoric. What I offer in this essay is an approach that attempts to comprehend the artistic method that underlies Shakespeare’s fusion of these two comic ideas into the single apprehension that is the play.

A number of critics have been attending to the ritualistic backgrounds of comedy. F. M. Cornford’s study of the structure of Aristophanic comedy is a basic work of this kind. His study refers Aristophanes’ “canonical plot-formula” of “*Agon*, Sacrifice, Feast, Marriage *Kômos*” to “the stereotyped action of a ritual or folk drama, older than literary Comedy, and of a pattern well known to us from other sources.” Wylie Sypher remarks that “Behind tragedy and comedy is a prehistoric death-and-resurrection ceremonial, the rite of killing the old year (the aged king) and bringing in the new season (the resurrection or initiation of the adolescent king).” Comedy, then, in Sypher’s words, is essentially “a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation.” Or as Susanne Langer explains, “Comedy is an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings, or initiations.” “What justifies the term ‘Comedy’,” she says, “is . . . that the Comus was a fertility rite, and the god it celebrated a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life.” Northrop Frye explains that “The ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero.” In relation to certain of Shakespeare’s comedies Frye says, “The green world charges the comedies with a symbolism in which the comic resolution contains a suggestion of the old ritual pattern of the victory of summer over winter.” C. L. Barber has applied the background of holiday and festival, the occasion of ritual, in interpreting the dramatic form of several of Shakespeare’s comedies, demonstrating the design and theme of clarification through release. “The clarification,” he says, “achieved by the festive comedies is concomitant to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and ‘nature’—the nature celebrated on holiday.”

With this list of statements rather too arbitrarily abstracted from their contexts, I do not mean to oversimplify the theories of comedy developed by these critics. But the comments help to define the idea of comedy that has emerged in association with festival and worship and influenced the development of comic art. Ritualistic comedy is the belief in and celebration of man’s participation in a recurrent pattern of renewal; it affirms a reality beyond the workaday world which confines identity and confounds desire. To ritualize experience is to replace the sense of everyday living, or living in a given society in immediate time, with a symbol of another sense of living, of living in communion with the natural and the divine in suspended or transcendent time.

Shakespeare and his age inherited the idea of ritualistic comedy in several ways. In Renaissance discussions of comedy, the idea was preserved in comments on the origin of comedy in ancient Greek times. William Webbe, for example, in *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586) explained that “Commedies tooke their name of *komadzw kal *ðwv, commessatam ire, to goe a feasting, because they vsed to goe in procession with their sport about the Citties and Villages, mingling much pleasant myrth wyth their graue Religion, and feasting cheerfully together wyth as great ioy as might be deuised.” Similar kinds of ritualistic comic expression developed in England from Christian and primitive traditions. The mystery cycle plays performed on the Corpus Christi holiday affirmed

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belief in scriptural myth and, in total scope, celebrated the victory of resurrection and eternal destiny. The chapters in E. K. Chambers' *The Mediaeval Stage* on various kinds of folk drama, such as “Festival Play,” “The May-Game,” and “The Sword-Dance,” present interesting testimony of the numerous forms of seasonal celebrations that developed in England out of primitive ritual. Speaking of the sword dances and the St. George plays, Chambers remarks that they are the “outcome of the instinct of play, manipulating for its own purposes the mock sacrifice and other débris of extinct ritual. Their central incident symbolizes the *renouveau*, the annual death of the year or the fertilization spirit and its annual resurrection in spring.”

A second main tradition of comedy inherited by Shakespeare was based on the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence. The plays of Plautus and Terence are set in the context of a specific social structure and a well-defined system of laws and mores. Typically, the desires of young men are placed in opposition to the more sober concerns of citizen fathers who are particularly adamant when the girls whom the young men pursue are not citizens of the Athenian world in which the plays are usually set. The clever servant, who should be obedient and keep his place, attempts to turn the social order upside down by outwitting the father and advancing the amour of the son. Specific problems arise if a slave owner objects to a young man's attempt to make off with a girl legally bound to the owner or if a son has incurred a debt against his father's wishes and knowledge. The plots are a series of moves and countermoves designed to maneuver the play's characters through social and legal complications to a point where a discovery or a stratagem allows conflicting parties to come together in a situation of awareness and agreement, a feast and a wedding promised as a celebration of the social concord. In the process a myopic father may be exposed as a foolish dotard, a braggart soldier as a bumptious pretender, a young lover as a sentimental dreamer, a wife as a shrew, a slave dealer as a villainous rascal. A parade of parasites, courtesans, domestics, and assorted citizens, each with a proper social role to play, fills out the stage of Roman comedy, the drama of everyday life.

The definition of this kind of comedy, a definition that became the major premise of the Renaissance conception of classical comedy, was articulated by Cicero in the oration *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*. Cicero referred to a situation in a Roman comedy to illustrate a point he was arguing, and then to affirm the cogency of the example, he said: “I think, in fact, that these fictions of the poets are intended to give us a representation of our manners in the character of others and a vivid picture of our daily life.” Aelius Donatus, a fourth-century commentator, whose work on Terence was ubiquitously published, imitated, and expanded in the Renaissance, repeated Cicero's remark in substance as a definition of comedy in a prefatory essay to his commentary: “Cicero has said that comedy is an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, an image of truth.”

