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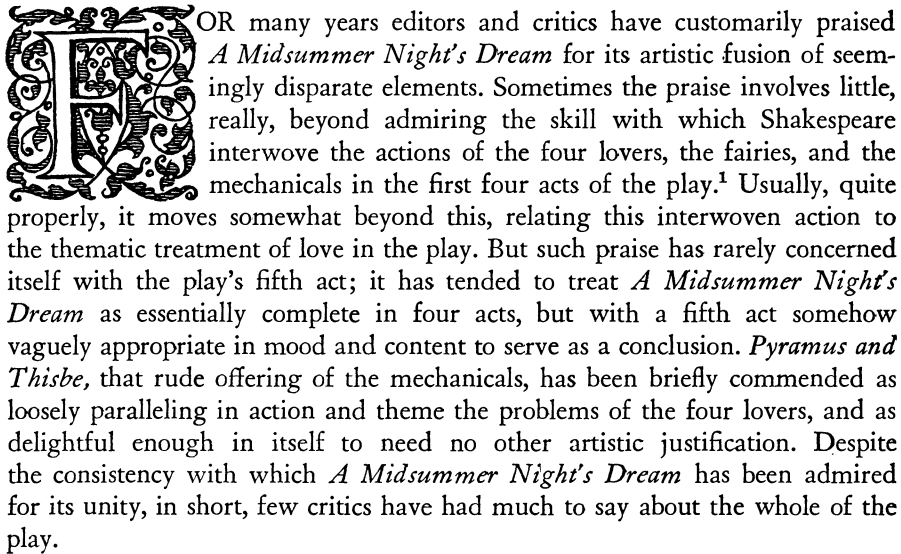
# Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

R. W. DENT



FOR many years editors and critics have customarily praised *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for its artistic fusion of seemingly disparate elements. Sometimes the praise involves little, really, beyond admiring the skill with which Shakespeare interwove the actions of the four lovers, the fairies, and the mechanicals in the first four acts of the play.[1] Usually, quite properly, it moves somewhat beyond this, relating this interwoven action to the thematic treatment of love in the play. But such praise has rarely concerned itself with the play's fifth act; it has tended to treat *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as essentially complete in four acts, but with a fifth act somehow vaguely appropriate in mood and content to serve as a conclusion. *Pyramus and Thisbe,* that rude offering of the mechanicals, has been briefly commended as loosely paralleling in action and theme the problems of the four lovers, and as delightful enough in itself to need no other artistic justification. Despite the consistency with which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been admired for its unity, in short, few critics have had much to say about the whole of the play.

The present essay seeks to reexamine the degree and kind of unity achieved by *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Without pretending to be strikingly original, it approaches the play from a somewhat different angle, suggesting that the heart of the comedy, its most pervasive unifying element, is the partially contrasting role of imagination in love and in art. I do not mean to suggest for a moment that Shakespeare composed this play, or any play, as the result of a single governing conception to which every detail can be effectively related. But I do mean to suggest that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has a dominant and premeditated conception. Thus, if my argument below appears guilty of the "intentional fallacy", it is so intentionally. Shakespeare's eye, in creating *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* did not "roll" in a "fine frenzy", and my point on imagination's role in the play demands my emphasis.

A prefatory word is necessary. Oversimply, to the Elizabethan the imagination ideally functioned as an essential servant to the understanding, whether as a reporter (the most emphasized function, that of transmitting accurate images of sense data, present or absent) or as a creator or inventor. When, as too fre-

[1] The frequency of such praise provoked R. A. Law's denial that the play had any organic unity whatever: "The Pre-Conceived Pattern of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *Texas Univ. Studies in English* (1943), pp. 5-14.

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quently happened, it became dominated by passions in conflict with reason, it became a false reporter and/or inventor. In the case of passionate love, for example, one could not say that the imagination actually caused love, but rather that love so influenced the imagination as to have it misreport what it saw, thereby heightening the passion, thereby heightening the imagination, thereby . . . an endless chain reaction to man's ever-increasing peril. In watching the lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* we tend to be aware of the imagination's activity only when it is thus failing in its proper function. At such times we can scarcely attribute the folly to love or imagination alone, obviously; it derives from their interaction.

Nothing is more common than the observation that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play "about love", about lovers' lunacy, where "reason and love keep little company together nowadays", where the follies of imagination-dominated Demetrius and Lysander are reduced to their essential absurdity by the passion of Titania for an ass. It is for the sake of this theme, surely, that Demetrius and Lysander are given so little distinctive characterization; they cannot contrast like a Claudius and a Benedick, so that a particular pairing of lovers is demanded by the characters of those involved. For the same reason, paradoxically, Hermia and Helena are differentiated, to heighten the puzzle of love's choices (as well as to increase the potentialities for comedy in the play's middle). By all conventional Elizabethan standards, tall fair gentle Helena should be the one pursued, and when Lysander eventually boasts his use of reason in preferring a dove to a raven his argument, by those standards, is indeed rational. Our laughter stems from recognizing that it is so only accidentally, as rationalization.

According to a good many critics, Shakespeare contrasts from the start the irrationality of the lovers with what these critics regard as the admirable rationality of Theseus-Hippolyta. The latter become a kind of ideal which the lovers approach by the end of the play. If so, the role of imagination in love is simple and obvious; it is a disrupting irrational influence which must eventually be purged, and will prove in simple and total contrast to the disciplined use of imagination essential to Shakespeare's art. But I cannot see that any contrast so mechanical as this is intended.

