SIX

May Games and Metamorphoses on a Midsummer Night

> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.

If Shakespeare had called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by a title that referred to pageantry and May games, the aspects of it with which I shall be chiefly concerned would be more often discussed. To honor a noble wedding, Shakespeare gathered up in a play the sort of pageantry which was usually presented piece-meal at aristocratic entertainments, in park and court as well as in hall. And the May game, everybody's pastime, gave the pattern for his whole action, which moves "from the town to the grove" and back again, bringing in summer to the bridal. These things were familiar and did not need to be stressed by a title.

Shakespeare's young men and maids, like those Stubbes described in May games, "run gadding over night to the woods, . . . where they spend the whole night in pleasant pastimes—" and in the fierce vexation which often goes with the pastimes of falling in and out of love and threatening to fight about it. "And no marvel," Stubbes exclaimed about such headlong business, "for there is a great Lord present among them, as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sports, namely, Satan, prince of hell."[1] In making Oberon, prince of fairies, into the May king, Shakespeare urbanely plays with

1. The passage in Stubbes is quoted more fully above, p. 22, in the course of a summary of May Day custom.

the notion of a supernatural power at work in holiday: he presents the common May game presided over by an aristocratic garden god. Titania is a Summer Lady who "waxeth wounder proud":

> I am a spirit of no common rate,
> The summer still doth tend upon my state . . .
> (III.i.157–158)

And Puck, as jester, promotes the "night-rule" version of misrule over which Oberon is superintendent and lord in the "haunted grove." The lovers originally meet

> in the wood, a league without the town,
> Where I did meet thee once with Helena
> To do observance to a morn of May.
> (I.i.165–167)

Next morning, when Theseus and Hippolyta find the lovers sleeping, it is after their own early "observation is performed"—presumably some May-game observance, of a suitably aristocratic kind, for Theseus jumps to the conclusion that

> No doubt they rose up early to observe
> The rite of May; and, hearing our intent,
> Came here in grace of our solemnity.
> (IV.i.135–137)

These lines need not mean that the play's action happens on May Day. Shakespeare does not make himself accountable for exact chronological inferences; the moon that will be new according to Hippolyta will shine according to Bottom's almanac. And in any case, people went Maying at various times, "Against May, Whitsunday, and other time" is the way Stubbes puts it. This Maying can be thought of as happening on a midsummer night, even on Midsummer Eve itself, so that its accidents are complicated by the

delusions of a magic time. (May Week at Cambridge University still comes in June.) The point of the allusions is not the date, but the *kind* of holiday occasion.[2] The Maying is completed when Oberon and Titania with their trains come into the great chamber to bring the blessings of fertility. They are at once common and special, a May king and queen making their good luck visit to the manor house, and a pair of country gods, half-English and half-Ovid, come to bring their powers in tribute to great lords and ladies.

The play's relationship to pageantry is most prominent in the scene where the fairies are introduced by our seeing their quarrel. This encounter is the sort of thing that Elizabeth and the wedding party might have happened on while walking about in the park during the long summer dusk. The fairy couple accuse each other of the usual weakness of pageant personages—a compelling love for royal personages:

> Why art thou here,
> Come from the farthest steep of India,
> But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
> Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love,
> To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
> To give their bed joy and prosperity?
>
> (II.i.68–73)

Oberon describes an earlier entertainment, very likely one in which the family of the real-life bride or groom had been concerned:

> My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou rememb'rest
> Since once I sat upon a promontory

2. A great deal of misunderstanding has come from the assumption of commentators that a Maying must necessarily come on May Day, May 1. The confusion that results is apparent throughout Furness' discussion of the title and date in his preface to the *Variorum* edition. He begins by quoting Dr. Johnson downright "I know not why Shakespeare calls this play 'A *Midsummer* Night's Dream' when he so carefully informs us that it happened on the night preceding *May* day" (p. v).

And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back . . .
That very time I saw (but thou couldst not)
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all arm'd. A certain aim he took
At a fair Vestal, throned by the West,
And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial votress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.

(II.i.147–164)

At the entertainment at Elvetham in 1591, Elizabeth was throned by the west side of a garden lake to listen to music from the water; the fairy queen came with a round of dancers and spoke of herself as wife to Auberon. These and other similarities make it quite possible, but not necessary, that Shakespeare was referring to the Elvetham occasion.[3] There has been speculation, from Warburton on down, aimed at identifying the mermaid and discovering in Cupid's fiery shaft a particular bid for Elizabeth's affections; Leicester's Kenilworth entertainment in 1575 was usually taken as the occasion alluded to, despite the twenty years that had gone by when Shakespeare wrote.[4] No one, however, has cogently demonstrated any reference to court intrigue—which is to be expected in view of the fact that the play, after its original performance, was on the public stage. The same need for discretion probably accounts for the lack of internal evidence as to the particular marriage the comedy originally celebrated.[5] But what is not in doubt, and what matters for our purpose here, is the *kind* of occasion Oberon's speech refers to, the kind of occasion Shakespeare's scene is shaped by. The speech describes, in retrospect, just

3. See E. K. Chambers, *Shakespearean Gleanings* (Oxford, 1944), pp. 63–64; and Venezky, *Pageantry*, pp. 140ff.

4. The conjectures are summarized in *Variorum*, pp. 75–91.

5. Chambers, *Gleanings*, pp. 61–67.

such a joyous overflow of pleasure into music and make-believe as is happening in Shakespeare's own play. The fact that what Shakespeare handled with supreme skill was just what was most commonplace no doubt contributes to our inability to connect what he produced with particular historical circumstances.

