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Nalin Ranasinghe

*Assumption College*, nranasin@assumption.edu

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## Ass, You Like It? Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Political Philosophy

Nalin Ranasinghe

William Shakespeare's early comedies are marked by the pervasive presence of twins. Remarkably, this theme extends even to the level of the plays themselves: comedies and tragedies with striking similarities appear on stage at about the same time. While each play in such a dyad conforms to the requirements of its respective genre, the presence of a *doppelgänger* creates irony, and raises questions about the comic or tragic conclusions reached in each play.

One such pair is *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both were written and performed in the mid-1590s, and both raise very similar questions about love, marriage and politics while yet describing exactly opposite—and thus perfectly complementary—dramatic trajectories. In *Romeo and Juliet* we see a potential comic resolution to a political impasse turn tragic through a malefic combination of religious meddling and star-crossed accident. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on the other hand, presents an inherently tragic situation that slips into a conventional comic conclusion. Its characters are not weighed down by determinate causality and intractable philosophical struggles with their own natures; the whole play seems to share Puck's airy comment on human affairs: "Lord, what fools these mortals be" (III.ii.115). The attitude of the fairies is broadly benevolent; they revel in what's comic and contingent in human matters, advancing rather than hindering the interests of mortals. Despite much misunderstanding and maladroit manipulation, the actions of the

Nalin Ranasinghe is Professor of Philosophy at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts.

play's characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are hardly fatalistic. For the most part, humans entangle themselves in homespun webs of false necessity. They are foolish, but not wicked. Unlike *Romeo and Juliet*, which shows the disaster that can arise from imposing social, political, and clerical structures on human life, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers a self-portrait of Shakespeare, a man as playful as Puck and as wise as Bottom, as he attempts to reconcile the divine and the human in our nature, and tries to repair the rupture between reason and religion.

In repudiating the reductive cruelty of Old Comedy, and rehabilitating, in the spirit of Erasmus, the gentler magic of a Menander or Plautus, Shakespeare offers a truly Christian alternative both to the austere anti-theatrical hellfire of Knox and to the corrupt ritualism of the Old Church. The new and overzealous religious piety of Shakespeare's time banished all playhouses from London and re-situated them on the other side of the river. Similarly, the young lovers Hermia and Lysander escape the harsh laws of the city by taking refuge in the dark woods of the imagination. I argue that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes the case for ending the ancient feud between philosophy and poetry, which in Shakespeare's day had become a conflict between rational but politicized religionists and pagan pastoral poets.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* signals its comic intent by rewriting the myth of Theseus and Hippolyta. Anyone conversant with the Greek tales would know that on the eve of Theseus's marriage to Hippolyta an Amazon invasion of Attica took the bride's life—a conclusion as contrary to the sunny ending of Shakespeare's play as any that could be dreamed. It seems, then, that because of the events Shakespeare relates, the tragic outcomes of the myth were averted. Hippolyta did not die in battle against her own people; Theseus did not take another wife, Phaedra; and Hippolytus, the son of Theseus and Hippolyta, did not die misjudged by his father because of his haughty insensitivity to his stepmother's passion for him. Shakespeare's alternative mythology transmutes tragedy into comedy.

But Shakespeare does not leave the tragic behind entirely.

We are reminded of darker forces at the very start of the play. Theseus, in ordering Philostrate to encourage exuberance in the kingdom, makes a reference to sorrow by way of contrast: “Go, Philostrate, / Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments; / Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth; / Turn melancholy forth to funerals; / The pale companion is not for our pomp” (I.1.11-15).<sup>1</sup> Almost immediately, an old man bearing his father’s name, Egeus, appears with a complaint against his disobedient daughter Hermia. The original Egeus, Theseus’s father, threw himself into the ocean when he failed to see the victorious signal flag that Theseus forgot to fly over the ship returning him to Athens from his mission to defeat the Minotaur in Crete. The Aegean Sea remains an enduring monument to Egeus’s precipitous despair.

Shakespeare’s Egeus is similarly hasty in despairing over his child. Hermia has fallen madly in love with Lysander rejecting her father’s wish that she marry the almost identical Demetrius. For his part, Demetrius has recently turned his affections to Hermia, despite having previously wooed and won the love of Helena, who had once been Hermia’s closest friend. Shakespeare paints the two pairs of lovers as being almost indistinguishable in character from each other.<sup>2</sup>

Angry Egeus demands that the full weight of the patriarchal Athenian law be applied against his disobedient daughter. If Hermia persists in denying her father’s legal right to overrule her affections, she must choose between execution and perpetual confinement in a nunnery (I.i.69-73). Although Theseus is sympathetic toward Hermia, he claims to be powerless under the law he must uphold; he gives her the same four days to make her

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1. Citations from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are keyed to *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard, and Katharine Maus, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

2. My reading of the play has been greatly influenced by Rene Girard’s “Love by Another’s Eye: Mimetic Punning in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” in his book *A Theatre of Envy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 72-79.

choice that stand between him and his approaching nuptials. (I.i.83ff.) According to Duke Theseus, Hermia should view her father as a god. She is but wax, subject to his formative power, to be defaced or reshaped in any way he chooses (I.i.47-51). It is also clear that Egeus is willful; even though there is no real difference between the two men vying for his child's hand, his own freedom of choice is all that really matters. In other words, to Egeus reason means nothing more than his authority to rule arbitrarily over the desires of those under his power. His law is not just; it is merely the tyranny of age over youth. It is no wonder that Hermia and Lysander try to flee from it.

Yet when we follow the lovers to overhear their conference, we rapidly lose our respect for them as well. It is as everything they know about love came from a poor staging of *Romeo and Juliet*—a play, I think, which Shakespeare spent much of his career trying to atone for. In choosing Juliet's adolescent passion over Egeus's self-centered authority, the lovers find themselves hooked on the other horn of the dilemma. Pure passion is as mad as puritanical rationality. Furthermore, since *A Midsummer Night's Dream* actually contains a poor performance of a crude version of *Romeo and Juliet*, we see our lovers obliviously mocking a play that accurately reflects their own follies and vices. To their elders, they are victims of Eros, tortured on the rack of passion.