When, thanks to Dian's bud, Lysander returns to Hermia, his "true love", the return marks a release from dotage but no return to reason as such, any more than does Demetrius' return to Helena by the pansy-juice. Love's choices remain inexplicable, and the eventual pairings are determined only by the constancy of Helena and Hermia in their initial inexplicable choices. As so frequently in Shakespearian comedy, the men fluctuate before finally settling down to a constant attachment such as the heroines exhibit from the start. Men's "fancies are more giddy and unfirm, / More longing, wavering, sooner lost and won, / Than women's are."[2] In the case of true love, once stabilized—even as in the case of mere dotage—imagination cannot "form a shape, / Besides yourself to like of"[3]; it "carries no favour in't" but that of the beloved.[4] Unlike dotage, however, it is in no obvious conflict with reason, either in its

[2] *Twelfth Night* II. iv. 34-36.
[3] To use Miranda's words, *The Tempest* III. i. 56-57.
[4] *All's Well That Ends Well* I. i. 93-94.

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object or its vehemence. By the end of the fourth act we are assured that Demetrius and Lysander have come to stability of this kind. But the terminus, I repeat, is not a rationally determined one. Like Theseus at the play's beginning, at the play's ending Demetrius and Lysander are settled. Jill has Jack, nought shall go back, and the prospect of happy marriage is before them all.

Thus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the origin of love never lies in reason. Love may be consistent with reason—e.g., Lysander is undeniably "a worthy gentleman"—and a healthy imagination, although influenced by love, will not glaringly rebel against reason. But as Hermia initially indicates, her choice is dictated not by her judgment but by her "eyes", by the vision of Lysander as her love-dictated imagination reports it. As Helena says at the close of this same introductory scene, love sees with that part of the mind that has no taste of judgment. Essentially this is as true for Hermia as for the others, although her choice conflicts with parental authority rather than with sound evaluation of her beloved's merits. Despite Egeus' initial disapproval, nevertheless, her choice is eventually confirmed. She is not compelled to "choose love by another's eyes" (I. i. 140), to see with her father's judgment (as Theseus at first demanded; I. i. 57), nor even to convert her love to one directed by her own judgment. Her love at the end is what it was at the beginning, with the obstacles removed.

Not even Egeus accuses her of dotage, although he does think her somehow "witched" in her refusal to accept his choice rather than her own. "Dotage", in this play, appears essentially reserved for two kinds of amorous excess approaching madness: the monomaniacal pursuit of an unrequited love (thus Helena "dotes in idolatry", Demetrius "dotes" on Hermia's eyes, and Lysander dotes for Helena in the night's comedy of errors), or the ridiculous bestowal of affection upon an obviously unworthy object (most grotesquely in Titania's passion for Bottom, but also in the gross excesses of Lysander and Demetrius during their "dream").[5]

In the middle of the play, then, when dotage grows most rampant, so too does imagination. The frenzied praises and dispraises of Lysander and Demetrius are exceeded only by Titania's infatuation for Bottom, her hearing beauty in his voice, seeing beauty in his ears, and so on. Were follies so excessive in the cases of the mortal lovers, we could never end as we do in marriage and lasting love. Yet by the end of Act IV, with all obstacles to happily paired marriages removed—no thanks to the behavior of the lovers—the lovers can sound, and behave, rationally enough. Their love, however, is in its essence as inexplicable as ever.

The inexplicability of love's choices was of course a favorite topic for discussion in the age and a favorite theme for Shakespearian comedy. Why should two particular people fall in love, often at first sight? Were they so destined by the stars, like Romeo and Juliet (but not Romeo and Rosaline)? Were they marked by peculiarly "correspondent qualyties of bloud"?[6]

[5] Helena is never so doting that she cannot recognize her apparent folly. Unlike the other victims of dotage, however, her foolish behavior has its root in a true love, once reciprocated and then unaccountably rejected. Thus only Helena can be cured of dotage by Oberon's curing someone else, rather than herself.

[6] Cf., for example, Boaistuau's *Theatrum Mundi* (ed. 1581), pp. 192-194, which treats both theories with equal seriousness. He concludes: "Others after that they had studyed all that euer they

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To this question *A Midsummer Night's Dream* perhaps suggests no kind of answer beyond the fact that such true loves do exist, are distinct from the fancy-dominated aberrations that mark inconstancy, and when properly terminating in marriage are part of the natural—and, in that sense, rational—order of things. From the start of the play, the mystery of love's choices (including the attendant male inconstancies) is stressed. Egeus, at least metaphorically, thinks Hermia "witched", and all Elizabethans would be reminded of disputes on whether love could be caused by witchcraft, or by philtres and charms, whether naturally or supernaturally administered.[7] When the fairies first appear (in II. i), and before ever they become involved with the lovers, Shakespeare skillfully prepares us for their role. First, the inexplicable fortunes and misfortunes of housewives are attributed to Puck—this may well receive first mention because it is drawn from folklore, is familiar to the audience, and thus allows the easiest transition into what follows. A few lines later, all the recently experienced disorders of the English-Athenian weather are similarly attributed to temporary discord in the fairy macrocosm:

> And this same progeny of evils comes
> From our debate, from our dissension.
>
> (II. i. 115-116)

For this night on which we can see fairies, we are allowed to understand, playfully, the cause for otherwise unaccountable phenomena. It is in such a context, too, that we hear the play's only reference to Theseus' well known infidelities preceding his "true love" marriage to Hippolyta; these too are charged to fairy influence (although Titania discounts the charge). In short, aspects of the inexplicable past, familiar to the audience, have been imaginatively explained as fairy-caused.