As we have seen, it was commonplace to imitate Ovid. Ovidian fancies pervade *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and especially the scene of the fairy quarrel: the description of the way Cupid "loos'd his love shaft" at Elizabeth parallels the Metamorphoses' account of the god's shooting "his best arrow, with the golden head" at Apollo; Helena, later in the scene, exclaims that "The story shall be chang'd:/ Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase"—and proceeds to invert animal images from Ovid.[6] The game was not so much to lift things gracefully from Ovid as it was to make up fresh things in Ovid's manner, as Shakespeare here, by playful mythopoesis, explains the bad weather by his fairies' quarrel and makes up a metamorphosis of the little Western flower to motivate the play's follies and place Elizabeth superbly above them.[7] The pervasive Ovidian influence accounts for Theseus' putting fables and fairies in the same breath when he says, punning on ancient and antic,

> I never may believe
> These antique fables nor these fairy toys.
>
> (V.i.2–3)

The humor of the play relates superstition, magic and passionate delusion as "fancy's images." The actual title emphasizes a sceptical attitude by calling the comedy a "dream." It seems unlikely that the title's characterization of the dream, "a midsummer night's dream," implies association with the specific customs of Midsummer Eve, the

6. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, with an English translation by Frank Justus Miller (New York, 1916), pp. 34 and 36–37, Bk. I, ll. 465–474 and 505–506.

7. See above, pp. 94f., for a similar compliment to the Queen by Nashe in *Summer's Last Will and Testament*. Nashe also elaborates meteorology into make-believe: Summer blames the drying up of the Thames and earlier flooding of it on the pageant figure, Sol (McKerrow, *Nashe*, III, 250, ll. 541–565).

shortest night of the year, except as "midsummer night" would carry suggestions of a magic time. The observance of Midsummer Eve in England centered on building bonfires or "bonefires," of which there is nothing in Shakespeare's moonlight play. It was a time when maids might find out who their true love would be by dreams or divinations. There were customs of decking houses with greenery and hanging lights, which just possibly might connect with the fairies' torches at the comedy's end. And when people gathered fern seed at midnight, sometimes they spoke of spirits whizzing invisibly past. If one ranges through the eclectic pages of *The Golden Bough*, guided by the index for Midsummer Eve, one finds other customs suggestive of Shakespeare's play, involving moonlight, seeing the moon in water, gathering dew, and so on, but in Sweden, Bavaria, or still more remote places, rather than England.[8] One can assume that parallel English customs have been lost, or one can assume that Shakespeare's

8. A good summary of English Midsummer Eve customs is in *Brand's Antiquities*, ed. Ellis, pp. 298–337, which gives simply and briefly examples of almost all the English customs included in Frazer's far more complete survey (see *The Golden Bough*, Vol. XII, *Bibliography and General Index*, London, 1915, pp. 370–371). Ellis cites (p. 319) a song from Penzance which describes what is in many respects a Maying, held on Midsummer Eve with a Midsummer bonfire for the men and maids to dance around (such a local combination of the customs is to be expected):

> Bright Luna spreads its light around,
> The gallants for to cheer,
> As they lay sporting on the ground,
> At the fair June bonfire.
>
> All on the pleasant dewy mead,
> They shared each other's charms,
> Till Phoebus' beams began to spread,
> And coming day alarms.

Although reported as "sung for a long series of years at Penzance and the neighbourhood," the piece obviously was written after Shakespeare's period. But the customs it describes in its rather crude way are interesting in relation to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, particularly the moonlight and dew, and the sun's beams coming to end it all.

imagination found its way to similarities with folk cult, starting from the custom of Maying and the general feeling that spirits may be abroad in the long dusks and short nights of midsummer. Olivia in *Twelfth Night* speaks of "midsummer madness" (III.iv.61). In the absence of evidence, there is no way to settle just how much comes from tradition. But what *is* clear is that Shakespeare was not *simply* writing out folklore which he heard in his youth, as Romantic critics liked to assume. On the contrary, his fairies are produced by a complex fusion of pageantry and popular game, as well as popular fancy. Moreover, as we shall see, they are not serious in the menacing way in which the people's fairies were serious. Instead they are serious in a very different way, as embodiments of the May-game experience of eros in men and women and trees and flowers, while any superstitious tendency to believe in their literal reality is mocked. The whole night's action is presented as a release of shaping fantasy which brings clarification about the tricks of strong imagination. We watch a dream; but we are awake, thanks to pervasive humor about the tendency to take fantasy literally, whether in love, in superstition, or in Bottom's mechanical dramatics. As in *Love's Labour's Lost* the folly of wit becomes the generalized comic subject in the course of an astonishing release of witty invention, so here in the course of a more inclusive release of imagination, the folly of fantasy becomes the general subject, echoed back and forth between the strains of the play's imitative counterpoint.