It is significant that this definition originated with a rhetorician, for it accentuates the relation of rhetoric and comedy that became a central part of Renaissance literary criticism. From classical authorities the Renaissance inherited the idea that rhetoric was a form of art designed to give persuasive force to the truths of civilized life. For example, the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a Roman rhetoric much admired in the Renaissance, said, “The task of the public speaker is to discuss capably those matters which law and custom have fixed for the uses of citizenship, and to secure as far as possible the agreement of his hearers.” This emphasis on the social context and persuasive end of rhetoric was often paralleled by a similar emphasis placed on comedy in Renaissance criticism. Gregorius Wagnerus, a commentator on Terence, said, for example, “Set forth in individual comedies are certain definite propositions concerning the various manners, characters, and duties of men, propositions which do a great deal for the promotion of a wise and civilized life.” Wagnerus then used the language of Cicero and Donatus referred to above to define comedy, and added: “Indeed, it [comedy] commends virtues and censures vices, and presents the substance of virtue in whatever kind of age, sex, and condition. We see here the image and vivid representation of almost all domestic actions.”

5. “Sunt in singulis Comedioi certae quaedam theses de hominum diversis moribus, ingenii, & officiiis propositae, quas multum faciant ad vitam sapienter & civiliiter instituendam.” *Terentii... Comoediae*, p. 675.
6. “Commendat enim virtutes, & vita insectatur, & in
This conception of comedy as an imitation of everyday life that functions as a kind of dramatic argument to dissuade men from vice and move them to virtue was a common one in the discussions of comedy by sixteenth-century English apologists of poetry. Because of the brevity and generality of their comments and because of the narrowly moralistic emphasis (not that the English were alone in this emphasis), the English theorists presented a limited conception of a rhetorical idea of comedy. Nevertheless they promoted such an idea by affirming the importance of the social context and persuasive end of comedy. Sidney, for example, emphasized the importance of the social context when he explained how the manner in which comedy handles "our private and domestical matters" can teach us in "the actions of our life" to know evil as so better to perceive virtue. He affirmed the persuasive effect of comedy in his definition of the genre: "Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he [the comic poet] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornefull sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one."13

It was, however, in the commentaries on Terence by Donatus and the Renaissance scholars who followed him that rhetorical ideas and methods were fully and specifically applied to the study of comedy.14 The commentators discovered the same expansive relations between rhetoric and the comedy of Terence that Quintilian said he found between rhetoric and the comedy of Menander: "Now, the careful study of Menander alone would, in my opinion, be sufficient to develop all those qualities with the production of which my present work is concerned; so perfect is his representation of actual life, so rich is his power of invention and his gift of style, so perfectly does he adapt himself to every kind of circumstance, character and emotion."15

The commentators explicated the particulars of Terence's style according to devices of trope and scheme. They analyzed the speeches and scenes of the plays according to rhetorical patterns, from exordium to peroration, and according to the types of oratory, deliberative, judicial, and demonstrative. They found dramatic centers for scenes and the whole plays in key propositions; they made clear, for example, how the action of Adelphi is centered in the question of whether it is better for a father to be strict or indulgent in educating a son.16 Dramatic structure was understood as a sequence of prolatias (the unfolding of the argument), epilasis (complication), and catastrophe (resolution), a pattern fundamentally involving the tying and untying of a knot of intrigue.17 The commentators carefully explained the connection of the pieces of action and the continuity of scenes. They made clear the temporal sequence of a play by explaining how any one allusion to time was consistent with another and where transitions in time took place. The characters were analyzed according to the social, temperamental, and moral types they represented, and the oppositions between characters were explained as methods of affirming standards of behavior. As Maurice Kyffin said in the preface to his English edition of Andria: "... he [Terence] opposeth several speakers of several natures, and contrary conditions, one to another ... to the end that the undue demeanor in the one, may the sooner be seen by the contrarie in the other."18

In short, what the body of Terentian commentary evoked was a theory of comedy based not only on the idea of art as imitation of life but also on a set of rhetorical principles and methods that shaped the whole form of that imitation as an eloquent and dramatic argument about the problems of finite experience. According to this theory, comedy was a mirror and measure of everyday reality, its social conflicts, its confusion of interest and purpose issuing through a dialectic sequence into a happy ending—the whole pattern ordered and controlled by the art of the comic playwright. This theory plus the art of Plautus and Terence itself form the tradition of qualibet setate, sexu, & conditione, virtutis materiam praebet. Omnia fere actionum domesticarum image & typus expressus hic cernitur." Terentii ... Comediae, p. 675.


14 For a detailed study of comic theory and technique as developed in Terentian commentary, see Marvin T. Herrick, Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century (Urbana, Ill., 1950).


17 For a detailed study of this structure as worked out by the Terentian commentators, see T. W. Baldwin, William Shakspere's Five-Act Structure (Urbana, Ill., 1947).

comedy that may be called comedy as argument, comedy as rhetoric.

I have summarized the traditions of ritual and rhetoric as they relate to comedy to clarify the two ideas of comedy that they help to explain, not to refer A Midsummer Night's Dream to particular rituals or festivals on the one hand or to particular plays of Plautus and Terence or exegeses by the Terentian commentators on the other. General parallels between the play and Roman comedy or between the play and folk celebrations can be cited. For example, the basic social conflict of the play (desire of youth against the authority of age) and the resulting intrigues of young lovers have analogues in Roman comedy. And, on the other hand, the title and the nighttime atmosphere of part of the play suggest the holiday magic of summer solstice that then seems to issue by a curious seasonal anachronism into the "rite of May" (iv.i.136). But details of the play evade comparison to the particulars of either Roman comedy or English holiday customs.