Lysander and Hermia are quite certain that "the course of true love never did run smooth" (I.i.134). To them this means that the intensity of their mad passion is reinforced by the conventional love-perils they must overcome—and they are unaware of the fact that having love-perils is itself a convention. But this surely amounts to choosing "love through another's eyes," (I.i.140) the very command Hermia rejects when told her eyes must see with her father's judgment. Further confirmation of the self-conscious madness induced by this kind of love is given by Helena, who tells Demetrius of the lovers' plan to flee Athens, thus jeopardizing her chance to be rid of her rival merely because she expects to be thanked by him for this favor. Helena is all too aware of the fickle nature of love, which "looks not with the eyes but with the

mind” (I.ii.234), but she is no less prone to be ruled by a force that elevates “to form and dignity . . . things base and vile” (I.ii.232). Her judgment is ruled by forces to which she submits, even as she laments their tyranny. We are again reminded of her namesake, Helen of Troy, and her excuse “a god made me do it.”<sup>3</sup> This divinization of love—both affirmed and denied in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the extent that it reveals love to be random and supernaturally potent—seems to distinguish between two distinct ways of being influenced by love: we can fall under the spell of an imaginary love we create for ourselves, or we can actually succumb to the real thing. Although *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* seems to warn that the effects of imaginary love are as short-lived as they are rare, we will shortly receive an account of the transcendent origins of this sickness. This disease is so potent that just the desire for it can lead to follies that lack all the divine power and inspiration imparted by true love.

Meanwhile, in accordance with Theseus’s demand for merriment, a troupe of lowly but loyal Athenian artisans are preparing to stage a play. Although these men are far lower on the social scale than the lovers, their affairs, and the account of imagination that attends them, are of particular interest because Shakespeare himself did not belong to the nobility, while he is almost universally considered one of the world’s greatest poets. Like the demi-deity Eros, whom Diotima describes in Plato’s *Symposium* as the offspring of Need and Plenty,<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare is a unique combination of low status and high imagination. Despite being out in “the wind and the rain” like Touchstone at the play’s end, Shakespeare nevertheless had the honor of being summoned to entertain the highest nobility. One could say that Titania is the alter-ego of Queen Elizabeth.

Thus, despite the ridicule they suffer, the players called “rude mechanicals”—and Bottom in particular—will teach us how to laugh at them; this will prepare us for the self-knowledge that will have us laughing at ourselves together with Puck. The deep

3. Homer. *Iliad*, 6.349.

4. Plato, *Symposium*, 203b-d.

self-knowledge that is to be imparted here is comic rather than condemnatory: the doctrine of original sin and limited redemption is replaced by the doctrine that men are fools with immortal yearnings that make us both sublime and ridiculous. Shakespeare's theater takes the place of the church and its rituals, just as Athenian theater sought simultaneously to worship, to edify, and to entertain. As in the Christian liturgy, the Theater of Dionysus—a god-man who was torn apart and consumed by his devotees—brought grace and desire into close contact. In theater, the performance is not marred by the personal imperfections of the individual performers, just as in the Mass the sacrifice of the Eucharist is not tainted by any sins that may attach to the priest performing the service. Indeed, the theater constitutes a polite but decidedly pagan challenge to the church's claim to be the sole pathway to God. Shakespeare's comic theater does not insult divinity, and thus it avoids both hubris and original sin. On the contrary, it takes the ancient Greek view of the sacredness of theater and joins to it the Christian humanistic belief in the ultimate goodness of both creation and its God.

Now the rude mechanicals are anxious not to offend the nobles in the audience; for this reason they try to explain away any troubling aspects of their performance. This concern is essentially political. Theater has always been a vehicle for breaking through class constraints, and an indirect organ of social criticism, as the ruling classes have always been well aware. Recall Elizabeth I's alarm at recognizing herself in Richard II: she is supposed to have said, "I am Richard II, know ye not that?"<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare too is aware of the political implications of his art. By calling his play a "Dream" and presenting it as fantasy, he makes it easy for his audience to escape the strictures of society. This in turn allows them eventually, like the young lovers in the play, to be delivered from the shackles of self-ignorance that are tightened by society's prohibitions—as illustrated by the Myth of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*.

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5. See Jason Scott-Warren, *Was Elizabeth I Richard II?: The Authenticity of Lambard's "Conversation,"* *Review of English Studies* 64: (2012), 208-230.



Bottom the weaver stands out from all the other players. His profession suggests that Shakespeare intends him to be a parody of Plato's statesman, who weaves together all the different constituencies of a city. He resembles the kind of poet most feared by the guardians of the *Republic* in his zany desire to play every role and steal every scene.<sup>6</sup> His wild malapropisms suggest that he cares little for the nature of things, and that nothing is stable in his whirligig view of reality. For Bottom, at bottom, all things are one. This would be worrying enough to the forces of order, but what is worse is his earnest desire to "play" the tyrant (I.ii.21-22, 33). Fortunately, no one has to take Bottom seriously. Although his boundless energy, incorrigible ingenuity, and good humor might have stood him in good stead at a higher station in life, Bottom's Christian name, Nick, indicates his actual condition: he is "nicked," or safely penned within the confines of social reality.

The play now turns to the fairies in the depths of the forest. We meet Puck (an emancipated version of Prospero's indentured spirit Ariel in *The Tempest*), who is the chief factotum of Oberon, King of Fairies. If Bottom is the hidden solid base of our play, Puck is its grand unifying principle; his task is "to jest to Oberon and make him smile" (II.i.44). This sprite seems to delight in jolting all things out of their accustomed positions and thereby causing their true natures to be revealed. Nature, after all, involves continual growth and self-revelation: as Heidegger pointed out, in Greek the term for nature, *phusis*, essentially means "growth."<sup>7</sup> The nature of a city too must involve growth, repeated overturning of established categories, and continual revelation of its character. The static order of a city is only its body; a city only becomes a *polis* by striving toward the beautiful and the just,<sup>8</sup> and it often needs the aid of guiding *daimon* to do so. In fifth-century Athens, Socrates played this role through his persistent

6. Plato, *Republic*, 398a.

7. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 189.