The Fond Pageant

We can best follow first the strain of the lovers; then the fairies, their persuasive and then their humorous aspects; and finally the broadly comic strain of the clowns. We feel what happens to the young lovers in relation to the wedding of the Duke. Theseus and Hippolyta have a quite special sort of role: they are principals without being protagonists; the play happens for them rather than to them. This relation goes with their being stand-ins for the noble couple whose

marriage the play originally honored. In expressing the prospect of Theseus' marriage, Shakespeare can fix in ideal form, so that it can be felt later at performance in the theater, the mood that would obtain in a palace as the "nuptial hour / Draws on apace." Theseus looks towards the hour with masculine impatience, Hippolyta with a woman's happy willingness to dream away the time. Theseus gives directions for the "four happy days" to his "usual manager of mirth," his Master of the Revels, Philostrate:

> 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.i.11–15)

The whole community is to observe a decorum of the passions, with Philostrate as choreographer of a pageant where Melancholy's float will not appear. After the war in which he won Hippolyta, the Duke announces that he is going to wed her

> in another key,
> With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.
>
> (I.i.18–19)

But his large, poised line is interrupted by Egeus, panting out vexation. After the initial invocation of nuptial festivity, we are confronted by the sort of tension from which merriment is a release. Here is Age, standing in the way of Athenian youth; here are the locked conflicts of everyday. By the dwelling here on "the sharp Athenian law," on the fate of nuns "in shady cloister mew'd," we are led to feel the outgoing to the woods as an escape from the inhibitions imposed by parents and the organized community. And this sense of release is also prepared by looking for just a moment at the tragic potentialities of passion. Lysander and Hermia, left alone in their predicament, speak

a plaintive, symmetrical duet on the theme, learned "from tale or history," that "The course of true love never did run smooth":

> *Lysander*. But, either it was different in blood—
> *Hermia*. O cross! too high to be enthrall'd to low!
> *Lysander*. Or else misgraffed in respect of years—
> *Hermia*. O spite! too old to be engag'd to young!
> (I.i.135–138)

Suddenly the tone changes, as Lysander describes in little the sort of tragedy presented in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet exclaimed that their love was "Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say 'It lightens' " (II.ii.119–120).

> *Lysander*. Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
> War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
> Making it momentany as a sound,
> Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
> Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
> That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
> And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
> So quick bright things come to confusion.
> (I.i.141–149)

But Hermia shakes herself free of the tragic vision, and they turn to thoughts of stealing forth tomorrow night to meet in the Maying wood and go on to the dowager aunt, where "the sharp Athenian law / Cannot pursue us."

If they had reached the wealthy aunt, the play would be a romance. But it is a change of heart, not a change of fortune, which lets love have its way. The merriments Philostrate was to have directed happen inadvertently, the lovers walking into them blind, so to speak. This is characteristic of the way game is transformed into drama in this play, by contrast with the disabling of the fictions in

Love's Labour's Lost. Here the roles which the young people might play in a wooing game, they carry out in earnest. And nobody is shown setting about to play the parts of Oberon or Titania. Instead the pageant fictions are presented as "actually" happening—at least so it seems at first glance.

We see the fairies meet by moonlight in the woods before we see the lovers arrive there, and so are prepared to see the mortals lose themselves. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita describes explicitly the transforming and liberating powers of the spring festival which in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are embodied in the nightwood world the lovers enter. After Perdita has described the spring flowers, she concludes with

> O, these I lack
> To make you garlands of; and my sweet friend,
> To strew him o'er and o'er!
> *Florizel.* What, like a corse?
> *Perdita.* No, like a bank for love to lie and play on;
> Not like a corse; or if—not to be buried,
> But quick, and in mine arms. Come, take your flow'rs.
> Methinks I play as I have seen them do
> In Whitsun pastorals. Sure this robe of mine
> Does change my disposition.
>
> (*WT* IV.iv.127–135)

Her recovery is as exquisite as her impulse towards surrender: she comes back to herself by seeing her gesture as the expression of the occasion. She makes the festive clothes she wears mean its transforming power. Florizel has told her that

> These your unusual weeds to each part of you
> Do give a life—no shepherdess but Flora
> Peering in April's front!
>
> (IV.iv.1–3)

Holiday disguising, her humility suggests, would be embarrassing but for the license of the sheep-shearing feast:

> But that our feasts
> In every mess have folly, and the feeders
> Digest it with a custom, I should blush
> To see you so attired.
>
> (IV.iv.10–13)

The lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* play "as in Whitsun pastorals," but they are entirely without this sort of consciousness of their folly. They are unreservedly *in* the passionate protestations which they rhyme at each other as they change partners:

> *Helena*. Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake.
> *Lysander*. And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake
> Transparent Helena!
>
> (II.ii.102–104)

The result of this lack of consciousness is that they are often rather dull and undignified, since however energetically they elaborate conceits, there is usually no qualifying irony, nothing withheld. And only accidental differences can be exhibited, Helena tall, Hermia short. Although the men think that "reason says" now Hermia, now Helena, is "the worthier maid," personalities have nothing to do with the case: it is the flowers that bloom in the spring. The life in the lovers' parts is not to be caught in individual speeches, but by regarding the whole movement of the farce, which swings and spins each in turn through a common pattern, an evolution that seems to have an impersonal power of its own. Miss Enid Welsford describes the play's movement as a dance:

> The plot is a pattern, a figure, rather than a series of human events occasioned by character and passion, and this pattern,

> especially in the moonlight parts of the play, is the pattern of a dance.
>
> "Enter a Fairie at one doore, and Robin Goodfellow at another. . . . Enter the King of Fairies, at one doore, with his traine; and the Queene, at another with hers."
>
> The appearance and disappearance and reappearance of the various lovers, the will-o'-the-wisp movement of the elusive Puck, form a kind of figured ballet. The lovers quarrel in a dance pattern: first, there are two men to one woman and the other woman alone, then a brief space of circular movement, each one pursuing and pursued, then a return to the first figure with the position of the woman reversed, then a cross-movement, man quarrelling with man and woman with woman, and then, as finale, a general setting to partners, including not only the lovers but fairies and royal personages as well.[9]

