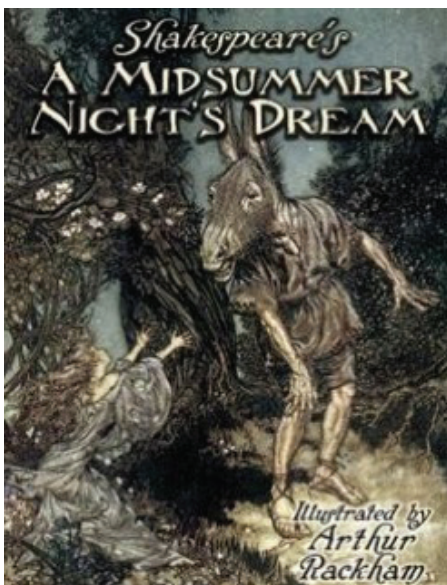


A Commentary of
Act III, Scene 1
Shakespeare's: A
Midsummer Night's Dream
for
THE
TUDOR SOCIETY



by
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Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them into shapes, and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(V .i.4-17)

“But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon ...”

(II .i.161-162)

I wonder just how many people who have read Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can ever forget the enchanting fairy world it makes real to us, the mischievous antics of that loveable rascal Puck, the lovers' "dreamy" escapades, and above all, those wondrously delightful scenes between the very UN star-crossed lovers, Bottom and Titania. I, for one, can never think of the play without a vision of that foolish, yet very dear Nick Bottom, with an ass head in place of his own, in the arms of the beautiful, but silly Titania. As H.B. Charlton so eloquently describes the play, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with all its appearance of fairy, with its apparent revelry in the stuff of which dreams are made of, with its alluring unreality, and its evident riot of fantasy, is yet the first play in which Shakespeare reveals his promise as the world's comic dramatist, the first exhibition of his power to use comedy for its proper function, to show real man encountering the real problems of the world in which he was really living – the first play in which he showed contemporary man buffeted by the power felt then to be the primary factor of his existence, his response to the quality and the might of love." (1) The play is at once, delightful and didactic, two traditional components of literature, being a skillful work of art, in which Shakespeare combines not only the entertainment of its comic elements and fairy tale like appeal, but also some very truthful comments on the human condition.

The play is an illustration of several themes, many of them quite prevalent in the Tudor and Elizabethan ages. However, Shakespeare's genius lies here in the ability to take popular motifs and present them in a manner that prompts us to react first by laughing at them and enjoying them, and secondly by considering just how much they represent those limitations in our own human lives. Thus, Shakespeare's interpretation of the ever popular and universal theme of love, and of another theme particularly recurrent in his own plays, that concept of illusion as opposed to reality (coupled here with the related theme of the dream, and consequently what happens in the world of sleep or night, and what happens in the daylight of the waking world), is realized not only from a comic standpoint, but a serious one also. We laugh at the irrationality of the love that we are being shown here, and because we know or at least we think we know!) which is illusion (dream) and which is reality, we laugh at the resulting conclusion of this among the characters in the lay but we are also intended to become philosophical in the end, and realize that although the themes have been exaggerated, they are nevertheless part of human behavior and existence. Like it or not, we must consider that, when we laugh at the Athenian lovers, and Puck's semi-harmless mistakes, and the loving serenades of the Fairy Queen and the ass, we are also laughing at very real aspects of our own human characters.

One could choose elements throughout the lay, of course, that exemplify the two main concepts



mentioned above. However, I feel there is a particular scene, Act III, scene 1, which illustrates not only the main ideas upon which Shakespeare wishes to comment, about love, and specifically irrational love, and about the problem of determining the confines of illusion and actuality, but is at the same time uproariously funny and contains a great deal of the dominant imagery and characterizations necessary to the success of the total work. So, let us go now into the world of the fairies, where

Titania loves Bottom, because love transposes things “base and vile” to “form and dignity”, and the bounds of reason are subservient to the irrationality of the emotions, and illusion and dreams are confused with reality.

The scene begins with Bottom and his crew as they continue to plan their infamous production of the “very tragical yet mirthful” story of Pyramus and Thisbe. And, right away, we are confronted with the problem of appearance or illusion as opposed to reality. As the clownish fellows debate the problem of how to present a bloody death on stage without frightening the audience, Bottom comes up with one of his usual ingenious ideas:

Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to
Say we will do no harm with our swords, and that
Pyramus is not kill'd indeed; and for the more better
Assurance, tell them that I Pyramus am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver.
This will put them
Out of fear.