Nevertheless the ideas of comedy as ritual and comedy as rhetoric or dramatic argument are there in A Midsummer Night's Dream, the one celebrative of transcendent life and time, the other interpretative of everyday experience and time. I believe that Shakespeare's embodiment of the two ideas can best be demonstrated by examination of the context, dramatic action, and language of the play. The context of ritual is nature and divinity; the context of rhetoric is society. The dramatic movement of ritual is associative and symbolical, that of rhetoric is dialectical. Ritual employs a language of song and incantation; the language of rhetoric is primarily interpretative and argumentative. Ritualistically Shakespeare's play grasps and dramatizes the sense and moment of renewal, the renewal of man in communion with nature and its gods. Realistically it grasps a period of social conflict issuing into order, men in communion with one another. Poetically it grasps both, relates them, and dissolves the two ideas of comedy into one, the one that thereby apprehends the relation of nature and experience. I do not mean to impose a definition of poetry or poetic structure upon the play, to argue that poetry is that imaginative form which "bodies forth" the relation of nature and experience, but rather to demonstrate that such form is the poetic structure of this play. "The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" (v.i.12-13), says Theseus, and the imaginative effort of the poet of A Midsummer Night's Dream is very like that. Insofar as his fine frenzy affirms the possibilities of man achieving renewal in nature and order in society, the poet's eye is one with the eye of comedy, the comedy that combines faith (which the ritualistic tradition particularly promotes) and understanding (which the rhetorical tradition particularly promotes).

Shakespeare obviously enough created two contexts, two worlds, for the play's action. On the one hand there is the world of the fairies, a world of dewdrops and spangled starlight, wild thyme and eglantine, inhabited by creatures small enough to live in flowers, yet puissant enough to "wander everywhere, / Swifter than the moon's sphere" (ii.i.6-7). The measure of fairy reality is nature, nature in its expansive, mysterious, elemental sense. You cannot catch the nature spirits by ordinary measures of size, space, time. You calculate their size with cow-slips, acorn cups, or snake skins (ii.i.10, 31, 255-256). You cannot pin down the sprites geographically. They have a fairyland somewhere (ii.i.65; iv.i.64), but they "wander everywhere," now "thorough flood," now "thorough fire" (ii.i.5). Just recently in India (ii.i.69), now suddenly they are in an Athenian wood. Their history in space is remarkably wide. Oberon has been on a strange promontory that afforded him an amazing perspective of the cosmos (ii.i.149-174); Titania has known "spiced Indian air" and "Neptune's yellow sands" (ii.i.124-126). The prankster Puck has had his larks in village locales, in and out of querns and gossips' bowls (ii.i.34 ff.), but like all the fairies he has travelled elementally; he has "run / . . . From the presence of the sun, / Following darkness like a dream . . ." (v.i.390-393). These lines from Puck's song are also a key to the temporal measure of fairy reality. The fairies are rather too 19 My quotations are according to the text in George Lyman Kittredge, The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Boston, 1936). 20 The pattern and idea of "May-game action" are of central importance in C. L. Barber's interpretation of the play (Shakespeare's Festive Comedy, pp. 119-162), but he believes that critics make a mistake in assuming that the reference to the "rite of May" necessarily refers the time of the play's action to May Day, since "people went Maying at various times" (p. 120). Barber (pp. 123-124) also reviews English midsummer customs and beliefs as they might have relevance to the play (e.g., greenery decoration, wandering sprites, divinations whereby maidens might come to know their true loves); however, he believes that the play's title seeks not so much "association with the specific customs of Midsummer Eve" as "suggestions of a magic time." For records of English holiday customs, see John Brand, Observations on Popular Antiquities, with the additions of Sir Henry Ellis (London, 1877).
swift for the sun to catch them, too swift to be clocked by the moon (II.i.7; IV.i.101), beyond the measure of mortal timekeeping. Appearing mysteriously at night, perhaps lingering in the dawn (III.ii.388 ff.), they tell time by the morning lark (IV.i.97), whose call they answer by disappearing in a mysterious flight (IV.i.98-101), whence they emerge on the following night, renewed and renewing (V.i.378-429), symbols of the course of elemental nature. All in all, the fairy world is the context of ritual, the kind of reality that man attempts to sense in holiday and deify in worship. The fairies represent this reality in the play as personifications of nature’s presence and nature’s divinity.

This context sounds more sober in the explanation than it is in the presentation. The fairy figures are something of a burlesque of the reality and powers which they represent. Erratic and rather absurd, they present nature almost as ludicrously as Starveling presents moonshine. When Titania explains her role as nature divinity, she does so in a haughty little speech (I.i.81-117) that equates the movement of “The spring, the summer,/The chiding autumn, angry winter” with her own eccentricities as Oberon’s quarrelsome mate. But nature’s gods are after all good-hearted and eventually manage to muddle through a benevolent program for every Jack and Jill.

The second world, the other main context of the play, is that of a human society with its hierarchy of citizens (rulers, aristocrats, artisans), its laws and marriage customs, its problems of parental authority and young love. This society has from one perspective ordinary boundaries in space and time. We meet this world in a moment of its history and see its life unfold in Athens and a nearby wood through a period that is announced as taking place from four days before Theseus’ wedding day until that wedding day and night (see i.i.2-11, 83-90; IV.i.135-139; V.i.33-34, 370-371). However, some rather peculiar things happen to the social context in the course of the play’s action. Its particular social conflict and problem, even its sense of place and time undergo distortion and transformation as the mortals are influenced by the measures and reality of the other world.