This is fine and right, except that one must add that the lovers' evolutions have a headlong and helpless quality that depends on their not being *intended* as dance, by contrast with those of the fairies. (One can also contrast the courtly circle's intended though abortive dances in *Love's Labour's Lost*.) The farce is funniest, and most meaningful, in the climactic scene where the lovers are most unwilling, where they try their hardest to use personality to break free, and still are willy-nilly swept along to end in pitch darkness, trying to fight. When both men have arrived at wooing Helena, she assumes it must be voluntary mockery, a "false sport" fashioned "in spite." She appeals to Hermia on the basis of their relation as particular individuals, their "sister's vows." But Hermia is at sea, too; names no longer work: "Am I not Hermia? Are not you Lysander?" So in the

9. *The Court Masque*, pp. 331–332. Although Miss Welsford's perceptions about dance and revel make her account of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* extremely effective, the court masque, to which she chiefly refers it, is not really a formal prototype for this play. It *is* a direct and large influence in shaping *The Tempest*, and her account of that play brings out fundamental structure such as the early masterpiece gets from entertainment and outdoor holiday, not the court masque.

end Hermia too, though she has held off, is swept into the whirl, attacking Helena as a thief of love. She grasps at straws to explain what has happened by something manageably related to their individual identities:

> *Helena*. Fie, fie! You counterfeit, you puppet you.
> *Hermia*. Puppet? Why so! Ay, that way goes the game.
> Now I perceive that she hath made compare
> Between our statures; she hath urg'd her height . . .
> How low am I, thou painted maypole? Speak!
> (III.ii.289–296)

In exhibiting a more drastic helplessness of will and mind than anyone experienced in *Love Labour's Lost*, this farce conveys a sense of people being tossed about by a force which puts them beside themselves to take them beyond themselves. The change that happens is presented simply, with little suggestion that it involves a growth in insight—Demetrius is not led to realize something false in his diverted affection for Hermia. But one psychological change, fundamental in growing up, is presented. Helena tries at first to move Hermia by an appeal to "schooldays friendship, childhood innocence," described at length in lovely, generous lines:

> So we grew together,
> Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
> But yet an union in partition—
> Two lovely berries molded on one stem . . .
> And will you rent our ancient love asunder
> To join with men in scorning your poor friend?
> (III.ii.208–216)

"To join with men" has a plaintive girlishness about it. But before the scramble is over, the two girls have broken the double-cherry bond, to fight each without reserve for her man. So they move from the loyalties of one stage of life to those of another. When it has happened,

when they wake up, the changes in affections seem mysterious. So Demetrius says

> But, my good lord, I wot not by what power
> (But by some power it is) my love to Hermia,
> Melted as the snow, seems to me now
> As the remembrance of an idle gaud
> Which in my childhood I did dote upon . . .
>
> (IV.i.167–171)

The comedy's irony about love's motives and choices expresses love's power not as an attribute of special personality but as an impersonal force beyond the persons concerned. The tragedies of love, by isolating Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, enlist our concern for love as it enters into unique destinies, and convey its subjective immensity in individual experience. The festive comedies, in presenting love's effect on a group, convey a different sense of its power, less intense but also less precarious.

In *Love's Labour's Lost* it was one of the lovers, Berowne, who was aware, in the midst of folly's game, that it was folly and a game; such consciousness, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is lodged outside the lovers, in Puck. It is he who knows "which way goes the game," as poor Hermia only thought she did. As a jester, and as Robin Goodfellow, games and practical jokes are his great delight: his lines express for the audience the mastery that comes from seeing folly as a pattern:

> Then will two at once woo one.
> That must needs be sport alone.
>
> (III.ii.118–119)

Like Berowne, he counts up the sacks as they come to Cupid's mill:

> Yet but three? Come one more.
> Two of both kinds makes up four.
> Here she comes, curst and sad.

Cupid is a knavish lad
Thus to make poor females mad.

III.ii.437–441)

Females, ordinarily a graceless word, works nicely here because it includes *every* girl. The same effect is got by using the names Jack and Jill, *any* boy and *any* girl:

And the country proverb known,
That every man should take his own,
In your waking shall be shown:
Jack shall have Jill;
Nought shall go ill:
The man shall have his mare again and all shall be well.

(III.ii.457–463)

The trailing off into rollicking doggerel is exactly right to convey a country-proverb confidence in common humanity and in what humanity have in common. The proverb is on the lovers' side, as it was not for Berowne, who had ruefully to accept an ending in which "Jack hath not Jill." A festive confidence that things will ultimately go right supports the perfect gayety and detachment with which Puck relishes the preposterous course they take:

Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be!

(III.ii.114–115)

The pageant is "fond" because the mortals do not realize they are in it, nor that it is sure to come out right, since nature will have its way.

