

The Concord of this Discord : A Midsummer Night's Dream

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most original, eloquent, and skilfully constructed works. Although he took hints from various written sources — from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Plutarch's *Lives* for Theseus and Hippolyta,

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for Titania's name and for the mechanicals' play *Pyramus and Thisbe*, perhaps Apuleius' *Golden Ass* for Bottom's transformation — the basic narrative seems, unusually for Shakespeare, to have been his own invention. And

although it is a comparatively early play, probably written around 1595, close to *Romeo and Juliet*, which seems to be parodied in the play scene, it is entirely confident in its execution. Largely because of the subject matter and style, it has

been suggested that the *Dream* might have been written for the celebration of an Elizabethan court marriage; but if so, it was also given at the public theatres, since the title-page of the first printed edition (1600) says specifically that it was 'sundry times publicly acted ... by the Lord Chamberlain's servants', the company to which Shakespeare belonged. The *Dream* is about love and marriage; and Shakespeare adroitly interweaves four distinct groups of characters — the court, the lovers, the mechanicals, and the fairies — in order to dramatise various aspects of lovers' experience. The wedding of the former adversaries Theseus and Hippolyta is the event towards which the stories of the four groups move, and which finally unites all

four in the final scene: the mechanicals have prepared their play *Pyramus and Thisbe* to celebrate the occasion, which also marks the marriages of the four young lovers after their quarrels in the wood, and the fairies' blessing of the palace

at the end of the play is a potent image of the harmony, the 'concord', to which the whole play has been moving.

But that concord has only been achieved by characters who have endured extreme discord.

Commenting on the apparently contradictory description of the mechanicals' play as 'very tragical mirth', Theseus asks, 'How shall we find the concord of this discord?' The answer seems to be, as always in Shakespearean

comedy, to look potential disaster straight in the face. It is as if Shakespeare feels that the resolutions of comedy must be put to the test of harsher experiences if they are to be convincing: the

happy ending is the more appreciated if both the characters and the audience are aware of the things that threaten it. Such awareness in no way weakens the humour of the play, but intensifies it by contrast. When Bottom and his companions perform their 'tedious brief scene' before the court, the fatal love of Pyramus and Thisbe is directly relevant to the experience of the four lovers in the wood: without Oberon's benevolent intervention to restore them to their correct pairings, this is how they might have ended up — and an awareness of this may be why they heckle the mechanicals' play so mercilessly.

If the play scene is the climax of the *Dream* as a whole, the climax of the first half is the meeting between Titania and Bottom. Shakespeare's characteristic technique of juxtaposing contrasting extremes is in full operation here, as the fairy queen falls in love with the ass-headed weaver. And in the process the scene contributes to the play's dramatisation of love in all its forms: its joys and sadness, its idealism and its selfishness, and the way in which people may fall in love with external appearances — which is why Oberon and Puck squeeze the love juice on to people's eyes.

Between the extremes of love in the *Dream* stands Theseus. He has had a wild past, including, according to Oberon, an affair with Titania as well as with numerous other mistresses; and he himself acknowledges that he has wooed Hippolyta 'with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries'. But now he has become a figure of reason, balanced (possessing a nice sense of irony), a fair law-giver — but a law-giver who can pragmatically bend that law a little when it is in the interests of his subjects to do so. This is made clear in his final judgement on the lovers: towards the end of the play, he does what at the beginning he said he was not able to do, and over-rules Egeus's insistence on the strict application of the Athenian law when he sees that the two pairs of lovers are properly and happily matched.

'The Athenian law': the play, technically, takes place in Athens, and the fairies have come 'from the farthest steppe of India'; but a more English play it would be hard to imagine. This is strikingly apparent in Shakespeare's dramatisation of the fairy kingdom, and in the lyrical language in which he evokes the rural world which the fairies inhabit and from which they draw their power — from potent natural resources like the wild flowers and the 'fair blessèd beams' of the sun. That relationship is a reciprocal one, and when Oberon and Titania quarrel, nature itself is

thrown into chaos. This is the point of the longest, and arguably the finest, speech in the play, Titania's evocation of the bad weather that has resulted from her quarrel with Oberon, a speech which builds to a general confusion of the seasons:

The spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazéd world
By their increase now knows not which is which.

But if Titania's speech culminates in such grandeur, it can accommodate much more down-to-earth language too: she can communicate the wretched summer the mortals are enduring by alluding to a rural game, cut out of turf that has now become waterlogged: 'The nine men's morris is filled up with mud.' This muddy image summarises Shakespeare's daring in this play: the fairy queen, far from being remotely ethereal, expresses herself in terms of everyday country experience. It is this quality which gives the *Dream* its characteristic flavour, and why, despite the references to Athens or India, it seems to be taking place in an English rural community. From the farthest steppe of India to rural Warwickshire: these extremes focus the range of the play.

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