Shakespeare’s method of relating and assimilating the two contexts of nature and society is intricate. The method is not simply a matter of creating two worlds and letting the one act upon the other and so transform it. The social world is of itself from the beginning in a dual condition. On the one hand it is in the mood for holiday, the kind of holiday that associates the human desire for new life with seasonal renewal. On the other hand it has a social conflict to debate; it must solve a problem of human experience according to the standards of custom and law. The two desires, to be one with nature and to be one with law, are in fact in conflict with one another at the beginning. The conflict can be appreciated in understanding the dual role of Theseus in the first scene.

In the first nineteen lines of the play Theseus and Hippolyta present themselves as King and Queen of a new season, of new life, of May Day, as allusion later in the play suggests. The old season, marked by their war, has come to an end. Says Theseus:

Hippolyta, I woo’d 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)

They now await a magical movement from one season to another, a transition to be concluded by a celestial new moon that will solemnize their wedding as a moment of the union of their human life with the expansive and repetitive course of nature. Says Hippolyta:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

(I.i.7-11)

In the repetitive syntax Hippolyta here captures the sense of moving through ordinary days and nights into transcendent life and time. In the one fine simile that images the moon as heavenly silver bow she symbolizes the translation of the old ways of war into the celebration of nature and love. Time shades into dream, and a war instrument is metamorphosed into a celestial symbol of beauty and new life.

But if Theseus is King of the New Season he is also Duke of a particular society, with its defined laws and customs. Before Theseus’ world can issue into its moment of ritualistic celebration it must solve a problem of everyday reality. The problem is established and debated in the first scene, lines 22-127, in what is fundamentally a rhetorical context. A father demands that his daughter marry the man of his choice according to the law supported by proofs against Lysander, the man his daughter Hermia prefers. Hermia insists on the right of her own choice, and Lysander pleads his case and presents a case against Deme-
Hermia, and Helena in pursuit of Demetrius. In Act II, Scene i, Oberon overhears Helena's importuning of Demetrius and decides to help her by ordering Puck to douse the eyes of Demetrius with the juice of a flower once struck by Cupid's arrow. This plan of Oberon prepares for the complication.

Immediately we see how the play moves toward a merging of the contexts of the reality of society and the reality of nature myth, of rhetoric and ritual. Love is not only a social problem now; the gods of love are involved. Not only decisions of the lovers based on the law and their own relations with each other will determine the course of love; nature as personified by its gods will be a controlling force. As Lysander and Hermia prepare to move into the Athenian wood, they seem to sense this merging of contexts. On the one hand their plan to bypass the law is based on ordinary, realistic considerations of time, place, and circumstance. They will meet “to-morrow night” in the wood, “a league without the town,” and then travel “seven leagues” to the house of Lysander’s hospitable and sympathetic aunt (I.i.70 ff.). We are approaching, after all, the time of the new season and Theseus is rather reluctant to insist on the law of death, however much his duty demands that he cite it. He would rather refer, it seems, the legal difficulty to other areas of debate, areas involved with more fundamental questions of life and nature.

The pattern of action issuing from the initial situation and conflict is both dialectical and symbolic, sequential and associative. On the one hand there is a plot, an argumentum (as a Terentian commentator might call it), suggestive of the move and countermove pattern of Roman comedy and the proof and disproof structure of rhetoric. This rhetorical level of the action can be conveniently divided into the tripartite division used by Renaissance commentators on Terence, the pattern of protasis-epitasis-catastrophe that presents, ties, and unties a knot of intrigue, an intrigue centered in the problem of the young lovers as they seek fulfillment in the face of the obstructions of authority and law and their own wrangling. On the other hand there is a magical movement, a ritualistic pattern, whereby and wherein the process of young love unfolds as a series of symbolic acts performed by the fairies, potions of Cupid and Diana serving as sacramental media for the action. As the fairies intervene, the dialectical pattern is modulated by magic and symbol. Thus in combining the two levels of action Shakespeare creates a prism through which a peculiar refraction of the relation of ordinary and symbolic reality, of experience and dream, can emerge.

In the protasis of the play (Act I and most of Act II) the lovers are faced with the obstacles to their love and make their initial plans. Hermia and Lysander decide to flee Athens; and Helena, even though she wants Demetrius for herself, informs Demetrius of the plans of the other two in order to win his favor. Thus all the lovers flee to the Athenian wood, Hermia and Lysander to escape the law of Athens, Demetrius in pursuit of
less, the young lovers are delivered through a process of confrontation and debate in which they must test and try to interpret their mutual relations, themselves, and the condition of love. After Puck mistakenly puts the juice on Lysander’s eyes and so attracts him to Helena, there is a debate between Lysander and Helena, the one arguing that Helena is a worthier maid than Hermia, the other concluding that Lysander mocks her with pretense of love (II.ii.103–134).