8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b.



practice of public dialectic. In the Athens of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck plays this role through his persistently playful upending of public norms. The continual reconsideration of settled categories shows that the *telos* of the city, its true end and purpose, cannot be sustained by economic and social stability and self-sufficiency. Such a structure results in a stifling hegemony like that of Egeus, in which the old use the law to punish the sexual desires of the young in order to advance their own vices, which are directed more at gaining and preserving power than at fertile productivity.<sup>9</sup>

Puck reports a quarrel between Oberon, his master, and Titania, the queen of the fairies. It seems that they have fallen out over a changeling boy on whom they both have claims. While the queen loves him for the sake of her dear friend, his dead mother, with whom she spent many a pleasant hour, Oberon seems to want him for reasons that have more to do with jealousy than genuine affection. It seems that the mimetic impulse to desire another's possession simply because the other takes delight in it extends far beyond the human realm. But we also see the contrast between this kind of jealous desire, which can only express itself through contending over things inconsequential in themselves, and true friendship. When we recall how the longstanding friendship between Hermia and Helena was swiftly ended by the introduction of mimetic romantic desire, we wonder how and from source wanton fancy, a sort of love in idleness, gains the tragic desire to uproot itself from what is natural and orderly. Mimetic desires must reflect, however deceptively, some transcendent reality that the natural order can only understand in terms of transgression and outrage. Otherwise, we cannot explain how the imagination effortlessly overturns the natural order, strikes out after goals that cannot be grasped by the likes of old Egeus, and threatens to turn us all into lunatics, star-crossed lovers, and bad poets. Small wonder that the outraged rulers of a city choose to fight this force using every means in their power.

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9. See Montaigne, "On Repenting" in *Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1958), 610-620.

Some explanation of the origin of these desires is provided when Oberon and Titania make their entrance accompanied by their entourages. While they bicker we learn that both Theseus and Hippolyta owe much to the fairy queen and king: although their beneficiaries are oblivious to this, Oberon and Titania have provided these lucky mortals whom they love with supernatural assistance in their heroic exploits. It is striking that the benevolence of the fairy rulers is bestowed upon Theseus and Hippolyta on the basis of erotic attraction. Even for fairies, love seems to defy all the conventions of marital fidelity. Although they know how to use love's power far more efficiently than humans, the fairies are clearly not immune to the madness of love. This is why their quarrel over the changeling boy has produced terrible consequences in the physical world. Nature's order has been terribly disrupted: the harvests have been ruined; the seasons do not change on time; indeed, all the limits of nature have been transgressed. Titania admits that she and Oberon are the progenitors of this mad chaos. Their erotic desires are not fulfilled by sexual union, but rather by infusing those they love with their power. The rhythm and order of the cosmos, and of all the creatures in it, seem to be kept through their meeting and dancing, which their quarrel has prevented.

After Hippolyta's angry departure, Oberon schemes to torment her for this "injury" to his pride. Now Puck is told to employ magic against Titania; he must use the juice of a flower, once touched by one of Cupid's arrows, to make her fall madly in love with the next living creature she sees (II.i.172). Insofar as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* analogizes the politics of its time, neither Cupid's arrow nor Puck's flower-juice hit the mark. The intended victim, the Queen of England, seems to have been immune to love's otherwise irresistible power. Elizabeth was about sixty years old when the play was first produced, and by that time, it appears, she understood the reality of love, and was not to be ruled by its false signifiers.

While Shakespeare may tread, however lightly, on dangerous political ground, he does not seem to be in open conflict with the unstated doctrines of love that we have managed to derive from

the play. We distinguished earlier between the real madness of love and merely falling victim to the concept of love. Now let us remember Plato's *Phaedrus*, from which the language of lunatic, lover, and poet is derived, and recall Socrates' famous palinode in defense of truly divine love.<sup>10</sup> Like Elizabeth, Socrates—whose only claimed area of expertise was in matters of love—was immune to the blandishments of false love: he was more than able to resist the sexual attraction of the all-but-irresistible Alcibiades.<sup>11</sup> These examples of being able to separate true love from false love show that love is not in itself madness. Nevertheless, it is also the basis of the various forms of lunacy come over us because of our craving for love, a craving that is often just as blind as it is selfish. We must distinguish between beholding the genuine object of love, falling into the genuine madness of love, and embracing the base imitation of this genuine madness—recall Plato's condemnatory suspicions in the *Republic* of imitations twice and thrice removed from the truth.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the *Phaedrus* Plato describes even the god of Olympus as being only a bit better than humans at pursuing true hyper-Uranian beauty.<sup>13</sup> Although Oberon and Titania are not comparable to the Olympian gods, they are still located on much higher rungs on the ladder of love than humans. If Plato is to be believed, the fairies can confer the benefits of love on those below them, while they themselves also remain subject to the power of love.

Returning now to the play's action: Oberon, hiding in the forest, observes Demetrius and Helena. Plato's image of the magnetic chain of attraction from the *Ion* is the key to their behavior.<sup>14</sup> Demetrius searches wildly for Hermia, despite being well aware of the repugnance she feels for him; Helena meanwhile com-

10. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a ff.

11. Plato, *Symposium*, 219 b-d.

12. Plato, *Republic*, 602b-c.

13. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247a-c.

14. Plato, *Ion*, 533d-536d.

plains quite explicitly about the magnetic attraction that her sometime lover still exerts on her. She is well aware of, but unaffected by, his repeated claims to be sickened by the sight of her. Demetrius is disgusted Helena's masochistic appeal, "The more you beat me, I will fawn on you: / Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, / neglect me, lose me; only give me leave, / unworthy as I am, to follow you" (II.i.204-5). But this reaction, she says, only increases her desire for him.

Oberon watches them leave, the maid in hot pursuit of the man, and he feels sympathy for hapless Helena. He instructs Puck, who has just returned with the magic juice, to apply some of it to the eyes of the man in Athenian garb so that he will return the affections the young woman he has just spurned. While Puck is occupied in this task, Oberon will treat sleeping Titania's eyes in the same way. While the fairy king's intentions toward his own queen are clearly mischievous, he sincerely wishes to help poor spurned Helena win back her beloved. Unfortunately, or perhaps serendipitously, Puck sprinkles the flower-juice on Lysander as he sleeps some distance away from Hermia following a minor disagreement over whether or not it would be correct for them to lie in repose beside each other. Then, as luck would have it, Helena comes by, still chasing Demetrius. She awakens Lysander only to see him fall madly in love with her. Helena, in a self-pitying mood after her encounter with Demetrius, believes that Lysander is playing a cruel trick on her. She cannot understand how else he would now speak so dismissively of his beloved Hermia, while lavishing the most fulsome praise on herself. Helena then flees, hotly pursued by the newly ardent Lysander.