(III .i.17-22)

These poor members of the craftsman's world are very disturbed by the unsettling question of what is real and what is only pretended. They can think of no other solution to the problem of the possibility of frightening their audience with the pretended bloodshed and a “pretend” lion, excepting to come right out and tell them that it is only illusion (as if their audience would not know! But poor Bottom and his crew are merely trying to be considerate and one must surely give them credit for that!) And the whole question of illusions as opposed to reality is symbolized in Quince's question as to how the group can employ the presence of moonlight for their play when man cannot control these kinds of natural forces:

But there is two hard things: that is,
To bring moonlight into a chamber; for you
Know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight.

(III .1.47-50)

They must make illusion seem real, and reality seem an illusion. And before we go on, it is necessary to point out one of the images mentioned here by Quince which is essential to the play, the moon. It represents the inconstant, the ever-changing and uncontrollable, which as we can see by Bottom and his friends, and their inability to command it, is an important concept to note here. So, the moon plays a role in several facets of the play: in the illusion versus reality theme because Bottom and his crew cannot control it to create illusion, and as we shall see, in the irrational love theme, because it is fickle and inconstant, and finally in the imager of night time with all its dreams and enchantment.

As long as we have left Bottom and company waiting for us to return to talking about the, I'm sure they can wait a few moments longer for us to digress a bit more in order to discuss here another important aspect of the play, its characterization. And we won't be leaving our friend the weaver entirely, of course, because this subject obviously involves him! Bottom has, for a long while, been considered the most well defined character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He is most surely the very substantial personality of the tangible man who represents in reality and in life that which the mind of a character like Duke Theseus provides in theory and in conjecture about life. (2) In a sense, Bottom is the real foundation upon which the whole is based. He is the connecting factor

between the three spheres which Shakespeare so beautifully incorporates into unity within the play: the classical heritage of reason and social necessity (embodied in Theseus), the elemental power of nature (as represented by the fairy world) and the workaday world of common and uncommon sense found in him and his craftsmen friends. Shakespeare shows wonderful dexterity in weaving (no surprise at Bottom's representation as the "weaver") together three distinct and unrelated worlds into one consistent universe. And Bottom is the "missing link" if you will, for he is at home everywhere, and turns every situation to his advantage.

So, we see the amazing design Shakespeare employs in this very scene, (Act III, scene1) to move from the crude world of the rustics, who mangle the language and seem to use every available opportunity to exhibit their ignorance, to the magic realm of fairyland, another of the three worlds in the universe of the play. And we must note that Bottom is the vehicle he uses to conduct us there, he is the "weaver" who connects the whole.

We return to our friends now, and to our discussion of the concept of illusion versus reality in this scene and find that Puck has changed Bottom into a man with an ass head. This, we learn, has been done so that the mischievous fairy can fulfill the request of his fairy lord Oberon that Titania fall in love with something beastly in order that the King can make some fun out of all and at the same time embarrass her into giving him her Indian boy which is his whim *for the moment*. Now that we know what is happening, we can get back to the point and see how here again is exemplified Shakespeare's favorite theme, because Bottom *appears* to be something that he truly *is not*. And when Snout tells the weaver, "O Bottom, thou are chang'd! What do I see on thee?" (III .i.114-115), Shakespeare takes the opportunity to create a tremendously funny pun sequence on the part of poor Bottom, who does not realize what has befallen him.

He replies to Snout in a very haughty manner, "What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you?" (III .i.116-117) To Bottom's friends, it *appears* he has been "Translated," but they do not realize that in *reality* he is still the same old Bottom. And the whole confusion between what is real and what is supposed is made obvious to us as Bottom says of his friends, "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me ..." (III.i.120-121) Because Bottom cannot see his appearance, he is only aware of the reality of the true Bottom and to his crew, the real Bottom is hidden by an appearance! The beauty of it all, is that in symbolic terms the ass-head on Bottom IS reality because we know he is a fool! And so it is that the silly but instinctual Bottom comes unknowingly upon the fairy bower of the sleeping Titania in lines 127 to 136 and Shakespeare can then beautifully illustrate the second and main theme of the lay, irrational love.