When later Oberon puts the juice on Demetrius’ eyes so that he too loves Helena, there is a medley of discordant rhetorical exchange, Lysander and Demetrius each trying to persuade Helena of his love, Helena concluding that all have formed a plan to mock her, Lysander berating the advances and character of Hermia, Hermia accusing Helena of belittling her and stealing Lysander, Lysander and Demetrius quarreling over the right to Helena (III.ii.122 ff.). What the love juice has evoked in the play is a chain reaction of fickleness, suspicion, and quarreling, the usual exchange that accompanies the ways of young lovers in the ordinary world when passion obscures reason and folly promotes absurdity. “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” (III.ii.115) says Puck of the lovers, even though his own mistake with the potion initiated the confusion. But, of course, he is right. One effect of the intrusion of fairy magic in mortal affairs is to accentuate the condition of mortal love as it exists in normal experience. The mistake of Puck and the juice of Cupid are personifications of the erratic and blind behavior of human lovers. Demetrius, we learned at the beginning of the play (I.i.106–110), was a fickle lover without benefit of magic. And Helena recognized and explained the Cupid-like childishness and absurdity of love before she entered the magical wood (I.i.226–251). Oberon and Titania are mirrors of this folly of human love, engaging as they do in quarrel over the possession of the page boy and generally accusing each other of infidelity (II.i.60 ff.). What happens in the epitasis of the play is a counterpointing of two modes of reality in such a way that the mythology of love is equated with the actuality of love. On the one hand the problems of love are experienced and debated by the lovers in a rhetorical action, in a plot involving their particular group and society. And yet the audience sees this involvement as a gambol in the moonlit wood under the control and power of a Fairy King of Love, sees the involvement as participation in ritual, in association with the mysterious forces of nature that furnish a mythological and universalizing explanation for the causes of the effects the lovers experience and debate. The causes are personifications of the effects. The gods of love are very like the lovers, and the reality of ritual is very like the reality of normal experience.

The similarity has a double effect. The erratic gods heighten the satiric interpretation of the erratic lovers and yet translate the human frailty into the realm of myth and thereby release it from satiric and moral judgment. Bottom has some awareness of this curious relation between the mythic experience of ritual and the affairs of ordinary reality when he is brought into the mythic world to play mock king to Titania. With the head of an ass, he sits in Titania’s woodbine bower royally attended by the spirits of herbs and flowers and magnificently wooed by the tiny Fairy Queen. The scenes involving this strange coronation and love affair are the burlesque embodiment of the discordant fusion of mortals and spirits in the epitasis of the play. Bottom is ridiculed as he is ennobled in company with these gods who quarrel and love as mortals do. A man for all occasions, Bottom graciously accepts the attendance and love of Titania and her train, realizing that “reason and love keep little company together now-a-days” (III.i.147–148).

The play begins to move from such discord to its comic resolution at the end of Act III when Oberon decides to use “Dian’s bud” (as the antidote is called in iv.i.76) to relieve Lysander of his love for Helena (and so set the mortal lovers in proper order) and Titania of her fondness for Bottom. Metaphorically the conflict has been referred to the mythic battle of Cupid and Diana. Oberon explained the origin of the Cupid potion earlier in the play (III.i.155–168): the bow of Cupid was aimed at a vestal virgin of Diana when Diana sent its aim awry and the arrow infected the little western flower that Oberon has used in the complication of the play. Now the Diana flower, “Whose liquor hath this virtuous property, / To take from thence all error with his might” (III.ii.367–368), is used to correct the mistakes of the epitasis and symbolize the movement of the play from the trials of Cupid’s reign to the ordered hegemony of Diana.

The catastrophe or conclusion of the plot comes in Act IV. Egeus, Hermia’s father, can no longer impose his authority and the law upon love, since his choice for his daughter’s bridegroom is paired with another. The lovers look upon the night’s experience as wonder and

dream, rejoice in the harmony created for them, and prepare to join Theseus and Hippolyta in celebration of new season and new life as promised at the beginning of the play.

The main structure of the play has been designed to bypass the specific problems of custom and law and deliver the group through a magical and transcendent experience that relieves them of the obstacles that would otherwise prevent them from partaking in the celebration of the last act. And yet the experience has been real experience too. The lovers have fought and quarreled and attempted to find the moral measure of each other’s behavior. It has all proved to be rather silly, as silly as the antics of the gods who control love, but it has nevertheless been a human problem, one that must be understood in its proper perspective. At the end of Act iv, this perspective is ours, ours as informed by the artistry of the play. The lovers are not sure what turned their love struggle into happy issue. They only know that, awake or in dream, they have achieved a harmony that is natural and right; as Demetrius says, “. . . come to my natural taste, / Now I do wish it, love it, long for it, / And will for evermore be true to it” (iv.i.177–179).

Love, we have seen, is a condition of social reality and must be understood in relation to the demands of society and the involvement of lovers as individuals of a social unit. But the measure of what is right, what is moral about love cannot be adequately comprehended in this context. The question of what is right is referred to the larger measure of what is natural and subsumed within it. The lovers are no longer concerned about the logic of love. They do not debate, they simply believe. They do not interpret love, they simply celebrate it. The logic of love has been referred to the measure of the powers of nature and the realm of ritual that embodies these powers. The measure of love in this realm is just as illogical as it is in the social realm, but in the realm of ritual that doesn’t matter, and that is what we understand about love in both realms. It is the perspective that allows the folly of everyday life to be understood as folly and celebrated as myth. This is the pure comic vision that laughs at the limitation of the finite condition and yet apotheosizes that limitation as subject to and reflective of the benevolent course of nature and its gods.