Within the play, thus far, we have one similarly puzzling phenomenon, Demetrius' desertion of Helena to pursue Hermia, as well as the less specific mystery of love's choices generally. We have by now a hint that such mysteries —at least that of Demetrius' infidelity—may be similarly explained. The play will never say, understandably. Instead it will allow us for one single night to witness, and thereby understand, "the mystery of things, / As if we were God's spies".

The magic charm by which love is to be manipulated on this single night is quite naturally a flower potion administered on the eyes.[8] From the play's beginning we are reminded of the commonplace that although the eyes are integrally involved in the process of inspiring and transmitting love, nevertheless "love sees not with the eyes"; instead, the eyes "see" what the lover's

coulde therein, and not finding the spring and original of this so furious an euill, haue said that Loue was one, I know not what, that came I knowe not how, and burned I know not how, a thing very certain and true. . . ."

[7] See Burton's voluminous annotation for *Anat. Mel.*, III. ii. V. iv, or the treatment in such familiar plays as *Endymion, Othello,* or *The Duchess of Malfi*. See also, in relation to Raleigh, Bruno, and Elizabethan preachers, T. Walter Herbert's "Dislocation and the Modest Demand in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *Renaissance Papers 1961* (Durham, N. C., 1962), p. 36.

[8] Not surprisingly, "eyes" appears far more frequently in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than in any other of Shakespeare's plays (with *Love's Labour's Lost* second, for comparable reasons). Like the equally abundant use of "moon", this frequency is of course partly determined by the story, but the demands of the story are in turn determined by those of the theme.

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imagination dictates. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* at least, this imagination does not misreport sense data, except in the sense that it selects from those data and confers value accordingly. Hermia is never imagined as tall or blonde, Bottom as hairless. Titania was "enamoured of an ass", and knew it, but her selective imagination found beauty in its "fair large ears", "sleek smooth head", even in its voice. Love, via imagination, transposes "to form and dignity" by altering the normal evaluation, either in essence or in degree. At its extreme, it sees beauty where others see "things base and vile", thus finding "Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt".[9] Conversely, it unwarrantedly makes "base and vile" whatever object love causes it to reject. That the potion should be applied to the eyes was inevitable.

The choice of flower for the potion was almost equally so. "Maidens call it love-in-idleness." Perhaps it is foolish to labor over the implications of a flower which the play avoids calling explicitly by its most familiar name. But surely most of the audience would recognize the flower as the pansy, and "That's for thoughts", as Ophelia says, as well as for relief of the heart. Cotgrave may remind us of some of the usual associations:

> *Pensée: f.* A thought, supposall, coniecture, surmise, cogitation, imagination; ones heart, mind, inward conceit, opinion, fancie, or iudgement; also, the flower Paunsie.
>
> *Menues pensées.* Paunsies, Harts-ease, loue or liue in idlenesse; also idle, priuate, or prettie thoughts.[10]

However, although as Friar Laurence says,

> O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
> In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities,

the true dispenser of grace in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Oberon. The flower itself, wrongly applied by Puck, can make a hell of heaven rather than a heaven of hell. Both the mispairings and the eventual proper pairings of love,

[9] That the love-stirred (or hate-stirred) imagination commonly distorted in this fashion, by selection and erroneous evaluation, was a commonplace. Annotation is probably superfluous, but see *Anat. Mel.*, III. ii. III. i, or Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (1601), pp. 92-93: "Furthermore, the imagination representeth to the vnderstanding, not only reasons that may fauour the passion [i.e., by selection], but also it showeth them very intensiuely, with more shew and apparence than they are indeede; for as the Moone, when she riseth or setteth[,] seemeth greater vnto us, than indeed she is, because the vapours or clowdes are interuerted betwixt our eyes and her[,] euen so, the beauty and goodnesse of the obiect represented to our vnderstanding, appeareth fairer and goodlier than it is, because a clowdie imagination interposeth a mist."

A useful survey of Renaissance thought on love generally, and on its relationship to imagination, appears in Chapter IV of Franklin Dickey's *Not Wisely but Too Well* (San Marino, Calif., 1957). For the present point on the love-directed distortions of the imagination it is enough to recall Sir Topas' praise of Dipsas in Lyly's *Endymion* (ed. Bond, III. iii. 50-60) or the parody praise of Mopsa in Sidney's *Arcadia*, I. iii (ed. Feuillerat, I, 21).

[10] Necessarily, to remedy Puck's error with Lysander, Oberon must use Dian's bud, just as he does for Titania. But the pansy influence, "Cupid's power", is clearly implied to have as lasting an effect for Demetrius as "Dian's bud" for Lysander. Witness III. ii. 88-91 and V. i. 414-415, for example. Shakespeare's working out of the love theme is perhaps a bit awkward here, but only if we labor the play mechanically in a fashion contrary to is entire spirit. Yet we should not, I believe, do what several critics have done: treat the two flowers as representing opposed kinds of love, irrational and rational, carnal and chaste, etc.

On the association of magic flowers with Midsummer Night, see Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer, "Folk Medicine and the Four Fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *SQ*, X (1959), 514-515.

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on this single night, we can witness as produced by fairy influence. Oberon wishes true loves properly paired, and eventually sees that they are. Puck, while not wilfully mistaking, can delight in the consequences of his error, and we do too—the follies of mispaired doting lovers, their excessive praises and dispraises, their broken friendships, even the threat of bloodshed—potential tragedy were it not for Oberon's protection, of which we are so well aware that we can laugh at the folly they themselves take so seriously. The eventual pairings, then, are determined by Oberon, although always with the recognition that the heroines' choices are in some mysterious way right, that the pairings, to be "true loves", must correspond with their wishes. Oberon provides the remedy for the difficulties introduced at the beginning of the play and complicated by the subsequent action; the flower, like the eyes, is but his means.