Bringing in Summer to the Bridal

Spenser's *Epithalamion*, written at about the same time as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, about 1595, is very like Shakespeare's play

in the way it uses a complex literary heritage to express native English customs. In the course of fetching the bride to church and home again, Spenser makes the marriage a fulfillment of the whole countryside and community:

> So goodly all agree with sweet consent,
> To this dayes merriment.
>
> (83–84)

A gathering in, like that of the May game, is part of this confluence:

> Bring with you all the Nymphes that you can heare
> Both of the riuers and the forrests greene:
> And of the sea that neighbours to her neare,
> Al with gay girlands goodly well beseene.
>
> (37–40)

The church of course is decked with garlands, and the bride, "being crowned with a girland greene," seems "lyke some mayden Queene." It is Midsummer. The pervasive feeling for the kinship of men and nature is what rings in the refrain:

> That all the woods them answer and their echo ring.

Shakespeare, in developing a May-game action at length to express the will in nature that is consummated in marriage, brings out underlying magical meanings of the ritual while keeping always a sense of what it is humanly, as an experience. The way nature is felt is shaped, as we noticed in an earlier chapter, by the things that are done in encountering it.[10] The woods are a region of passionate excitement where, as Berowne said, love "adds a precious seeing to the eye." This precious seeing was talked about but never realized in *Love's Labour's Lost*; instead we got wit. But now it is realized; we get

10. See above, pp. 20–21.

poetry. Poetry conveys the experience of amorous tendency diffused in nature; and poetry, dance, gesture, dramatic fiction, combine to create, in the fairies, creatures who embody the passionate mind's elated sense of its own omnipotence. The woods are established as a region of metamorphosis, where in liquid moonlight or glimmering starlight, things can change, merge and melt into each other. Metamorphosis expresses both what love sees and what it seeks to do.

The opening scene, like an overture, announces this theme of dissolving, in unobtrusive but persuasive imagery. Hippolyta says that the four days until the wedding will "quickly *steep* themselves in night" and the nights "quickly *dream* away the time" (I.i.6–7)—night will dissolve day in dream. Then an imagery of wax develops as Egeus complains that Lysander has bewitched his daughter Hermia, "stol'n the *impression* of her fantasy" (I.i.32). Theseus backs up Egeus by telling Hermia that

> To you your father should be as a god;
> One that compos'd your beauties; yea, and one
> To whom you are but as a form in wax,
> By him imprinted, and within his power
> To leave the figure, or disfigure it.
>
> (I.i.47–51)

The supposedly moral threat is incongruously communicated in lines that relish the joy of composing beauties and suggests a godlike, almost inhuman freedom to do as one pleases in such creation. The metaphor of sealing as procreation is picked up again when Theseus requires Hermia to decide "by the next new moon, / The sealing day betwixt my love and me" (I.i.84–85). The consummation in prospect with marriage is envisaged as a melting into a new form and a new meaning. Helena says to Hermia that she would give the world "to be to you translated" (I.i.191), and in another image describes meanings that melt from love's transforming power:

ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyes,
He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolv'd, and show'rs of oaths did melt.
(I.i.242–245)

The most general statement, and one that perfectly fits what we are to see in the wood when Titania meets Bottom, is

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
(I.i.232–233)

"The glimmering night" promotes transpositions by an effect not simply of light, but also of a half-liquid medium in or through which things are seen:

Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass,
Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass,
(A time that lovers' flights doth still conceal) . . .
(I.i.209–213)

Miss Caroline Spurgeon pointed to the moonlight in this play as one of the earliest sustained effects of "iterative imagery."[11] To realize how the effect is achieved, we have to recognize that the imagery is not used simply to paint an external scene but to convey human attitudes. We do not get simply "the glimmering night," but

Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night
From Perigouna, whom he ravished?
(II.i.77–78)

11. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (New York, 1935), pp. 259–263.

The liquid imagery conveys an experience of the skin, as well as the eye's confusion by refraction. The moon "looks with a wat'ry eye" (III.i.203) and "washes all the air" (II.i.104); its sheen, becoming liquid pearl as it mingles with dew, seems to get onto the eyeballs of the lovers, altering them to reshape what they see, like the juice of the flower with which they are "streaked" by Oberon and Puck. The climax of unreason comes when Puck overcasts the night to make it "black as Acheron" (III.ii.357); the lovers now experience only sound and touch, running blind over uneven ground, through bog and brake, "bedabbled with the dew and torn with briers" (III.ii.442). There is nothing more they can do until the return of light permits a return of control: light is anticipated as "comforts from the East" (III.ii.432), "the Morning's love" (III.ii.389). The sun announces its coming in a triumph of red and gold over salt green, an entire change of key from the moon's "silver visage in her wat'ry glass":

> the eastern gate, all fiery red,
> Opening on Neptune, with fair blessed beams
> Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
>
> (III.ii.391–393)

Finally Theseus comes with his hounds and his horns in the morning, and the lovers are startled awake. They find as they come to themselves that

> These things seem small and undistinguishable,
> Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.
>
> (IV.i.190–191)

The teeming metamorphoses which we encounter are placed, in this way, in a medium and in a moment where the perceived structure of the outer world breaks down, where the body and its environment interpenetrate in unaccustomed ways, so that the seeming separateness and stability of identity is lost.

