TRAGICAL MIRTH

program notes by Gideon Lester

When Puck fixes Bottom with an ass's head in the central scene of **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, the transformation provokes three very different reactions. Bottom's fellow Mechanicals flee in terror, Puck laughs, and Titania falls in love. So divergent are these responses, and so swift in sequence, that the tone of the episode becomes ambiguous. How can one image be simultaneously terrifying, hilarious, and erotic?

Such ambivalence pervades **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, and the subjectivity of human experience is at the core of the play. "Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transform to form and dignity," laments Helena in the opening scene, and what ensues proves her point. The characters' sight is always partial, clouded by the "strong imagination" that allows lunatics, lovers, and poets to turn bushes into bears. Whether at the Athenian court or in the depths of a wood, whether ruled by magic, the moon, or hormones, human perception is infinitely changeable.

Subjectivity is so essential to **A Midsummer Night's Dream** that it is hard-wired into the play's structure. By creating four sub-narratives (the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, the thwarted lovers, the Mechanicals' rehearsals, the strife between Oberon and Titania) and allowing them to intersect, Shakespeare is able to dramatize several subjective responses to a single event. In scene after scene, a character from one story - most commonly Puck or Oberon - happens upon an episode from another narrative and interprets what he sees according to his own experience and circumstances. Thus Oberon watches as Helena pursues Demetrius and spies on Titania as she sleeps, Puck stumbles upon the Mechanicals in rehearsal and mistakes the dormant Lysander for Demetrius, and so on, until the presence of a silent witness becomes one of the dominant images of the play.

When the four narratives of **Midsummer** cross paths,

ambiguities abound. The transformed Bottom is an object of terror, ridicule, or lust, depending on the perspective of each witness. The Mechanicals may believe that Pyramus and Thisbe is a sublime tragedy, but for their urbane audience the performance is hilarious (unintentionally validating Peter Quince's oxymoron in the play's billing, "very tragical mirth.")

"Translated ... transposed ... transformed ... transported ... transfigured" - **Midsummer** is shot through with a language of mutability. The world of the play is in constant flux, from the magical flower, "before milk-white, now purple with love's wound," to the lovers' affections, to the seasons themselves, which Titania protests have grown indistinguishable. The play's shape-shifting has its fullest embodiment in Puck, Oberon's protean lieutenant who can transform at will into a "horse, hound, hog, bear, fire," a three-legged stool, or a simulacrum of Lysander or Demetrius. Puck thrives on, and creates, chaos. His function in the play is anarchic – "those things do best please me / That befall preposterously," he announces – and though he intends neither good nor harm, the outcome of his meddling is at best confusion, at worst nightmare. Puck is a close relative of the archetypal trickster-figure, found in many folkloric traditions, whom Carl Jung identified with a "fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half-animal, half divine." The critic Jan Kott wrote of Puck, "He liberates instincts and puts the mechanism of this world in motion. He puts it in motion and mocks it at the same time. [He is] a faun, a devil, and Harlequin, all combined." As such Puck reflects the ambiguities of the play, which is by turns hilarious or horrific, depending on whose eyes we are watching through.

The high degree of subjectivity in **A Midsummer Night's Dream** is destabilizing for us, the audience, as well as for the characters we are observing. In the cacophony of responses that characterizes much of Midsummer, the usual signposts that delineate genre become blurred ,and we are often unsure how to react to the play's events. When Titania makes love to Bottom, the tenderness of her gesture is undercut by her threatening language, which is laden with images of destructive, suffocating nature: "So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle / Gently entwist; the female ivy so / Enrings the barky fingers of the elm."

The counterpoint between word and embrace is disorienting and sinister, though Titania's intentions are not so. When Helena begs Demetrius to "use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me," there is desperation, even masochism, in her entreaty. The situation is deadly serious, but audiences often respond by laughing at Helena's plight. In this shifting world we, like the lovers, find ourselves dislocated. Tragedy and comedy merge, and the play takes on the crazy logic of a waking dream.

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