The necessity of such "fairy grace" had been suggested from the start. Helena had asked in vain "with what art" Hermia won the heart of Demetrius. In love there is no art; imagination follows and encourages the mysterious dictates of the heart. Thus Lysander had appropriately wished Helena "luck" in gaining Demetrius, for only by such good fortune could she conceivably gain the man who found her every advance offensive (no more offensive, of course, than Lysander would later find Hermia, that dwarf, minimus, Ethiope). Helena had herself repeatedly lamented that her prayers were unanswered, that she somehow lacked the "grace" to be "happy", "fortunate", with "blessed and attractive eyes". On the night in the wood at last her prayers are answered. Like the rest of the lovers, including Theseus and Hippolyta, she is blessed, and an object of that "fairy grace" with which the chaos of the first four acts is ended and with which the play concludes (V. i. 406).

When initially Hermia defied her father's wishes, she said she knew not "by what power" she was "made bold". In similar terms, Demetrius later acknowledges being cured of his dotage for Hermia and restored to his true love for Helena: "I wot not by what power/ (But by some power it is)". The power is perhaps that mysterious source by which Hermia swore: "that which knitteth souls and prospers loves" (I. i. 172). "Fairy grace", certainly, removes the external obstacles to marriage for Hermia and Lysander, while at least assisting in the operation of knitting souls for all four lovers.

Initially, Hermia and Lysander had lamented that the course of true love never did run smooth. In the world of tragedy, whether for Romeo or for Pyramus, it does not. "A greater power than we can contradict" thwarts the plans of Friar Laurence, just as that same Heaven hath a hand in the tragic fortunes of Richard II. Within the complex world of these tragedies written approximately at the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the divine will plays an essential role, as critics have long recognized. Within the comic world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* where Shakespeare of course avoids so sober an explanation of "events", we have "fairy grace".

In accordance with Oberon's plan, the four lovers awake harmoniously paired and think their whole experience of the night a dream,[11] although a

[11] Only Hermia has had an actual dream (II. ii. 147ff.), a prophetically accurate one to introduce the chaos into which she initially awakes. The love-threatening serpent of her dream, symbol of male inconstancy, proves more destructive than the literal "spotted snakes with double tongue" against which we have just heard the fairies sing. For spotted, double-tongued Demetrius see I. i. 110, III. ii. 70-73.

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mystifying one with (as Hippolyta says) "great constancy". We know it was no dream, at least not in the sense they regard it as one; we have witnessed its entirety and have even better reason than Hippolyta to reject Theseus' dismissal of lovers' "shaping fantasies". What we have seen indeed "more witnesseth than fancy's images", partly because we are aware that we have been beholding the images of Shakespeare's "fancy" rather than that of the lovers. Yet we may well ask just how much it "witnesseth", and we may look to Bottom for a clue. When he awakes, he too thinks he has had a dream, and, as everyone knows, he soliloquizes in terms that echo *1 Corinthians* ii. 9-10.

> I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. . . . The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream. It shall be call'd 'Bottom's Dream,' because it hath no bottom. . . .

> 9 But *we preache* as it is written, Things w^c eye hath not sene, & eare hath not heard, nether haue entred into mans mynde, which thinges God hath prepared for thē that loue hym.
> 10 But God hath opened *them* vnto vs by his Sprite, for the Spirite searcheth all thinges, yea, the botome of Goddes secretes.[12]

It used to be customary to see no significance whatever in this echo. One might merely observe, like Dover Wilson, "that Bottom was a weaver, and therefore possibly of a Puritanical turn of mind", apt to recall Scripture. Enticed by Bottom's suggestive malapropism a few minutes earlier ("I have an exposition of sleep come upon me"), it is tempting to look for more meaningful implications, ones that "expound" Shakespeare's *Dream* if not Bottom's. The lovers, of course, never saw the fairies; their "dreams" are only of the "fierce vexation" caused by Puck's mistakes in combination with their own folly. Bottom, in turn, had seen the fairies, had been the unappreciative, unimaginative object of Titania's temporary dotage and of the ministrations of her fairies.[13] Unlike either the lovers or Bottom, however, we have ourselves been admitted

[12] I cite the 1557 Geneva New Testament, which J. A. Bryant thinks "to have been the version that Shakespeare knew best" (*Hippolyta's View* [Lexington, Ky., 1961], p. 52). The 1557 version is like Tyndale and Coverdale in "the botome of Goddes secretes"; later 16th-century translations read "the deep things of God".

[13] Two recent critics have in their different ways been especially anxious to find meaning in Bottom's echo. See Paul Olson, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Meaning of Court Marriage", *ELH*, XXIV (1957), 95-119, and Frank Kermode, "The Mature Comedies", *Early Shakespeare* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, III, London, 1961), pp. 214-220. While very unlike one another in interpretation, Olson and Kermode agree in seeing the play as essentially serious and essentially about love, true and false, earthly and spiritual.