The most frequent question in Tudor and Renaissance poetry is, "What is love?" The significance of love to man's present was a concern of a vast number of poets in Tudor times. John Donne, Sir Walter Raleigh, Shakespeare, Phillip Sidney and many more writers literally began some of their poems with the question, "What is love? Raleigh's "Now what is love, I pray thee tell?," and Shakespeare's "What is love? 'Tis not hereafter," and Peele's "What thing is love? For, well I wot, love is a thing," are good examples. (3) And this question is what Shakespeare asks in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He ridicules the kind of love which is engendered in the imagination and blinds both reason and the senses. This form of love has cut itself off from reality from the evidence of the senses, it is a creature of "seething brains," a kind of madness. It is indeed the main theme of the



play and provides the connecting link between the various episodes and groups of characters.

In the Titania-Bottom love scene in Act III, scene 1, the parody of love-madness is carried to its ludicrous extreme. Here, in the infatuation of the Queen of Fairies for the weaver metamorphosed into an ass, we have displayed for our delight as well as for our more serious reflection, the full absurdity of the kind of love which is entirely divorced from both reason and the senses. When Titania is awakened in line 127 by Bottom's "singing," she tells him her ear "is much enamoured" of his note. And she declares her love for him right away as if she were convinced by the best of reason,



So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And they fair virtue's force (perforce) doth move me
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee.

(III .i.137-141)

We are reminded here that the true eyesight in love is a large demand, and a lover's recognition of beauty is apparently uncontrollable and unreasonable. As Helena says in Act I, scene 1, line 234, "love looks not with the eyes but with the mind." And although we know Titania's impaired vision is the result of a magic herb, we are forced to recognize Shakespeare's comment here on real life and love's effects on it. The theme of the play is symbolized in Bottom's reply to the Fairy Queen's professions of love for him as he says,

Methinks, mistress, you should have little
Reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company
together now-a-days.

(III .i.142-144)

His judgment is more modest than Titania's and he alone seems to keep his head (no pun intended!), because although he suffers a symbolic transformation for a short while, nothing can shake his equanimity. He has indeed "hit the nail right on the head" in his statement. Reason and love are in fact rarely in company, and though we are laughing at this fact here, we must nevertheless accept it as a truth. And the little western flower which is called "Cupid's flower", or love-idleness, becomes thus the concrete embodiment of the love-madness that Shakespeare is out to ridicule. Its juice is infused into the eyes, robbing them of their power of unbiased vision, inflaming the imagination, and putting reason to flight. But as we must guess, the flower is only symbolic of man's liability to be distracted by vagaries whose source is his fancy or his emotion. For they subdue his "cool reason" and his intuitive common sense, and distort his view of things. But lucky for us, the irrationality of love's choice as seen in the lay and specifically this scene, provides sport rather than grief. And we have Titania and Bottom, and the fairy realm of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; a world where the inhabitants are apt to the witchery of love and the natural instruments are magic herbs and mischievous Pucks. It is a woodland realm where moonlight and fairy influence suspend our



belief in lasting hardship; it is only as fleeting as a dream, a midsummer fantasia.

Because the fairy world is so much a part of the dominant scheme of the play and especially of this scene, it is necessary to point out a few of its significances. It is closely linked to the other two worlds of the play, that of the lovers and Theseus, and that of bottom and the craftsmen not only b Bottom's "involvement" with its Queen but by the fairies' influence on human life. In the fairy world, mere personal preference and mood are left in entire control, and affection follows fancy. It is a world in which Titania and Oberon give way to such irrational quarrels that the very weather turns bad. And because the fairies are such beings subject to whimsy, mischief, irrationality and the forces of the supernatural, their whole world represents the kinds of love of which Shakespeare wants us to take note. Thus, when we see Titania enamoured of Bottom, and we laugh at the silly dilemmas of the Athenian lovers, we realize that it is not *because* of the fairy world and its magic that this mad and

unreasonable passion attacks man, it is rather something inexplicable which is ingeniously accounted for by that marvelously symbolic world of "Faerie".

We accept, then, that Titania loves Bottom, at least for a short while. And the humor of the love-scene depends on our realization that it is a supremely beautiful woman who is enamoured of this weaver-turned-ass! And as Titania commands her fairy attendants to wait on her new love, we see that bottom, with his customary adaptability to fit any part he is called upon to play at once accepts his position as paramour of the Fairy Queen with all the readiness of the lack of surprise with which dreamers take for granted the most incredible happenings. Then, as the scene closes, we see Bottom conversing with and inquiring of each of the small fairies as if it were the natural course to follow.

