

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Waiting to get married is an itchy time for many of Shakespeare's lovers. In *Much Ado About Nothing* the plot to bring Beatrice and Benedick together is hatched to fill up the time between betrothal and marriage, while in *Measure for Measure* the bed-trick serves to consummate the long-deferred union of Angelo and Mariana. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with Duke Theseus counting the hours until he can wed his Amazon bride Hippolyta 'with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling'. The play's plot thus serves as a time-filling diversion, a way to pass those lingering hours, just as the mechanicals' entertainment of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' 'hath well beguiled/ The heavy gait of night'. At the play's conclusion, three couples make their way to bed, under the blessing of the fairies: 'To the best bride-bed will we,/ Which by us shall blessed be./ And the issue there create/ Ever shall be fortunate./ So shall all the couples three / Ever true in loving be'.

This stress on marriage has made many critics search for an Elizabethan aristocratic wedding ceremony for which the play might have been written. Although none has been convincingly identified, the wish for this play to be connected to nuptial celebration is a perennial one. David Wiles has defined its genre as that of epithalamium, or poem in honour of marriage. Such interpretations limit the play's depiction of love within the socially conservative impulse towards marriage.

There is, however, another, less demure side to the play's interpretation of love, an idea that then, as now, had carnal as well as romantic connotations. In part the play seems almost satirical in its depiction of the romance convention of love-at-first-sight. By mistakenly applying a love-potion to the eyes of the male Athenians, Robin Goodfellow confuses the play's couples, making both Lysander and Demetrius turn their attentions from Hermia to Helena. The strong suggestion is that the lovers are interchangeable. Demetrius has turned from Helena to Hermia to Helena again (perhaps still under magical influence); Lysander turns from Hermia to Helena back to Hermia. These confusions, however, merely amplify the play's apparent disinclination properly to distinguish between the two men or to establish them as different characters. Hermia is willing to enter a convent rather than marry her father's choice, Demetrius, but the play does nothing to indicate why she should so strongly prefer Lysander. Even Hermia herself is able only to claim that Lysander is just as good as Demetrius. 'Demetrius is a worthy gentleman,' Theseus admonishes. 'So is Lysander,' she replies. Elsewhere, the play seems to undermine or poke fun at the conventions of romantic comedy. The repetitions of the word 'dote' and images of sight are used sustainedly to ridicule the folly of falling in love with outward appearances. Titania's sweet nothings to the donkey-man Bottom end 'how I love thee! how I dote on thee!': her desire for this bestial creature is a comic, even humiliating, echo of the undermotivated affections between the

Athenian couples. Even Pyramus and Thisbe, the Ovidian story of tragic lovers which inauspiciously marks the duke's nuptials, is performed with such thumping rhymes and slapstick literal-mindedness that it drives a dramatic coach and horses through the elevated love rhetoric that is so key to the contemporaneous *Romeo and Juliet*.

Titania's dalliance with Bottom in her bower is not simply funny, however. Victorian illustrated editions of Shakespeare's plays neutralised the erotic charge of the scene of their encounter, rewriting the play to make its fairies dainty creatures from the nursery and establishing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a play particularly suitable for children. They couldn't have been more wrong. Shakespeare makes his love-potion derive from a flower transformed by Cupid's arrow into the distinctly suggestive 'before milk-white, now purple with love's wound'. An illustration of Robin Goodfellow from the 1620s shows a hairy-legged satyr sporting an impressive phallus: to be puckish in the early modern period was thus to be involved in sexual, rather than innocent, forms of mischief. The Polish director and critic Jan Kott saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as 'the most erotic of Shakespeare's plays', but he saw this as a dark force: 'in no other comedy or tragedy of his, except *Troilus and Cressida*, is the eroticism expressed so brutally'.

That sexual desire is the violent, transgressive obverse of romantic love is cued from the beginning of the play. Hippolyta is a captive bride, as Theseus boasts: 'I wooed thee with my sword,/ And won thy love doing thee injuries.' This sadistic opening has its masochistic counterpart in Helena's unswerving devotion to Demetrius: 'the more you beat me, I will fawn on you:/ Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me'. Even Hermia suddenly recognises her adored Lysander as a threat when they run away from her father, requesting him to lie further away from her and preserve the relationship between 'a virtuous bachelor and a maid'. Romance here reveals its threatening opposite, illicit desire. Recent productions of the play have been concerned to excavate the wood outside Athens as a kind of dreamscape, in which unconscious desires have full rein. Since Freud, we all know what our dreams are really about. Potential conflict between Theseus and Hippolyta is displaced into the warring between Oberon and Titania (the same actors probably doubled these roles on the Elizabethan stage and often do in modern productions), and the mysterious Indian boy over whom they are quarrelling has been reimagined as an adolescent object of erotic, rather than parental, love. One school party left a recent Stratford production in disgust at its explicit depictions of sexuality, revealing the gap between Victorian ideas of this as a play particularly suitable for children, and modern interpretations of its violent eros. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* emerges from recent studies as a romantic comedy sceptical about romance conventions, ironizing its central marriages, and concerned with love less as idealized courtship and more as physical desire. Perhaps, after all, it is not ideal entertainment for a wedding.

Emma Smith
Hertford College, Oxford