Kermode, p. 218, seems far-fetched in comparing Bottom's vision to that of Apuleius, who, "relieved by the hand of Isis from his ass's shape, has a vision of the goddess, and proceeds to initiation in her mysteries". Titania violently rejects her dotage when awakened, and Bottom certainly has not profited from any initiation. "Bottom's dream", Kermode argues, "is *oneiros* or *somnium;* ambiguous, enigmatic, of high import. And this is the contrary interpretation of blind love; the love of God or of Isis, a love beyond the power of the eyes. . . . Bottom is there to tell us that the blindness of love, the dominance of the mind over the eye, can be interpreted as a means to grace as well as to irrational animalism; that the two aspects are, perhaps, inseparable" (p. 219). If I understand Kermode, he appears to confuse Bottom's vision with that of Shakespeare's audience, and to make that vision a product of the "blindness of love" rather than the art of the poet.

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to a more complete vision, though we may well be asses if we seek to infer from it more than the suggestion of a mysterious "grace" that sometimes blesses true love. Unlike the lovers and Bottom, we have been witnessing a play, a creation of Shakespeare's imagination. Only a part of the time have we watched imagination-dominated "dreams"; all of the time we have watched the product of Shakespeare's own imagination. If our attitude to art is that of Theseus, we may, as the humble epilogue encourages us to do, think we

> ... have but slumb'red here
> While these visions did appear.
> And this weak and idle theme,
> No more yielding but a dream.

But, being good Elizabethans, we may well remember that not all dreams are the product of disordered, passion-stimulated, never-sleeping imagination. Some dreams are divine revelations of truth, however difficult to expound, and we have already seen plays of Shakespeare where dreams contained at least a prophetic, specific truth, if not a universal one. Some dreams are yielding, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—although a poet's revelation rather than a divinity's—may be one of them.

At the same time, when we eventually hear the epilogue's modest disclaimer, we have seen much more than a treatment of "fairy grace" blessing true love. The "visions" we have beheld embrace far more than just the "visions" experienced by Titania, Bottom, and the four lovers. Our visions began with the first line of the play, and a good part of our time has been devoted to watching Bottom and his friends prepare and present a play of their own.

As I remarked at the beginning, few critics have had much to say about the relationship of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to the play as a whole.[14] Undoubtedly Shakespeare's reasons for including this farce were multiple and complex. For one thing, it is impossible to believe that *Pyramus and Thisbe* is only accidentally related to *Romeo and Juliet,* although we may never be certain which play preceded and provoked Shakespeare's contrasting treatment in the other.[15] Such considerations, however, are wholly external to our present concern with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an individual artistic entity. The play, if it was to be conventional, would of course include low comedy, and Shakespeare's problem was to determine what sort of low comedy would be most fitting. An ass like Bottom would serve to develop the love theme effectively, but such an ass could be easily introduced without his fellows. Why have a play-within-the-play, why give it the Pyramus-Thisbe plot, and why develop it in the particular way Shakespeare employed?

[14] Notable exceptions are Paul N. Siegel, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Wedding Guests", *SQ,* IV (1953), 139-144, and C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959), pp. 119-162. I am indebted to both, especially for their assuring me that my approach to the play is not wholly idiosyncratic.

[15] Not merely the play by the mechanicals but aspect after aspect of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* invites comparison, and contrast, with *Romeo and Juliet:* e.g., on Cupid's arrow versus Dian's wit, on doting versus loving, on love's "infection" through the eye, on oaths, inconstant moons, and male inconstancy, on "blind love" best agreeing with night, on dreams and fairies as "begot of nothing but vain fantasy". The relationship is too complex and too tangential to pursue here, but it once again suggests the need to treat *Pyramus and Thisbe* as an integral part of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

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To begin with, within his play for a wedding occasion[16] Shakespeare apparently saw the advantages of introducing an inept production for a parallel occasion, the wedding of Theseus. Like Biron, he recognized " 'tis some policy/ To have one show worse than" his own offering.[17] Of course he could not decide what sort of plot to choose for this contrasting production without at the same time considering what development he would give it. But for the moment we can consider the two aspects separately. In contrast to his own play, the mechanicals should choose for Theseus a plot thoroughly inappropriate for a wedding: love tragedy. Only their ineptitude, and Shakespeare's skill, should make *Pyramus and Thisbe* fit pastime for a wedding night, both for the newlyweds within *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and those beholding it. Secondly, the plot should be one inviting comparison with the main plot of Shakespeare's play. The moment we meet the mechanicals in I. ii we learn they are preparing a play of Pyramus and Thisbe. Even without the early reminder that Pyramus would kill himself, "most gallant, for love", the audience would at once recognize in the familiar story parallels, actual and potential, to what had begun in I. i. Like Hermia and Lysander, Pyramus and Thisbe would run off to the woods in the night, frantically hoping to escape the obstacles to their true love. Unlike Hermia and Lysander (but at this point of the play the audience cannot know of the fairy grace to come), Pyramus and Thisbe, the audience knows, will find their "sympathy in choice" brought to such sudden catastrophe as Hermia and Lysander had expressly feared (I. i. 132ff.).[18]

Most critics who have related *Pyramus and Thisbe* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole have largely confined themselves, very cryptically, to thematic implications of this partial parallel in the action. For E. K. Chambers, *Pyramus and Thisbe* is "but a burlesque presentment of the same theme which has occupied us throughout", that "lunacy in the brain of youth" which is "not an integral part of life, but a disturbing element in it".[19] For Arthur Brown, it is "an integral part of the main theme of the play, which seems to be concerned with gentle satire of the pangs of romantic love".[20] More soberly, for Frank Kermode it "gives farcical treatment to an important thematic element; for Bottom and his friends will perform a play to illustrate the disastrous end of doting".[21] For Paul Olson, most sober of all, it "fits into the total pattern" because "it is the potential tragedy of the lovers in the woods", reminding us of the probable consequences of the " 'headie force of frentick love' ".[22]

[16] Alfred Harbage has recently objected to interpreting Shakespeare on the basis of hypothetical occasions for which there is no external evidence ("*Love's Labour's Lost* and the Early Shakespeare", *PQ*, XLI [1962], 19-20). Nevertheless, the internal evidence that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was either written or adapted for a courtly wedding seems to me, as to most, overwhelming.