Meanwhile Hermia, waking up from a nightmare to find herself alone in the dark forest, panics. Certain that Lysander would never have abandoned her, she is convinced that something quite terrible has happened to him. By this time, however, her categorical certainty about Lysander has been undermined, for the audience at least, both by the implicit sexual overture he made to her and by the subliminal message in her dream of a serpent stealing away with her heart. Hermia takes this a warning that Helena will betray her, as indeed she has (though not in relation to Lysander).

Here we begin to note that the course of their love will be compromised equally by their own characters and by the impediments others will throw in their paths. Whatever their fate will be at the play's end, their mimetically idealized expectations of each other will have been modified by these magically induced events. The four lovers, trapped between the stifling laws of the city and the mad passions released in the forest, are consumed in pairs, just as Theseus's Minotaur devours the pairs of young people in Crete. As the second act ends, attention is drawn to Titania, who slumbers in her bower. She too will soon awaken to find herself drawn to a most unexpected erotic object.

When the third act begins we are again reminded by the mechanicals' elaborate precautions to avoid giving offense, that Shakespeare too is conveying weighty and sensitive matters in an allegorical fashion. Bottom begins the rehearsal by declaring that some things in their comedy "will never please" (III.i.9). He believes that gentle ladies in the audience will never bear the sight of Pyramus killing himself. But, rather than leaving the killing offstage as the Greeks would, Bottom proposes writing a prologue that would dispel all fear by revealing not only that Pyramus is not really killed, but also that Pyramus is actually Bottom the Weaver. Further, since the sight of a lion would occasion even greater fear, the lion should name himself and wear a mask exposing half the actor's face. As a final absurd precaution, this fearful lion should expressly entreat the audience not to show fear or even tremble as he comes before them; for that, he should tell the onlookers, would be the pity of his life.

The players then address several ridiculous technical problems, with Bottom once again taking the lead. They consider how to represent the moonlit night when Pyramus and Thisbe meet, and decide it would be best for one to enter with a bush of thorns and a lantern, saying "that he comes to disfigure or to present the person of Moonshine" (III.i.51-53). Next, since the lovers speak through a wall, Bottom proposes that another dress in materials "that signify wall" and use his fingers to make a hairy, chalky cranny through which Pyramus and Thisbe speak words of love to each other (III.i.57-60).

While it is very clear that Shakespeare intends Bottom's audience to find these primitive representations hilarious, and in the last instance even obscene, he fully expects, on the contrary, that most of those in his own audience will be oblivious to his taking similar—if markedly less absurd—precautions to obviate offense and fear. He takes these measures in order to prevent his audience from suspecting that they are being deceived. Just as Helena should not have been convinced that Lysander and Demetrius were mocking her intentionally, although they themselves in their separate delusions were quite sincere, Shakespeare has to do all he can to prevent his audience from indulging in the paranoid suspicion the playwright, or even the whole world, is deliberately engaged in a conspiracy against them—as tempting as such a conclusion may seem to their solipsistic egos. Shakespeare takes great pains to reveal the extent to which coincidences, accidents, and errors pervade the human world. Gods and fairies seldom act with perfect foresight; more often, they are scrambling to repair the damage done by blind chance, mortal mistakes, and even their own well-intended plans.

The climax of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* arrives when Puck decides to place an ass's head on Bottom. As a result of this strange transformation the other players run away in terror and the unsuspecting weaver is left alone with Titania. This fulfills Oberon's desire that his queen should fall madly in love with a "vile thing" (II.ii.40) when she awakens to see Bottom with her anointed eyes. Oberon's aim is to embarrass Titania in order to make her more willing to surrender to him her former favorite, the little changeling boy. Yet, once again, while carrying out the king's instructions to the letter, Puck has somehow added an element of inspired randomness that produces unexpected results. The "translated" Bottom somehow does not believe himself to be changed in the least respect. His essential nature unchanged by Puck's trick, Bottom retains his characteristic aplomb and does not give any credence to the fearful observations of Snout and Quince that he is "changed" and "translated" (III.i.102-105). He denies these allegations and refuses to be made an ass of, telling Snout that he sees an ass's head of his own—that is, Bot-



tom sees that all other men are asses. His use of the word “ass” in addressing both Snout and Quince also suggests that he does not see himself in this light. Bottom believes that they are knavishly trying to frighten him. He refuses to be frightened. Is he more or less the ass for this?

When Bottom begins to sing in order to show his fellow players that he is not afraid, he awakens Titania. Professing to be as enchanted by Bottom’s singing as by his shape, the queen goes on to declare that she has fallen in love with him at first sight. He responds by telling her that, while she has little reason to feel this way about him, he sees that “reason and love keep little company nowadays” (III.i.126-29). Bottom finds it a pity that some honest folk cannot reconcile them, self-consciously owning that he can “gleek” (III.i.129), or jest knowingly, on occasion; he is perhaps laying claim to being that rare philosophical poet, one capable of addressing the desires rationally. The enamored Titania then tells the asinine sage that he is as wise as he is beautiful—a claim that cannot be faulted. Bottom modestly denies both claims, adding that he would be quite satisfied with sufficient wit to find his way out of the forest. Just like the lovers, Bottom understands that he is trapped in a maze, but he is unable to see that he now resembles the original bull-headed denizen of the Cretan labyrinth.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a retelling, and perhaps a recitification, of the ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Bottom is as strange a hybrid beast as the man with the head of a bull that Theseus slew in Minos’s labyrinth. Because he is a weaver, however, he is tied to the ball of string that Ariadne gave to Theseus in order to help him escape from the maze. His double nature is sewn together when Titania falls in love with him, and she too expresses a double nature: she is both Ariadne, who provides Bottom with the way out of his predicament, and Pasiphaë, the wife of Minos who falls in love with the bull of Poseidon. How will Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus overcome the monster Bottom in a manner that is consistent with comedy? Will he retain the moral ambiguity of the original Theseus, who cleverly outwitted the Minotaur to save his Athenian comrades but also



betrayed his promise to marry Ariadne, leaving her behind on an isolated island where she finally is rescued by the god Dionysus? Will Duke Theseus act in a similar way toward Bottom? And will Dionysus, god of the theater, rescue him?