The action of metaphor is itself a process of transposing, a kind of metamorphosis. There is less direct description of external nature *in* the play than one would suppose: much of the effect of being in nature comes from imagery which endows it with anthropomorphic love, hanging a wanton pearl in every cowslip's ear. Titania laments that

> the green corn
> Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;

while

> Hoary-headed frosts
> Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose . . .
>
> (II.i.94–95, 107–108)

By a complementary movement of imagination, human love is treated in terms of growing things. Theseus warns Hermia against becoming a nun, because

> earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
> Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn
> Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness.
>
> (I.i.76–78)

Titania, embracing Bottom, describes herself in terms that fit her surroundings and uses the association of ivy with women of the songs traditional at Christmas:[12]

12. See above, p. 131. A recurrent feature of the type of pastoral which begins with something like "As I walked forth one morn in May" is a bank of flowers "for love to lie and play on," such as Perdita speaks of. This motif appears in the "bank where the wild thyme blows" where Titania sleeps "lull'd in these flowers by dances and delight." In such references there is a magical suggestion that love is infused with nature's vitality by contact.

So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
Gently entwist; the female ivy so
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.

(IV.i.45–47)

One could go on and on in instancing metamorphic metaphors. But one of the most beautiful bravura speeches can serve as an epitome of the metamorphic action in the play, Titania's astonishing answer when Oberon asks for the changeling boy:

Set your heart at rest.
The fairyland buys not the child of me.
His mother was a vot'ress of my order;
And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side,
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th'embarked traders on the flood;
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following (her womb then rich with my young squire)
Would imitate, and sail upon the land
To fetch me trifles, and return again,
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die,
And for her sake do I rear up her boy;
And for her sake I will not part from him.

(II.i.121–137)

The memory of a moment seemingly so remote expresses with plastic felicity the present moment when Titania speaks and we watch. It suits Titania's immediate mood, for it is a glimpse of women who gossip alone, apart from men and feeling now no need of them, rejoicing in their own special part of life's power. At such moments,

the child, not the lover, is their object—as this young squire is still the object for Titania, who "crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy." The passage conveys a wanton joy in achieved sexuality, in fertility; and a gay acceptance of the waxing of the body (like joy in the varying moon). At leisure in the spiced night air, when the proximate senses of touch and smell are most alive, this joy finds sport in projecting images of love and growth where they are not. The mother, having laughed to see the ship a woman with child, imitates it so as to go the other way about and herself become a ship. She fetches trifles, but she is also actually "rich with merchandise," for her womb is "rich with my young squire." The secure quality of the play's pleasure is conveyed by having the ships out on the flood while she sails, safely, upon the *land*, with a pretty and swimming gait that is an overflowing of the security of make-believe. The next line brings a poignant glance out beyond this gamesome world:

> But she, being mortal, of that boy did die.

It is when the flower magic leads Titania to find a new object that she gives up the child (who goes now from her bower to the man's world of Oberon). So here is another sort of change of heart that contributes to the expression of what is consummated in marriage, this one a part of the rhythm of adult life, as opposed to the change in the young lovers that goes with growing up. Once Titania has made this transition, their ritual marriage is renewed:

> Now thou and I are new in amity,
> And will to-morrow midnight solemnly
> Dance in Duke Theseus' house triumphantly
> And bless it to all fair prosperity.
>
> (IV.i.90–93)

The final dancing blessing of the fairies, "Through the house with glimmering light" (V.i.398), after the lovers are abed, has been given meaning by the symbolic action we have been describing: the fairies

have been made into tutelary spirits of fertility, so that they can promise that

> the blots of Nature's hand
> Shall not in their issue stand.
>
> (V.i.416–417)

When merely read, the text of this episode seems somewhat bare, but its clipped quality differentiates the fairy speakers from the mortals, and anyway richer language would be in the way. Shakespeare has changed from a fully dramatic medium to conclude, in a manner appropriate to festival, with dance and song. It seems likely that, as Dr. Johnson argued, there were two songs which have been lost, one led by Oberon and the other by Titania.[13] There were probably two dance evolutions also, the first a processional dance led by the king and the second a round led by the queen: Oberon's lines direct the fairies to dance and sing "through the house," "by the fire," "after me"; Titania seems to start a circling dance with "First rehearse your song by rote"; by contrast with Oberon's "after me," she calls for "hand in hand." This combination of processional and round dances is the obvious one for the occasion: to get the fairies in and give them something to do. But these two forms of dance are associated in origin with just the sort of festival use of them which Shakespeare is making. "The customs of the village festival," Chambers writes, "gave rise by natural development to two types of dance. One was the processional dance of a band of worshippers in progress round their boundaries and from field to field, house to house. . . . The other type of folk dance, the *ronde* or 'round,' is derived from the comparatively stationary dance of the group of worshippers around the more especially sacred objects of the festival, such as the tree or

13. See *Variorum*, p. 239, for Dr. Johnson's cogent note. Richmond Noble, in *Shakespeare's Use of Song* (Oxford, 1923), pp. 55–57, argues that the text as we have it *is* the text of the song, without, I think, meeting the arguments of Johnson and subsequent editors.

fire. The custom of dancing round the Maypole has been more or less preserved wherever the Maypole is known. But 'Thread the Needle' (a type of surviving processional dance) itself often winds up with a circular dance or *ronde*. . . ."[14] One can make too much of such analogies. But they do illustrate the rich traditional meanings available in the materials Shakespeare was handling.