[17] *Love's Labour's Lost* V. ii. 513-514.

[18] For reasons already indicated, I think Pyramus and Thisbe meant primarily to parallel Lysander and Hermia as examples of frustrated true love rather than as examples of folly. Lysander and Hermia may not behave rationally in their flight from authority, but only when misled by pansy-juice does Lysander approach the frenzied passion which so disturbed Friar Laurence. Even in that play, I believe, Shakespeare distinguishes between Romeo's doting for Rosaline and his true but frustrated love for Juliet.

[19] *Shakespeare: A Survey* (New York, 1926), pp. 87, 80.

[20] "The Play within a Play: An Elizabethan Dramatic Device", *Essays and Studies*, XIII (1960), 47.

[21] P. 216.

[22] P. 118.

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Yet in the actual play as developed by the mechanicals, Shakespeare provides a focus that scarcely emphasizes any such parallel to the lovers. The thwarting parents are cast but never given even a line in rehearsal or production; they are referred to in neither Quince's argument nor in the lovers' speeches. In turn, the decision to run to the woods is presented in a single line, and the barrier wall is focused upon as farcical in itself rather than as a cause for action. Lastly, however ridiculous the love poetry of Pyramus and Thisbe, it scarcely seems focused for comic parallel and contrast to the speeches or actions of Shakespeare's four young lovers (except in one possible way, to be examined below).

For Shakespeare's actual development, few critics have much to say. They recognize such external considerations, all undeniably valid, as a possible light mocking of earlier plays, or the demonstration that a Romeo-Juliet plot could be converted to farce by its treatment, or the demands of the low comedy convention. More internally, they recognize the necessity that *Pyramus and Thisbe* be treated farcically if it is to harmonize in tone with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole.

But *Pyramus and Thisbe* is not merely a play about love with a partial resemblance to the love plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is, as Shakespeare's original wedding audience would be inevitably aware, a play for a wedding audience. It provides a foil to the entire play of which it is a part, not merely to the portion involving the lovers. And not only Bottom's play, but his audience as well, invites comparison with Shakespeare's.[23]

It is time to turn to the principal member of Bottom's audience, and to his famous speech beginning Act V. Himself a creation from "antique fable" unconsciously involved in "fairy toys", Theseus believes in neither. His speech, without appearing improbable or inconsistent with his character, is obviously one demanded by Shakespeare's thematic development. Just as Theseus has no dramatically probable reason to refer to "fairy toys", so too he has no reason to digress on poetry while discussing the lunacy of love. But by his speech he can provide for Shakespeare a transition from the earlier emphasis of the play upon love to its final emphasis upon art. He can explicitly link the imagination's role in love with its role in dramatic poetry. For him, with his view that "the best in this kind are but shadows", pastimes to be tolerantly accepted when offered, the imagination of the poet commands no more respect that that of the lover.

Theseus' speech introduces the words "image", "imagine", "imagination", and "imagining" to the play. But of course it does not introduce the concepts involved. As we have already seen, and as Theseus reminds us, much of the play has thus far concerned the role of imagination in love. A subordinate part has similarly drawn attention to its role in drama, a role manifested by the entirety of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The success of any play ideally demands effective use of the imagination by the author, the producers, and the audience. Perhaps through modesty, Shakespeare gives us little explicit encouragement to compare his own imaginative

[23] This point of view has been excellently advanced by Siegel (see note 14 above). My own emphases are somewhat unlike his, but his essay seems to me exceptionally illuminating, rivalled only by Barber's chapter on the play. That Siegel's view has received so little attention in the past decade leads me to hope that a partial repetition of his arguments is here excusable.

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creation with that initially provided by Quince.[24] We hear nothing, strictly, of Quince's authorial problems prior to rehearsal. The sources of our laughter spring mainly from mutilation of his text in production, by additions and corruptions, rather than from the text with which the mechanicals began. Yet some measure of comparison of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with their premutilated text is inescapable. *Pyramus and Thisbe,* with nothing demanded beyond the simple dramatization of a familiar story, could at least have been given imaginative development in action, characterization, theme, and language. It has none. The first three are less than minimal, and the language—in its grotesque combination of muddled syntax, padded lines, mind-offending tropes, ear-offending schemes—does violence even to what would otherwise be woefully inadequate. We have:

> Anon comes Pyramus, sweet youth and tall,
> And finds his trusty Thisby's mantle slain;
> Whereat, with blade, with bloody blameful blade,
> He bravely broach'd his boiling bloody breast,

or

> O grim-look'd night! O night with hue so black!
> O night, which ever art when day is not!
> O night, O night! alack, alack, alack,
> I fear my Thisby's promise is forgot!
> And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,
> That stand'st between her father's ground and mine!
> Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
> Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!