While the love-stuck Titania is plying the amazed Bottom with gifts, even promising to purge Bottom of his “mortal grossness” and place at his disposal attendant fairies who will fetch him “jewels from the deep” (III.i.139-142), the four young lovers are rushing headlong into their own labyrinth—the labyrinth of undifferentiated confusion into which they have been led by their impulsive passions.

At the beginning Helena and Hermia were best friends (III.ii.199-220). This relationship mirrors the pure friendship enjoyed by Titania and the changeling boy’s mother. Duke Theseus’s appropriation of the changeling reminds us that the original Theseus violently snatched Hippolyta from her Amazon kingdom. This is why the Amazon invasion of Athens, which, as mentioned earlier, does not occur in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, becomes a significant non-event. Instead of an angry female reaction to male violence, the play substitutes the quarrel between Hermia and Helena that erupts towards the end of Act III, scene ii. Their forthcoming marriages alienate them from each other. Their female sisterhood is fractured by the approaching demands of sexuality and childrearing. The breast takes precedence over the heart. Moreover, friendship, the candid sharing of souls, is about to be replaced by the demands of economic necessity and patriarchal power. (Patriarchal tyranny over womens’ lives is represented, as suggested earlier, in the figure of Egeus. Recall Lysander’s angry jab at Demetrius: “You have her father love, Demetrius; / Let me have Hermia’s: do you marry him” [I.i.93-94]. Lysander is unacceptable to Egeus precisely because he has wooed Hermia directly, rather than submitting to Egeus’s patriarchal rule over his daughter’s life.)

While it is certain that Demetrius becomes interested in Hermia after successfully wooing Helena, it is not clear whether this occurred before or after Lysander gained Hermia’s love. In either case, the bond between the two women had been broken. As

Hermia and Helena progress from childhood friendship to adolescent romance to parentally approved marriage, they move away from genuine friendship toward the social roles that stifle self-realization.

Perhaps this move toward conventional roles could also explain Demetrius's attraction to Hermia. If his conventional relationship with the beautiful but rather passive Helena became dissatisfying, he would naturally seek the wonderful qualities that his fiancée praised so highly in her friend. (To paraphrase the song from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, "Who is Hermia? what is she, / that Helen so commends her?")

By contrast, Lysander's romance with Hermia, by virtue of being disapproved by her father, may not yet have been soured by familiarity or proximity. Short, dark, and thus less attractive by normal standards of beauty, Hermia certainly seems to possess more spirit than the somewhat masochistic Helena. Yet she will be shocked to discover that Lysander's attraction to her, despite his apologies when she refuses to let him sleep beside her, is ultimately sexual in nature. He is not seeking a friend in marriage, but a sexual partner. This natural urge toward marriage turns out to be even less fulfilling than the conventional one to Hermia, and perhaps to anyone who has shared true friendship with another soul.

It is all too easy to see how Lysander, after being spurned by Hermia, finds the more physically endowed Helena to be more attractive. On the other hand, Demetrius, whose sole reason for being drawn to Hermia has been mimetic, loses interest in her the moment he finds that Lysander is now drawn to Helena. This fact makes her rise in stature in his eyes. Demetrius makes the mistake Socrates points out in the *Euthyphro*: to him, Helena is not loved because she is inherently desirable; she is loved because another person loves her.<sup>15</sup> Whatever inherently desirable qualities Hermia may possess, they become invisible to Demetrius when he sees that Helena is loved by Lysander.

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15. Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a-11b.

Though Hermia may be a far better object of mimetic desire, once Oberon anoints Demetrius with the magic juice, he only has eyes for Helena. When Puck brings Helena to meet the now enchanted Demetrius, he is delighted to find that she has Lysander in tow. As Demetrius sleeps, Helena bitterly denounces Lysander for his treachery. By using the very oaths he swore before Hermia to now pledge his love to her, he is only proving that he is just as false now as he was then. Things only get worse when Demetrius wakes up. When he too professes his undying love, Helena smells a rat. She believes mistakenly that both Lysander and Demetrius are playing a cruel joke on her (note how this runs parallel to Bottom's belief that the other players were trying to trick him!). She is rightly convinced, however, that the feelings they profess are not genuine. Their praise is for an idea rather than a real person; they are not talking about her at all. Being the masochist she is, Helena would rather be hated honestly than endure this kind of rhetoric. She is also convinced that all this is part of their rivalry for Hermia's hand. While both Lysander and Demetrius deny this charge, Hermia reappears, and Helena tells the two men that they now have a chance to prove their claim before Hermia in person. (Quite unlike Bottom, Helena has real difficulty accepting any good fortune.)

With Hermia's return matters reach a climax. First Lysander brutally tells her that Helena's beauty took him from her side, and then Helena herself accuses a stunned Hermia of being a part of a cruel conspiracy. Sadly recalling the blissful childhood years they spent together as the closest of friends, growing together "with two seeming bodies but one heart" (III.ii.215)—a state not unlike that of Aristophanes's circle-men of Plato's *Symposium*—Hermia accuses of Helena of betraying not just herself, but all women. The distinction between true friendship and mimetic love is now perfectly clear: in fact, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not depict one instance of true reciprocated love. Hermia's amazement at Lysander's betrayal is redoubled when she finds that Demetrius, whom she has just roundly abused for pursuing her, has now returned his affections to her antipodes—the despicable Helena. Her world has been inverted.

Even after Hermia states her astonishment at these accusations—"I am amazed at your passionate words" (III.ii.221)—another reference to a maze—Helena reiterates her charge of conspiracy, drops a dark hint about death, and tries to leave. When Lysander attempts to prevent her departure, calling her "my love, my life, my soul," (III.ii.247), Demetrius claims to love her more and challenges him to a duel. Hermia then seeks to prevent Lysander from pursuing Helena, only to hear Lysander call her an "Ethiope" and a "tawny Tartar" for her darker complexion, and a "serpent" whom he will shake off as she clings to him (III.ii.257-264). Worse, when Demetrius charges him with not being really in love with Helena, Lysander haughtily responds that he will not kill such a worthless thing as Hermia just to prove his feelings towards Helena.