And thus he is led off to Titania's bower, while we are once again given an image of the moon, "The moon methinks looks with a wat'ry eye" (III .i.198) This image only seems to merge the Fairy Queen herself with the moon's significance, because of her fickle behavior, for the moon is, as mentioned earlier, associated with love, especially fickle, inconstant love because of its changes, but it again is also the craft of Shakespeare in creating an atmosphere of woodland magic, dreams and illusion. And the worlds "moonstruck" and "lunacy" surely come to mind when one considers the two lovers, Titania and Bottom!

The love that is purely the creature of the imagination is, Shakespeare suggest, itself a dream, and the dreamer one of the company of "the lunatic, {again moon imagery} the lover, and the poet," for like them he "gives to aery nothing a local habitation and a name." And Shakespeare seems to be saying that the events in the wood that take place under the influence





of the moon and the magic flower are like the dreams of lovers on Midsummer Night. And the dream is as the illusion, opposed to reality. After all, is not Bottom's ready acceptance of all the wonders of fairydom and above all, of Titania's love for him, like that of dreamers who take for granted the most startling events?? And after Titania's and Bottom's love scenes, they and all the Athenian lovers believe upon "awakening" that the events of the night were all a mere dream, as Titania says, "My Oberon, what visions I have seen!" (IV .1.76) And Bottom sums it all

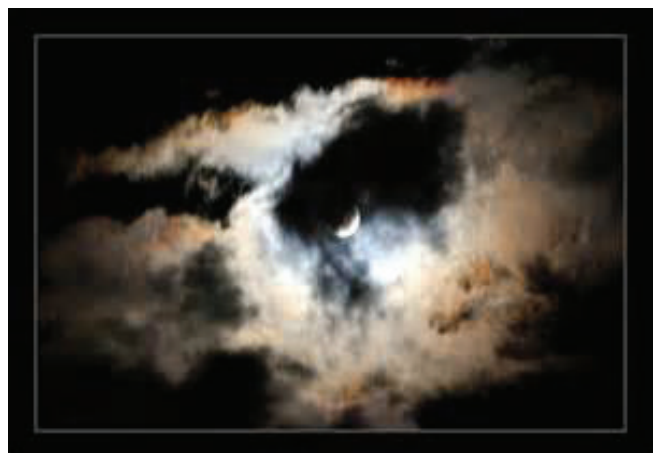
up,

"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 (t') expound this dream."

(IV .i.204-207)

The lunacy of Bottom has broken through into "vision," and now we are prepared for the complete restoration of reason and common sense to the "moonstruck" spheres of the "lunatic" (Bottom) and "lover" (court lovers and Titania) and the "poet" (Oberon and also Theseus.) And as daylight comes and the horns sound, and all the enchantment is lifted, the return of sanity is announced, and magic and illusion are dispersed.

The "dream" is over, and yet Shakespeare invites us to think of the whole play as a dram, or an illusion, as Puck's lines at the end suggest,



If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumb'ed here
While these visions di appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

(V .i.423-438)

But, dream or not, as the vagaries of love and enchantment had seemed perfectly reasonable to those who were involved, and unreasonable or even ridiculous to those who had only observed, so the whole action in the wood, once the first sight of day has passed, will seem more real or more fantastic. And with the passage of the night with its enchantment and its moon, its irrational love and its illusions and dreams, comes the daylight, when all the fairies must “way” and reason is restored to all, and we are once again in the waking world of reality.

From telling an enchanting story of magic and love's mysteries, Shakespeare has led us to contemplate the relationship between nature and the “art” of lovers and poets; he has led us to recognize the absurdity, privacy, and “truth of human imagination.” The play examines love in its particularly irrational form, as well as explores the bounds of illusion and dreams, and reality, using the mystical world of the fairies, and the magic of a Midsummer's eve. And as we are shown, particularly in act III, Scene 1, men without cool reason are the victims of the world, and especially the butts of its comedy. Yet although we may see parts of ourselves portrayed in this play, we enjoy it, laugh at it and learn from it. Because characters like Bottom and Titania might have been imagined to prove a point and to make us laugh, but they and the whole charming world of the fairies were also created for the world to fall in love with the play.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. Charlton, Shakespearean Comedy p. 103
2. Ibid., p. 119.
3. Ibid., pg. 105.

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