Contrasting in every respect we have *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* perhaps the most obviously "imaginative" of all Shakespeare's plays before *The Tempest:* we have the poetic fusion of classical and native, remote and familiar, high and low, possible and "impossible", romance and farce—all controlled by a governing intention and developed in appropriately varied and evocative language. Unlike Bottom, if not unlike the Quince who calls his play a "Lamentable Comedy", Shakespeare knows what is appropriate for his purposes. He will have infinite variety, but not merely variety as an end in itself. Bottom wishes to have a ballad written of his dream, and "to make it the more gracious" he will sing it over the dead body of Thisbe at the tragedy's end. Shakespeare, very literally "to make it the more gracious", will end his comedy with a song bestowing fairy grace. The contrast needs no laboring.

The contrast in authorial imagination, however, is not the principal cause for turning *Pyramus and Thisbe* from tragedy to farce. In the first appearance of the mechanicals, the largely expository casting scene, we get a hint of the aspect that receives subsequent emphasis: author-director Quince warns that if the lion roars "too terribly" it will "fright the Duchess and the ladies", and Bottom proposes as a solution to "roar you as gently as any sucking dove" (a remedy almost as sound as the later suggestion to "leave the killing out"). What

[24] Quince is perhaps the one who most invites contrast with Shakespeare, while his fellows contrast with the remainder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Yet Bottom by his irrepressible initiative tends to usurp even the authorial role. He is indeed the play's "weaver", effectively intertwining the thematic threads of love and art in the play.

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the mechanicals fail to understand, obviously, is the audience's awareness that drama is drama, to be viewed imaginatively but not mistaken, in any realistic sense, for reality. The idea that these clowns could conceivably create a terrifying lion is in itself ridiculous, but the basic folly lies in their supposing that their prospective intelligent audience will have the naiveté of Fielding's Partridge. And it is this aspect that receives all the emphasis of the mechanicals' rehearsal scene. Except for a very few lines of actual rehearsal, enough to heighten our expectation of the eventual production as well as to allow Bottom's "translation" to an ass, the whole rehearsal is concerned with how the mechanicals abuse their own imaginations by a failure to understand those of the audience. On the one hand they fear their audience will imagine what it sees is real, mistaking "shadows" for reality; on the other, they think the audience unable to imagine what it cannot see. Paradoxically, although they lack the understanding to think in such terms, they think their audience both over- and under-imaginative, and in both respects irrational. For each error Shakespeare provides two examples. More would render the point tedious rather than delightful; fewer might obscure it. Thus, to avoid the threat of over-imagination, they resolve by various ludicrous means to explain that Pyramus is not Pyramus and that the lion is not a lion; then, to counteract the audience's under-imagination, they will create Moonshine and Wall. In a play where Shakespeare's audience has been imagining moonshine since the beginning, Bottom and Quince can conceive only of real moonshine or a character to "disfigure" it. Of course they choose the latter. So too they can think only of bringing in a real wall, weighing tons, or another disfiguring personification.[25]

Significantly, Shakespeare opens the rehearsal scene as follows:

> *Bottom.* Are we all met?
> *Quince.* Pat, pat; and here's a marvail's convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring house....

The stage is a stage, not a green plot; the tiring house is a tiring house, not a hawthorn brake. The Lord Chamberlain's Men ask us to imagine a green plot and hawthorn brake, just as they ask us to imagine nonexistent fog or, on the other hand, imagine the invisibility of an obviously visible Oberon.[26] The play perpetually makes such demands upon us, and even greater ones. It asks us not only to accept mortal-sized actors as diminutive fairies but even to let them be bi-sized, sleeping in flowers and yet engaging in intimate association with ass-headed Bottom. Most basic of all, it asks us to enter imaginatively into a world dominated by fairies, and to accept them as the ultimate source of disharmony and of harmony, while at the same time not asking us to "believe" in them at all.

[25] Shakespeare wisely avoided much use of "Antigonus pursued by a bear" on the stage of his plays, but, as several critics have pointed out, the wall for *Romeo and Juliet* II. i may have posed momentary staging problems which find their reflection here.

[26] Modern productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* admittedly magnificent spectacles, often seem to have more in common with the mechanicals than with Shakespeare. Such productions obscure, if not destroy, thematic implications of the kind discussed here. Readers of the play are sometimes subjected to a similar disservice by editors—e.g., the New Cambridge stage direction opening II. i: "The palace wood, a league from Athens. A mossy stretch of broken ground, cleared of trees by wood-cutters and surrounded by thickets. Moonlight[.]"

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When we next see the mechanicals (except for their brief transitional appearance in IV. ii) it will be after Theseus' speech, with its condescending attitude toward poetry, and after the prefatory discussion by the court concerning the "tedious brief . . . tragical mirth" they wish to enact.[27] The emphases in the actual production—including both the production itself and the asides by the audience—are just what we have been prepared for in the rehearsal: not the follies of love but the follies of abused imagination in the theatre. When, for example, Quince concludes his Argument,

For all the rest,
Let Lion, Moonshine, Wall, and lovers twain
At large discourse while here they do remain,

Theseus cannot yet believe that Quince literally means "discourse":

*Theseus.* I wonder if the lion be to speak.
*Demetrius.* No wonder, my lord. One lion may, when many asses do.

But before ever they hear the talking lion they listen to "the wittiest partition that ever I heard discourse", that "courteous wall" which provides the "chink to blink through", only to receive the curses of frustrated Pyramus.

*Theseus.* The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again.
*Pyramus.* No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I told you. Yonder she comes.

As Theseus says, a few lines later,

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

There is no danger of wounding the feelings of a Bottom by letting him overhear an aside. His imagination, devoid of understanding, can as easily create beauty in his own mind as it can create unintended farce on the stage. Titania's folly, if possible, was less than what we are now witnessing.