Nothing in her past life has prepared Hermia for this. Asking him what can harm her more than hate, she asks "Am I not Hermia, are you not Lysander?" Yet her words "I am as fair as I was erstwhile" (II.ii.274-275) do not recognize that beauty resides in the eye and not in the object itself. This is why she, formerly thought fair, is now but a dark tawny "Ethiope." When Hermia goes on to accuse Helena of having literally seduced Lysander, maybe recalling too late his wish to sleep with her, Helena then calls her a "puppet" (III.ii.289). Although Helena means "deceptive," outraged Hermia takes this as a reference to her height. Dubbing poor Helena a "painted maypole," (II.ii.297) Hermia claims she is yet tall enough to scratch her eyes out. Helena then says that she will take her folly back to Athens. Her only fault, in her eyes, was to betray the lovers' plan to Demetrius whom she still loves despite his offenses. When she declares her fear of Hermia ("She was a vixen when she went to school / And though she be but little, she is fierce [III.ii.325-326]) both young men prepare to come to blows over who will defend her.

Now Oberon and Puck decide to step in. Puck denies that he is to blame for the pandemonium but admits to being gladdened by the "jangling" (III.ii.354). Oberon instructs him to separate the two angry young men from each other by imitating their voices in turn until they fall asleep, exhausted by chasing after

illusions. Puck must then crush an antidote to the “love in idleness” in Lysander’s eyes, restoring his normal way of seeing things. Oberon claims that this will take away “all error” (III.ii.369) from his sight, and he declares that when the lovers awaken, they will believe that everything they have seen and done was nothing but a dream. He is sure that once back in Athens they will be reunited “with league whose date till death shall never end” (III.ii.374). While Puck attends to that, Oberon will wheedle the changeling away from Titania before undoing the spell on her and restoring peace to all things.

At this point, Puck urges Oberon to hurry before the daybreak, as ghosts flee from the first rays of the sun. But Oberon corrects him, saying that “we are spirits of another sort” (III.ii.389), who need not fear the glorious day. It is as though Puck represents something older and a shade darker; more mischievous than Ariel, he is also a pagan force of chaos and disruption. There is a bit of Mephistopheles in Puck; he inadvertently serves the ends of goodness, despite seeking to fool, trip and disrupt.<sup>16</sup> While this residual pagan element seems to interfere with and interrupt both the perfection of God’s creation and the order of the city, there is a vital sense in which Puckishness saves what is joyful and spontaneous, and thus truly human, from the rules, rites, and routines of preachers, prudes, and prigs. Although he acted at Oberon’s bidding, Puck can take pride in his masterpiece of confusion—the translated Bottom is Puck’s finest creation.

While the lovers sleep in the woods, Act IV finds Titania, in her own words, “doting” on Bottom while her four attendant fairies cater to his every whim. After he has been fed, scratched and serenaded, Titania sends her fairies away and Bottom falls asleep in her arms. Shakespeare—at least as tactful in his consideration of his audience’s sensibilities as is Bottom of his audience—presents no overt signs of a sexual encounter between Bottom and Titania. But the connection to the myth of the

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16. “Part of the power / That constantly wants evil and constantly does good.” Goethe, *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy*, trans. Margaret Kirby (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2015), 1335-36.

Minotaur dispels the possibility that their union is purely platonic. According to the original story, Pasiphaë's mad desire for the bull of Poseidon prompted her to have Daedalus build her a portable wooden cow, within which she could position herself in order to copulate with the bull.

Oberon and Puck arrive to find Bottom cradled in Titania's arms, and Oberon feels pity for her. After securing custody of the changeling boy, he no longer feels the need to continue the farce. He drops the juice on Titania's eyes to remove the magic, then he orders Puck to remove the ass's head so Bottom may return to Athens and "think no more of this night's accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream" (IV.i.66). Titania wakes and tells Oberon of a most strange vision: "Methought I was enamored of an ass," though once awake she exclaims, "mine eyes do loath his visage now!" (IV.i.73,76). While Bottom sleeps on, his head removed, the king and queen dance and are reconciled. They will now bless the union of Theseus and Hippolyta. It is a fair inference that, had this interlude in the woods with Bottom not taken place, the royal pair would not have been reconciled, the marriage would not have been graced by their presence, and the bloody Amazon invasion, symbol of sexual strife, would have come to pass.

Meanwhile, Theseus and Hippolyta, while hunting in the forest, find all four lovers asleep. When Egeus finds out that Lysander and Hermia were fleeing Athens in defiance of his will, he asks Theseus to punish them, looking to Demetrius for support. Yet Demetrius confesses that his desire for Hermia has "melted as the snow" (IV.i.163). Recalling this passion as he would a sickness, he barely remembers or feels it now. Helena is again the sole object of his love. This frees Theseus to decree that the two couples shall be married along with him that very day. This should be welcome news, yet the lovers are still in shock.

When the four lovers are alone, they canvass one another's memories and find, as Hermia puts it, that "everything seems double" (IV.i.187). In other words, no identity is as stable as it was a night ago when she was Hermia and he Lysander. Likewise, Helena reflects that she has "found Demetrius like a jewel, mine own and not mine own" (IV.i.188). We all have deeper iden-



tities that cannot be owned even by ourselves, let alone by others. While Lysander, who was twice enchanted, has very little to say, it seems to Demetrius that they are still asleep and yet dreaming. As he observed earlier, things once indubitably certain now seem distant and mutable “Like far-off mountains turned into clouds” (IV.i.185). All that they are certain of is Theseus’s order that they follow him to the temple. To Demetrius, only *this* proves that they are awake. In essence, it is by the temple, the cave, and the city—for all three are equivalent—that the uncertainties of the nightmare in the forest are safely secured. This is why they meekly return to the cave, despite knowing full well that they shadows they behold there have unsuspected depths. The four of them will no doubt fashion an agreeable account of what happened to them in due time.

And then there’s Bottom. He was never truly lost in the bottomless ambiguity of the enchanted wood because he’s his own bottom. The “bottom” is the piece of wood around which a skein of thread is wound, so that Bottom is connected, as we said, to Ariadne’s thread. Bottom is able to exit from his enchanted confusion because of his ability to thread his way through many different roles. Though comically ignorant, he is nonetheless self-possessed, ingenious, and imaginative, and these qualities lead him through his labyrinthine trials successfully, even as he playfully mangles all the roles he steps into. After meeting Titania—an experience more supernatural than anything the lovers undergo—Bottom is indeed purged of his “mortal grossness,” as Titania promised. And yet he has enough “bottom” to take up all the jewels that Titania’s fairies bring him from the depths of the ocean.