What has happened in the play’s action to the context of normal reality is symbolized in the extreme by the wedding of Bottom and Titania, a wedding which can be understood only on the level of ritualistic reality. In Act iii, Scene i, Bottom can enter Titania’s bower because he is “translated,” transcending for the nonce the measure of his ordinary reality to become holiday king in comically magical masquerade. In a scene of song and flowers, with a feast of “apricocks and dewberries,” “purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries” (lines 169–170), he is led as bridgroom to bed (lines 202–206) with the Queen of Summer (see line 158). Such is the wedding of mortality and divinity, man and nature in ritual form.

But in the main plot the involvement of man and nature is more complex. The two levels of reality, man in society and man in nature, remain separate (the lovers do not know of the fairy action), yet related. The symbolic action of love potions influences the rhetorical action of debate but does not translate it entirely out of its own context. Bottom loses his shape and enters magically and magnificently into another context, another world, where measurements of size, space, and time are quite different from his own (a world which “hath no bottom” to use Bottom’s own measuring of it). The lovers do not change shape, but nevertheless peculiar things happen to their world. Throughout the night they have difficulty understanding each other as the potions create the sudden switches in the men’s affections. They have difficulty in space too. Generally speaking, the lovers lose sight of any realistic direction or destination in the enchanted wood. By the end of Act iv, the thought of making the seven-league trip to Lysander’s aunt has been forgotten. The lovers have lost and found each other in physical chase as strangely as they have in affection (see n.ii.88 ff.; n.ii.145 ff.; iii.ii.62 ff.; iii.ii.177 ff.). As the epielas comes to conclusion, Demetrius and Lysander seemingly hear but do not see each other as Puck translates their intended duel into weariness and sleep (iii.ii.401–430). Indeed at this point all the lovers are led by Puck “Up and down, up and down” (iii.ii.396) to an arrangement in space wherein “Bedabbled with the dew, and torn with briers,” as Hermia says of herself (iii.ii.443), they can be charmed and coupled by the powers of nature. And so when they awake (iv.1.142 ff.), they awake to the company of Theseus and Egeus, the authorities Lysander and Hermia set out to evade, and prepare now to return to Athens in harmony to celebrate the several weddings. Flight from Athens through the wood has been magically converted to return. The wood as the way out of Athens has been converted to the way in. Distance has become proximity as alienation has become community.
The context of nature and its gods has transformed the context of society and its laws and the scenic movement accentuates the change.

Something strange happens to time too. The first "day" of the play is the evening or night (see i.i.2–4) of Act i. The lovers and Bottom and his company plan to meet in the wood "to-morrow night" (i.i.164, 247; i.ii.103), and Acts ii, iii, and the first part of Act iv dramatize the events of that second night. When Titania, the lovers, and Bottom awake then in Act iv, it seemingly is the dawn of the third day of the play's representation (see iv.i.97, 103, 150 ff.). Yet it is also the day of Theseus' wedding (iv.i.138–139), presumably the fifth day of the play's representation, since four days and nights were to have passed between the time of the beginning of the play and that wedding day (i.i.7–8).  

In short, what should be the second night of the play's represented time issues into the dawn of what should be the fifth day, and two days and nights are lost in the magic wood. The life process of the lovers (and of Bottom too) has been as it were speeded up under the influence of fairy time through Acts ii and iii and the first ninety-five lines of Act iv. In the one magic night in the wood the lovers have slept and awaked in strange ways, quarreled, debated, changed partners, and found their true loves; in short they have lived a life of love and courtship according to the pace of the fairies, who move "Swifter than the moon's sphere," who must do their work "ere the first cock crow" (ii.i.267), and "effect this business yet ere day" (iii.ii.395), who indeed bring the lovers via nature's action through experience into fulfilment sometime between moonlight time (ii.i.60) and the time of the morning lark (iv.i.97). Society has measured out its orders to the lovers more precisely in time. Hermia was given in the first scene the four days and nights until Theseus' wedding day to adjust her desires to society's laws and fulfill the law's penalty (i.i.83–90). As Theseus and Egeus remind us in the fourth act (iv.i.138–140), that time has passed somehow according to ordinary measure, but the lovers, and we with them, have experienced it according to extraordinary measure. The two measures become one through the process of the play's action; the contexts of nature and society mysteriously merge in time.  

The plot of the play is completed by the end of Act iv. When the commentators applied the pattern of protasis-epitasis-catastrophe to the plays of Terence, the result was a five-act formula. Generally speaking, in the tradition of new comedy the resolution of the plot is a matter for the end of the play, for the last act, and there is very little onstage dramatization of the festivity that follows resolution. But in A Midsummer Night's Dream Shakespeare devotes a major portion of the drama, the whole last act as we inherit the act divisions from the Folio editors, to festival and wedding benediction, to the komos and gamos which follow upon plot and toward which the plot is directed.  

In this last act the human revels and the fairy songs celebrate what has been achieved in the plot of the play, the union of man and nature. The social celebration of love and marriage has been made possible by fairy action that has relieved the conflict of youth and authority, love and law. It is indeed now the new season that Theseus and Hippolyta looked forward to at the beginning of the play. Renewal of society as subsumed within the more universal renewal of man in communion with nature and the rhythm of life is given concluding expression by the spirits of nature. Puck, the folk sprite, prankster of field and household, sings a song invoking a metamorphosis of life from woe and weariness into frolic. Oberon and Titania, elemental King and Queen, then lead their spirit train in song and dance to deliver nature's benediction on human life issuing into a new generation.  