Wall's eventual exit provokes further satiric asides, followed by the primary thematic dialogue of the play:

*Hippolyta.* This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.
*Theseus.* The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.
*Hippolyta.* It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

While a successful production depends on the imaginative cooperation of playright, producers, and audience, Bottom's group has placed the entire burden on the audience. Theseus' group quite naturally makes no effort to "amend them". The tragedy is too entertaining as farce, too fitting for their nuptial spirits, and, besides, it would take an imagination transcending Shakespeare's own to give "form and dignity" to this *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

What follows demands no further elaboration. The lion proves "a goose

[27] This includes, of course, Theseus' comments on how a noble host should accept any well intended offering, however incompetent. Surely the host of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, especially if a greater admirer of poetry than Theseus, would recognize the implications as to how he should receive their humbly presented masterpiece.

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for his discretion"; the moon, appearing "by his small light of discretion" to be "in the wane",[28] ridiculously exits on command from Pyramus. And so on, until "Moonshine and Lion are left to bury the dead". "Ay, and Wall too."

But we may return to Theseus' comment that "The best in this kind are but shadows". In a sense he is obviously right, as Shakespeare never ceases to remind us, but his estimation of such "shadows" is consistently deprecating. A noble governor, quite willing to accept poetry for a wedding-night pastime and to acknowledge it as the well-intended offering of his faithful subjects, he at no time implies any respect for it. Shakespeare's entire play implies a contrary view, despite the humility of its epilogue.

Just how contrary a view is open to question. In his "Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic",[29] William Rossky usefully surveys in detail the reasons for imagination's "general disrepute" in Elizabethan England, and the response it produced from defenders of poetry. His basic thesis is well summarized in his concluding paragraph:

> Thus laboring to free the poetic imagination from the current disrepute of the faculty, Elizabethan poetic responds to the very bases of the disrepute. Although instrumental to the healthy operation of the soul, imagination, according to the psychology, is a faculty for the most part uncontrolled and immoral—a faculty forever distorting and lying, irrational, unstable, flitting and insubstantial, haphazardly making and marring, dangerously tied to emotions, feigning idly and purposelessly. And from the attempt to combat these grounds of disrepute through the adoption and adaptation of materials which were an absorbed part of every educated Elizabethan's background—materials often from the very psychology itself—there evolves a concept of poetic feigning: that poetic feigning is a glorious compounding of images beyond life, of distortions which are yet verisimilar imitations, expressing a truth to reality and yet a higher truth also, controlled by the practical purpose, the molding power, and, in almost every aspect, by the reason and morality of the poet.

The age's defenders of poetry—whether in extended defenses like Sidney's, or in prefaces like Chapman's or Jonson's, or even in passing (like Hamlet's)—inevitably stressed the high moral function of poetic imagination. One seldom finds so modest a defense as that prefacing *The Shoemakers' Holiday:* "Take all in good worth that is well intended, for nothing is purposed but mirth, mirth lengthneth long life." Yet, after all, as Theseus implied, there is a time for "pastime", and only the most vigorous precisian would have denied it. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could have been defended as indeed a pleasant pastime, especially appropriate for a wedding occasion but fitting for any moment of merriment. It could be further defended, unmistakably, as a delightful exposition of the follies produced by excessive imagination in love and the pleasures produced by controlled imagination in art. Only the most stubborn

[28] It is fanciful, perhaps, to see parallel implications in the opening of Shakespeare's play, where "O, methinks how slow/ This old moon wanes" before the new "moon, like to a silver bow/ New-bent in heaven" can appear. Certainly while the old moon wanes we behold the inconstancies and indiscretions of lovers, the "lunatic" aspect of love. With the new moon comes harmonious marriage, and the "silver bow" with its Diana associations (witness the later *Pericles* V. i. 249) may well suggest this alternative aspect of the moon, the prevalent one in the play.

[29] *Studies in the Renaissance,* V (1958), 49-73.

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precisian could have thought poetry the "mother of lies" after witnessing Shakespeare's thematic distinction, however ambiguous in its ultimate implications, between the worlds of imagination and of "reality". Thus in offering a defense for its own existence the play simultaneously offers us Shakespeare's closest approximation to a "Defense of Dramatic Poesy" in general.

In some measure, surely, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is such a defense, although one that expresses its view by indirection and without the emphasis upon strictly moral edification one commonly finds in more formal defenses. More legitimately than Greene, Shakespeare might well have appended to his play: *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.* Theseus links lunatic, lover, and poet indiscriminately. Shakespeare, by contrasting the role of imagination in love with that in dramatic poetry, discriminates. As the play delightfully demonstrates, and lightly satirizes, the imagination in love often operates in defiance of "discretion", especially in creating beauty observable by no one but the creator. Poetic art, distinct from that of a Quince or Bottom, is in accord with discretion, and its creations are capable of universal appreciation, both as beautiful and as meaningful. In love, the ridiculous results from the dominance of imagination over reason, and the lover is unaware of his being ridiculous. In good art, the ridiculous (if it exists) is the product of imagination's cooperation with reason, occurs only when the dramatist intends it, and is subordinated to a purpose which in some degree, at the least, combines *utile* with *dulci*. Rather than being a foe to good living, poetic imagination can be its comfort and its guide, far "more yielding" than most dreams. Whether *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has an unplumbed "bottom" as well as its inescapable Bottom I hesitate to say. But it provides us "a most rare vision", one that offers us a disarmingly unpretentious defense of poetry by the greatest of England's poets.

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