Bottom’s appearance is deceptive, even to the spirits. Puck ridiculed Bottom’s wit. Oberon confidently expected that the ass-headed monster would forget everything about his wild night in the woods. But they both seriously underestimated the worth of humble weaver. A man who is stable and “bottomed,” or self-contained, who can assume the humiliating mask of ass’s head to hide his gravity, is not to be scorned if he is a master of the royal art of weaving—that is, of statesmanship. Only such



a person can guide us safely through the dark woods of imagination and the subterranean cave of opinion.

It is unclear whether Theseus, when he discovers the four young lovers, ignores Bottom or whether Bottom is invisible to him. In any case, Bottom's experiences from that night in the woods far surpass the lovers' experiences. The lovers have only encountered Hegel's "bad infinite"—the anarchic possibilities that haunt the soul on a dark night—but Bottom has seen things sublime and trans-rational. Since he was never enchanted—it was Titania who was magically induced to fall in love with him—he does not need to be disenchanting; Oberon simply orders Puck to "take off this head" (IV.i.77). Despite being discovered in the queen's arms, Bottom escapes punishment by being taken for an ass. What would Elizabeth's father Henry VIII have made of this *lèse majesté*?

When Bottom awakens from his fairy-induced slumber, he at first believes that no time has elapsed at all and that he is still awaiting his cue in the play. Then he realizes that something has happened to him: "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" (IV.i.199-202). Bottom sees that he lacks the categories to describe his experience. Instead, dipping into the stores of his memory, he produces a garbled version of 1 Corinthians 2:9 to describe the inability to describe his 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" (IV.i.211-14). Shakespeare prudently stops Bottom from continuing on to the next verse of the scripture, which details the blessings God has prepared for us—that would be a blasphemous comparison between Titania's bounty and God's. Instead, Bottom will "get Peter Quince to write a / ballet [ballad] of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's / Dream, because it hath no bottom." (IV.i.214-16). And he will sing it after Thisbe dies, presumably because his vision provides intimations of a glorious afterlife. Perhaps his mystical vision will be the metaphysical basis of any future comedies Bottom himself may create.

Act V begins with Theseus and Titania discussing the four young lovers' account of their recollections from the preceding night. The act is strikingly undramatic: nothing significant happens. So deliberately flat an ending seems to demand that we shift from action to interpretation. Our focus goes from Helen to Hermes, from the enchantments of love to questions of hermeneutics. It is amusing to see two well-known figures from mythology arguing over how much credence should be given to "antique stories" and "fairy toys" (V.i.3)—especially when Theseus uses images from Socrates's palinode in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the philosopher defends divine madness and poetic inspiration. As if to drive this point home, Theseus speaks of how "The poet's eye in full frenzy rolling, / doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" (V.i.12-13). This image derives from Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates recounts what Diotima told him about Eros, the child of Need and Plenty.<sup>17</sup> In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the child of need and plenty would correspond to any offspring of the union between Bottom and Titania, who would represent a weaving together of the human and divine realms.

Since the matter of Theseus's argument only serves to unweave its content, Shakespeare urges us to agree with Hippolyta when she points out that the harmony of the four tales "More witnesseth than fancy's images / And grows to something of great constancy [consistency]" (V.i.25-26): the stories are not merely the fanciful products of over-heated imaginations. While Theseus denounces the tendency of humans to exaggerate—"How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" (V.i.22), this only makes it harder for us to accept his own heroic, but no doubt exaggerated, deeds. It seems as if he kills monsters by denying that they exist. This daylight dilution of night's truths, anticipating the Enlightenment's tendency to disparage everything that cannot be measured, strengthens the very irrationality it tries to contain. Theseus's hyper-rationality may well have caused the threat of the Amazon invasion, which happily has been averted. Largely

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17. Plato, *Symposium*, 202e-203a.

thanks to Bottom's intervention, nothing happens. As W. H. Auden put it, "Poetry makes nothing happen."<sup>18</sup> The curse of reification has been lifted from nature.

When Theseus is asked to choose among several alternative forms of entertainment to fill the three hours before supper and bed, it is clear that his strong preference is for comedy—and the more banal the better—over epic, tragedy or lyric. This is quite consistent with the tendency to reduce a bear to a bush, or turn the Minotaur into an amazed ass. The first three choices offered by the master of revels are (1) the battle with the Centaurs, (2) the murder of Orpheus by the Bacchae, and (3) a lament over the decline of learning by the nine muses. Theseus rejects the first two: he has told Hippolyta about the one and already seen the other. When the third choice is thought too satirical for the day, all that remains is our "tedious brief scene" Pyramus and Thisbe, of "very tragical mirth" (V.i.56-57). So the Duke chooses it, albeit over the strong objections of Philostrate. The strange combination of comedy and tragedy that is contained in the promise of "tragical mirth" probably has more to do with Theseus's aristocratic predilection of finding amusement in unintended buffoonery than with Socrates's assertion in the *Symposium* that the art of making tragedies is also the art of making comedies.<sup>19</sup>

Even after being informed that the play both "tedious and brief" (V.i.58), and only comic in that it is likely to be poorly performed, Theseus is determined to favor the rude mechanicals with his patronage. Hippolyta expressed a reluctance to see the simple-minded players embarrassed undertaking a task that is beyond their capacities, but Theseus replies that the audience ought not to incline toward harsh criticism: "Our sport shall be to take what they mistake: / And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect / Takes it in might, not merit" (V.i.90, 92). But the intent to judge the players by their "might"—by their widow's mite,

18. W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B Yeats" in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, (New York: Vintage, 1989), 80.

19. Plato, *Symposium*, 223d.

one might say—fails, even though Theseus claims that he has the power to see beyond appearances:

Where I have come, great clerks have purposèd  
To greet me with premeditated welcomes,  
Where I have seen them shiver and look pale,  
Make periods in the midst of sentences,  
Throttle their practiced accent in their fears,  
And in conclusion dumbly have broke off,  
Not paying me a welcome. Trust me, sweet,  
Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome,  
And in the modesty of fearful duty  
I read as much as from the rattling tongue  
Of saucy and audacious eloquence.  
Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity  
In least speak most, to my capacity. (V.i.87-99)

But this self-estimate is not accurate: the play is so bad that it cannot help but elicit derisive comments even from Theseus. He cannot get beyond reductive charity. Though he wishes to make the meaningless speech of the rough artisans orderly, he lacks the imagination to see that Bottom at least is pointing towards something that far exceeds the capacities of his station in the shadow world of the cave. To Theseus, art is a diversion from reality, filled with impractical ideals and impossible dreams, that must be tolerated by a kind of benign neglect—which is precisely the attitude that Theseus bestows on the mechanical.