The kind of fairy song that ends the play has been one of Shakespeare's methods throughout to give ritualistic expression to the action. Rhyming tetrameter songs describe the elemental action of nature spirits:

Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush, thorough brier,  
Thorough flood, thorough fire;  
Swifter than the moon's sphere;  
And I serve the Fairy Queen,  
To dew her orbs upon the green.  

(II.i.2–9)

Or they invoke the magical power of nature:

Flower of this purple dye,  
Hit with Cupid's archery,  
Sink in apple of his eye!  
When his love he doth espy,  
Let her shine as gloriously  
As the Venus of the sky.  

(III.ii.102–107)

In contrast to such fairy song there is in the play the language of argument and interpretation, designed to promote social action or interpret social experience. For example, the blank verse of lines 20–127 of the first scene is for the most part the language of courtroom exchange, placed in a pattern of charge and countercharge, accusation and defense, with Theseus as judge hearing the case. Egeus steps forth “with complaint” (I. 22) against Hermia and Lysander, demands the “obedience” due him (I. 37), cites the letter of the “law” (ll. 41–45); Hermia attempts to “plead” her thoughts (I. 61); Demetrius claims his “certain right” (I. 92); Lysander in turn asks for his “right” (I. 105) and accuses Demetrius of inconstancy (ll. 106–110).

But these examples represent only the extremes of ritualistic and rhetorical style, musical incantation on the one hand and legalistic argument on the other. It is easy enough to distinguish ritual from rhetoric in these cases, since it is not difficult to tell the difference between a song and a debate, a prayer and an argument. Between these extremes, however, there is a range of styles, marvelously intricate modes of expression rapidly shifting between the realities of nature and society.

One of Shakespeare’s methods of shifting from one reality to another is to elaborate the human rhetoric with figures of speech and sound and syntax in such a way that the figures combine with the sense to produce the effect of incantation. I have indicated above how at the beginning of the play Hippolyta’s use of repetition and simile helps to introduce the idea and feeling of incantation. It is not difficult to tell the difference between a song and a debate, a prayer and an argument. Between these extremes, however, there is a range of styles, marvelously intricate modes of expression rapidly shifting between the realities of nature and society.

The effect of this exchange is to lock the two lovers in a choric lamentation that lifts their problem out of the courtroom into ritual. Shakespeare here creates a rhetoric that transcends the function of social discourse and becomes a vehicle for the lovers to express in apostrophic prayer their complaints about the fortunes of love. In the exchange they comprehend on the one hand the social context of their problem (the obstacles to love presented by birth, station, age) and articulate on the other in exaggerated manner their response as creatures of nature (Hermia indeed with cheeks of roses and eyes of rain!) and their vague awareness of ineffable forces at work in the process of lovemaking throughout the course of time.

Lysander completes the articulation of the mysterious action of love as a phase, a substance of nature in a lyric passage marked by alliteration, assonance, and brilliant imagery:

But then a few lines later Hermia uses the same lyrical style and richly suggestive images of love and turns them into a joke:

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

In short, she pledges her faith by all that’s false. Shakespeare generally engages in such sport with his style throughout the play, using his language to move from one reality to another, pausing occasionally to turn a verbal world upon itself, as here the lyrical ritualizing of love in mythological allusion becomes a parody of itself and a mockery of stylistic affectation. Generally speaking, during the scenes in the moonlit wood the language of ritual belongs to the fairies and a mockery of stylistic affectation. Generally speaking, during the scenes in the moonlit wood the language of ritual belongs to the fairies and a mockery of stylistic affectation. Generally speaking, during the scenes in the moonlit wood the language of ritual belongs to the fairies and
mortals who engage in debate about their relations as friends and lovers, or enemies, about their conduct and the social action. But the fairies debate too in their own way (II.i.60–145), with the whole course of nature affected thereby as Titania claims, and Puck has his observations to make on social reality (I.i.42–58; III.ii.110–121), amusingly aware of his influence over that reality. And the lovers’ debates are infused with the language of ritual as they often in their quarrels and pleas express awareness of themselves or each other as creatures of nature and divinity. Demetrius, for example, can pray to Helena as “goddess, nymph, perfect, divine” (III.ii.137). Or Helena can address Hermia in language that images both Hermia and herself as “artificial gods” and remembers their “school-days friendship” as the “warbling of . . . song,” and the growth of a “double cherry” (III.ii.202–211).

The changes in style are kaleidoscopic. Through the first 187 lines of Act II, Scene i, for example, the fairy language moves from tetrameter song and pentameter-couplet lyric describing fairy action and the world of nature into couplet jokes about Puck’s domestic involvements, on to blank-verse debate between Oberon and Titania, then into the richly metaphoric and symbolic blank-verse passages on the origin and powers of the Cupid potion. Similarly the language of the lovers moves in shifting patterns. In Act III, Scene ii, lines 43–344, for example, the lovers love and quarrel, debate and wonder in a melange of styles. Half of the passage is in couplet, half in blank verse, sometimes declamatory, sometimes lyrical, sometimes stichomythic. Even within the continuum of a few lines, the style may vary in the extreme. Demetrius is ornate, alliterative, metaphoric, hymn-like, when he says to Helena, “O, let me kiss / This princess of pure white, this seal of bliss!” Helena is plain and flatly to the point in her response: “If you were civil and knew courtesy, / You would not do me thus much injury” (III.ii.143–144 and 147–148). And in the midst of the scene we hear the excited couplets and tetrameter song of Oberon and Puck that invoke the power of the nature potion on the one hand and interpret the human confusion on the other (lines 88–121).

The medley of styles is another of Shakespeare’s methods to bring together the realities of society and nature and to create the impression that the night of the lovers in the wood is both social involvement and ritual, experience and dream. It is not surprising when the lovers emerge from the wood that they “wot not by what power” (IV.i.167) they have found their true loves, that they see now the night’s activities as “things . . . small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds” (IV.i.190–191), that they “see these things with parted eye, / When everything seems double” (IV.i.192–193). For it has been the poet’s power, “The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,” glancing “from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven” that has made clouds of mountains, dream of experience, ritual of rhetoric and rhetoric of ritual, has made a single conception out of everything which seems double. Love can be expressed as a ceremony of faith or an argument of fact, or, as in this play, as both.

What is particularly interesting is the way Shakespeare controls the medley of styles to create a variety of comic effects. Hermia can understand well enough that Lysander’s prayer to her to lie innocently in the wood on a pillow of turf is nothing more than pretty riddling (II.iii.41–53). She mocks his invocation as a rhetorical trick. And conversely the debate of Oberon and Titania is curious rhetoric, based as it is on mythic premises, on Titania’s charge, for example, that Oberon “in the shape of Corin sat all day, / Playing on pipes of corn, and versing love / To amorous Phillida” (II.i.66–68) or on Oberon’s accusation that Titania led Theseus “through the glimmering night / From Perigouna, whom he ravished” (II.i.77–78). “I never heard / So musical a discord, such sweet thunder,” says Hippolyta of hounds she has heard (IV.i.120–121); so might we say of Shakespeare’s poetic and comic play with the languages of ritual and rhetoric, perhaps remembering especially the scenes in which Bottom’s bouncy prose meets in marvelous counterpoint with fairy verse in Titania’s bower.

Finally, in Bottom’s play, Shakespeare turns the medley of styles into a grand parody that burlesques the very threads out of which the language of the play has been woven. The languages of both rhetoric and ritual are magnificently abused. Language fails to fulfill a purely rhetorical function when Quince mispunctuates his introduction of the players (I.i.108–117) and says the opposite of what he intends.2 His purpose of establishing a bond of communication between the speakers and the audience thereby goes awry. And in the play when the elocutio of the players seeks to lift Pyramus and Thisby be-

2 Sister Miriam Joseph, C.S.C., cites the passage as an example of “amphibology,” one of the “vices of language” Shakespeare employed for comic effect, a device previously used in Ralph Roister Doister. See Sister Miriam Joseph’s Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language (New York, 1947), pp. 66–67.
yond the wall of reality that binds them into the transcendent world of love, the figures go awry. For example, Thisby's metaphor of cherry lips gets absurdly tangled with her apostrophe to the grotesque barrier:

O Wall, full often hast thou heard my moans
For parting my fair Pyramus and me!
My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones,
Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.
(v.i.190–193)

Stichomythia between the lovers is similarly made ludicrous by the context:

PYR. O, kiss me through the hole of this vile wall!
THIS. I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all.
(v.i.203–204)

When the lovers die, they do so with comically painful gasps of incantation, in songs of short-line beat that superbly reduce to the ridiculous the sublimities of mythic, elemental, and floral imagery:

Approach, ye Furies fell!
O Fates, come, come!
Cut thread and thrum;
Quail, crush, conclude, and quell!
(v.i.289–292)

Thus die I, thus, thus, thus.
Now am I dead,
Now am I fled;
My soul is in the sky.
Tongue, lose thy light;
Moon, take thy flight.
Now die, die, die, die, die!
(v.i.305–311)

These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, are gone.
Lovers, make moan!
His eyes were green as leeks.
(v.i.337–342)

Here the pronouncement of the sacrificial death of the hero is made manifestly absurd, an effect achieved by the abuse of a common device of rhetoric.

The play of Pyramus and Thisby is great comedy and it reveals Shakespeare's amusement at the artist's power through style to comprehend and relate the worlds of nature and experience. If in the play as a whole society has been elevated by participation in ritual into the comic mythos of renewal in communion with nature and its gods, something of a burlesque reverse of that theme of rebirth takes place in the play-within-a-play. Pyramus and Thisby is supposed to be a tragic tale of legendary lovers who think each other dead because of a chain of unfortunate circumstances and who, like Romeo and Juliet, break the bonds of an unsympathetic world by a pair of suicides. But as played by Bottom and his Company, the tale is magnificently funny: indeed Bottom entitles the play "The most Lamentable Comedy and most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby." There is no tragedy really in a world of the absolute comic vision. Bottom in the rehearsal of the play in Act III, Scene i, was concerned to make clear to the audience that "Pyramus is not kill'd indeed." When Pyramus does die in the play we can hardly believe in his death when he departs in lines of such hopping and tripping absurdity. In short, Bottom and his friends take the story of Pyramus out of the realm of legendary tragic myth and translate it via their bungling rhetoric into comedy. In the doing they deny Pyramus his tragic status and resurrect him as Bottom the clown, a figure of comic ritual in reverse, the mythic hero celebrated as "rude mechanical" and amateur actor.

In this sense the "artistry" of Bottom and his friends transforms Pyramus and Thisby into delightful entertainment for the "rite of May," just as the poetry of Shakespeare in the play as a whole transforms experience into the joy of a summer solstice dream.

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