Since the Duke does not allow Bottom speak his epilogue, Shakespeare's audiences must imagine it for themselves. The contours of this epilogue are clear enough: first, it must conclude the mechanicals' rendition of *Pyramus and Thisbe*; second, it must explain *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and third, it must also explain Bottom's mystical vision. This is why Bottom wants to place it after Thisbe's death: it has to reveal what lies beyond death, what sustains life, and what justifies love. Bottom's epilogue is the "bottom line" to be extracted from his near-death experience with Titania.

There are clear parallels between Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania. This is why the four roles are almost always

played by the same pair of actors. The male power of reason imperiously believes that it can censor, control, and shape the thoughts of the disordered female soul. But through his mystical vision, Bottom has been initiated into a suprarational wisdom by Titania. Can this wisdom be stolen from him as easily as Oberon tricked Titania or Theseus raped Hippolyta? A *Midsummer Night's Dream* trusts the power of drama to resurrect visions long forgotten by seers and heroes. "The best are but shadows and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them" (V.i.208-209). It must be the audience's imagination, not the actor's, that redeems the poet in the cave. Every time *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is performed, it becomes the vehicle, being ridden by an ass, through which salvation may enter the world.

Theseus cannot see that art bestows deeper meaning on human life than order. The wall dividing Pyramus and Thisbe represents the strife between reason and desire, between philosophy and poetry, city and theatre, law and will, civilized religion and pagan nature. The role of Lion, who threatens to destroy Pyramus and Thisbe, was one of those coveted by Bottom; it too stands for the Minotaur, the monster that devours young lovers in the dark labyrinth of desire that is nature. Yet it is the translated Bottom who finds that Titania, the feminine principle at the heart of nature, is far from monstrous. It takes imagination and charity, qualities Bottom possesses in abundance, to reconcile principles that seem to be separate and opposed. But this is precisely why Theseus, acting in the name of the male principle that dominates the city, must overcome the horned beast by denial, standing on his claim to have slain the Minotaur. The truth revealed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to be this: Men like Lysander and Demetrius become horned monsters when they are trapped in the labyrinthine coils of desires they cannot own or even recognize. Their paramount ambition is to possess the women they love and maintain their *amour propre*; that is to say, they only want to know other souls as objects, without genuinely trying to behold them as independent selves. But to burn with unloving passion avails us nothing. To quote St. Paul, though in a slightly different sense than he intended it, "Though I give my

body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”<sup>20</sup> Despite his ignorance, Bottom, having been opened up to the grace of Nature by Titania, sees much further than the lovers.

By comparison, *they* wear the heads of asses. True beholding of another self creates a loving obligation to protect and nurture the inner life of the other’s soul. One sees into that soul, as it were, through the eyes of a god. One the one hand, a love like this is infinitely preferable to the sort of “love” that motivates Egeus’s feudal claims over his daughter Hermia, who is for him “but as a form in wax, / By him imprinted and within his power / to leave the figure or disfigure it” (I.i.49-51). On the other hand, because of the godlike glance into the other’s soul, a Christian audience may well be inclined to regard it as blasphemous.

Other elements of Bottom’s epilogue would have to clarify the various ways in which love can go wrong. One way is that lustful or selfish love, in seeking spiritual support for its desires, falls into despair when the poetry it gets hold of is bad. Another way is that abstract reason, in seeking to domesticate the untamed aspects of eros, falls into nihilism. To avoid these and similar errors, the passions must be *educated* by poetry—not manipulated, as Oberon does, or rejected, as Theseus does. It is true that well-crafted laws can mitigate or even remove the possessiveness inherent in some kinds of selfish love (such as the property rights Egeus claims over Hermia). Indeed, such laws can help to ensure equality and even aid in the perennial human struggle to climb out of the cave. But neither law nor logos is easily taught to lovers. It would be better, if fate allows, to attend to our own soul’s need for love before being gripped by the passions. Our own soul’s unique charity for itself is to become equal to itself, to see itself clearly and love itself for what it truly is. This is the preparation that makes us capable of dealing with our passions competently. And the test of success in this preparation is to return to the cave—as Bottom returned to Theseus’s court after his mystical vision, or as Socrates willingly entered the courtroom to deliver his apology—bringing love, disorder, erotically charged

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20. 1 *Corinthians* 13:3.



chaos, and “mirthful tragedy” to our fellow humans rather than submitting to the reductive comedy of life constrained by generic rationality. To draw an example from another magical play: It is surely thus, after consolidating his mystical wisdom, that Prospero returns to Milan as *its* Duke after the events of *The Tempest*.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is as anarchic a carnival, we must imagine, as Bottom's mystical vision must have been. Its mad antics and category-crossing magic represent the way of wonder, an approach to a wisdom that cannot be contained within the rational confines of the *logos*. This wisdom, the wisdom of the spirit, comforts and inspires us when we reach the limits of the *logos*.

Spirit works in the spectral forests encircling the sublime, in the element of amazed ignorance; wonder is its vehicle, enlivening us much more vitally than anything or anyone we may try to possess. Its counterpart, *logos*, works with abstract categories, trying to convince us that the divine is not deeply irrational, nor jealous, nor unjust; but its reassuring arguments fail to convince, because they fly in the face of human experience. Spirit, on the contrary, addresses the passions, the absurdities, the savageries, and the secrets of the individual soul—its struggles have more in common with Dostoevsky's novels than with Hegel's System. Each individual soul's passage through the dark woods of imagination is different, and all are dialectical in the sense that the traveler learns as much from error as from truth. Similarly, love's benefits come from giving, forgiving, losing, and laughing: these acts strengthen and liberate the soul, whereas their contraries—taking, accusing, winning, and excessive seriousness—weaken and strangle it. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a feast for the soul, and we leave it with richer eyes, emptier hands, and longer ears. Only a beautiful ass can save us.