Puck's broom is another case in point: it is his property as a housemaid's sprite, "to sweep the dust behind the door" (V.i.397); also it permits him to make "room," in the manner of the presenter of a holiday mummers' group. And with the dust, out go evil spirits. Puck refers to "evil sprites" let forth by graves, developing a momentary sense of midnight terrors, of spirits that walk by night; then he promises that no mouse shall disturb "this hallowed house." The exorcism of evil powers complements the invocation of good. With their "field dew consecrate," the fairies enact a lustration. Fertilizing and beneficent virtues are in festival custom persistently attributed to dew gathered on May mornings.[15] Shakespeare's handling of nature has infused dew in this play with the vital spirit of moist and verdant woods. The dew is "consecrate" in this sense. But the religious associations inevitably attaching to the word suggest also the sanctification of love by marriage. It was customary for the clergy, at least in important marriages, to bless the bed and bridal couple with holy water. The benediction included exorcism, in the Manual for the use of Salisbury a prayer to protect them from what Spenser called "evill sprights" and "things that be not" (*ab omnibus fantasmaticis demonum illusionibus*).[16] This custom may itself be an ecclesiastical adaptation of a more primitive bridal lustration, a water charm of which dew-gathering on May Day is one variant. Such a play as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is possible because the May and Summer Spirit, despite its pagan affinities, is not conceived as necessarily in opposition to the wholeness of traditional Christian life.

14. *Mediaeval Stage*, I, 165–166.
15. *Ibid*., I, 122.
16. *Variorum*, p. 240.

Magic as Imagination: The Ironic Wit

In promoting the mastery of passion by expression, dramatic art can provide a civilized equivalent for exorcism. The exorcism represented as magically accomplished at the conclusion of the comedy is accomplished, in another sense, by the whole dramatic action, as it keeps moving through release to clarification. By embodying in the fairies the mind's proclivity to court its own omnipotence, Shakespeare draws this tendency, this "spirit," out into the open. They have the meaning they do only because we see them in the midst of the metamorphic region we have just considered—removed from this particular wood, most of their significance evaporates, as for example in *Nymphidia* and other pretty floral miniatures. One might summarize their role by saying that they represent the power of imagination. But to say what they *are* is to short-circuit the life of them and the humor. They present themselves moment by moment as actual persons; the humor keeps *recognizing* that the person is a personification, that the magic is imagination.

The sceptical side of the play has been badly neglected because romantic taste, which first made it popular, wanted to believe in fairies. Romantic criticism usually praised *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the assumption that its spell should be complete, and that the absolute persuasiveness of the poetry should be taken as the measure of its success. This expectation of unreserved illusion finds a characteristic expression in Hazlitt:

> All that is finest in the play is lost in the representation. The spectacle is grand; but the spirit was evaporated, the genius was fled. Poetry and the stage do not agree well together. . . . Where all is left to the imagination (as is the case in reading) every circumstance, near or remote, has an equal chance of being kept in mind and tells according to the mixed impression of all that has been suggested. But the imagination cannot sufficiently qualify the actual impressions of the senses. Any offense given to the eye is not to be got rid of by explanation.

> Thus Bottom's head in the play is a fantastic illusion, produced by magic spells; on the stage it is an ass's head, and nothing more; certainly a very strange costume for a gentleman to appear in. Fancy cannot be embodied any more than a simile can be painted; and it is as idle to attempt it as to personate *Wall* or *Moonshine*. Fairies are not incredible, but Fairies six feet high are so.[17]

Hazlitt's objections were no doubt partly justified by the elaborate methods of nineteenth-century production. A superfluity of "actual impressions of the senses" came into conflict with the poetry by attempting to reduplicate it. But Hazlitt looks for a complete illusion of a kind which Shakespeare's theater did not provide and Shakespeare's play was not designed to exploit; failing to find it on the stage, he retires to his study, where he is free of the discrepancy between imagination and sense which he finds troublesome. The result is the nineteenth-century's characteristic misreading, which regards "the play" as a series of real supernatural events, with a real ass's head and real fairies, and, by excluding all awareness that "the play" is a play, misses its most important humor.

The extravagant subject matter actually led the dramatist to rely more heavily than elsewhere on a flexible attitude toward representation. The circumstances of the original production made this all the more inevitable: Puck stood in a hall familiar to the audience. We have noticed how in holiday shows, it was customary to make game with the difference between art and life by witty transitions back and forth between them. The aim was not to make the auditors "forget they are in a theater," but to extend reality into fiction. The general Renaissance tendency frankly to accept and relish the artificiality of art, and the vogue of formal rhetoric and "conceited" love poetry, also made for sophistication about the artistic process. The sonneteers mock their mythological machinery, only to insist the more on the reality of what it represents:

17. *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817) in *The Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London, 1930), IV, 247–248; quoted in *Variorum*, pp. 299–300.

It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart,
An image is, which for ourselves we carve.

Yet it is

True and most true, that I must Stella love.[18]

Shakespeare's auditors had not been conditioned by a century and a half of effort to achieve sincerity by denying art. Coleridge has a remark about the advantages that Shakespeare enjoyed as a dramatist which is particularly illuminating in connection with this feeling for art in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He observes that "the circumstances of acting were altogether different from ours; it was much more of recitation," with the result that "the idea of the poet was always present."[19] The nearly bare stage worked as Proust observed that the bare walls of an art gallery work, to isolate "the essential thing, the act of mind."

It is "the act of mind" and "the idea of the poet" which are brought into focus when, at the beginning of the relaxed fifth act, Theseus comments on what the lovers have reported of their night in the woods. I shall quote the passage in full, despite its familiarity, to consider the complex attitude it conveys:

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

18. Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, No. V, in *Arcadia, 1593, and Astrophel and Stella*, ed. Albert Feuillerat (Cambridge, 1922), p. 244.
19. Coleridge, *Select Poetry and Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter (London, 1933), p. 342.

Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear!

(V.i.7–22)

The description of the power of poetic creation is so beautiful that these lines are generally taken out of context and instanced simply as glorification of the poet. But the praise of the poet is qualified in conformity with the tone Theseus adopts towards the lover and the madman. In his comment there is wonder, wonderfully expressed, at the power of the mind to create from airy nothing; but also recognition that the creation may be founded, after all, merely on airy nothing. Neither awareness cancels out the other. A sense of the plausible life and energy of fancy goes with the knowledge that often its productions are more strange than true.

Scepticism is explicitly crystallized out in the *détente* of Theseus' speech; but scepticism is in solution throughout the play. There is a delicate humor about the unreality of the fairies even while they are walking about in a local habitation with proper names. The usual production, even now, rides rough-shod over this humor by trying to act the fairies in a "vivid" way that will compel belief—with much fluttery expressiveness that has led many to conclude that the fairies are naïve and silly. Quite the contrary—the fairy business is exceedingly sophisticated. The literal and figurative aspects of what is presented are both deliberately kept open to view. The effect is well described by Hermia's remark when she looks back at her dream:

Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.

(IV.i.192–193)

As we watch the dream, the doubleness is made explicit to keep us aware that strong imagination is at work:

> And I serve the Fairy Queen,
> To dew her orbs upon the green.
> The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
> In their gold coats spots you see.
> Those be rubies, fairy favours;
> In those freckles live their savours.
>
> (II.i.8–13)

These conceits, half botany, half personification, are explicit about remaking nature's economy after the pattern of man's: "spots you see. / Those be rubies . . ." The same conscious double vision appears when Puck introduces himself:

> sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
> In very likeness of a roasted crab . . .
> The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
> Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
>
> (II.i.47–52)

The plain implication of the lines, though Puck speaks them, is that Puck does not really exist—that he is a figment of naïve imagination, projected to motivate the little accidents of household life.

This scepticism goes with social remoteness from the folk whose superstitions the poet is here enjoying. Puck's description has the aloof detachment of genre painting, where the grotesqueries of the subject are seen across lines of class difference. As a matter of fact there is much less popular lore in these fairies than is generally assumed in talking about them. The fairies do, it is true, show all the main characteristics of fairies in popular belief: they appear in the forest, at midnight, and leave at sunrise; they take children, dance in ringlets. But as I have remarked already, their whole quality is drastically different from that of the fairies "of the villagery," creatures

who, as Dr. Minor White Latham has shown, were dangerous to meddle with, large enough to harm, often malicious, sometimes the consorts of witches.[20] One can speak of Shakespeare's having changed the fairies of popular superstition, as Miss Latham does. Or one can look at what he did in relation to the traditions of holiday and pageantry and see his creatures as pageant nymphs and holiday celebrants, colored by touches from popular superstition, but shaped primarily by a very different provenance. Most of the detailed popular lore concerns Puck, not properly a fairy at all; even he is several parts Cupid and several parts mischievous stage page (a cousin of Moth in *Love's Labour's Lost* and no doubt played by the same small, agile boy). And Puck is only *using* the credulity of the folk as a jester, to amuse a king.

Titania and Oberon and their trains are very different creatures from the *gemütlich* fairies of middle-class folklore enthusiasm in

20. *The Elizabethan Fairies, The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (New York, 1930), Ch. V and passim. Professor Latham's excellent study points out in detail how Shakespeare, in keeping such features of popular superstition as, say, the taking of changelings, entirely alters the emphasis, so as to make the fairies either harmless or benign, as Titania is benign in rearing up the child of her dead vot'ress "for her sake." Dr. Latham develops and documents the distinction, recognized to a degree by some commentators from the time of Sir Walter Scott, between the fairies of popular belief and those of *Dream*. In particular she emphasizes that, in addition to being malicious, the fairies of common English belief were large enough to be menacing (Ch. II and passim). This difference in size fits with everything else—though it is not borne out by quite all of the evidence, especially if one considers, as Dr. Louis Wright has suggested to me in conversation, that Warwick is close enough to Wales to have possibly been influenced by Welsh traditions. (We have no direct knowledge, one way or the other, about Warwickshire lore in the Elizabethan period.)

Although Dr. Latham summarizes the appearances of fairies in entertainment pageantry, she does not consider the influence of this tradition, nor of the May game, in shaping what Shakespeare made of his fairies—or more accurately, in shaping what Shakespeare made of his play and so of the fairies in it. But her book made a decisive, cogent contribution to a subject that is often treated with coy vagueness. She surveys in Ch. VI the traditions current before Shakespeare about Robin Goodfellow, pointing out that he had not been a native of fairyland until Shakespeare made him so, but "occupied the unique position of the national practical joker" (p. 223).

the nineteenth century. The spectrum of Shakespeare's imagination includes some of the warm domestic tones which the later century cherished. But the whole attitude of self-abnegating humility before the mystery of folk imagination is wrong for interpreting this play. His fairies are creatures of pastoral, varied by adapting folk superstitions so as to make a new sort of arcadia. Though they are not shepherds, they lead a life similarly occupied with the pleasures of song and dance and, for king and queen, the vexations and pleasures of love. They have not the pastoral "labours" of tending flocks, but equivalent duties are suggested in the tending of nature's fragile beauties, killing "cankers in the musk-rose buds." They have a freedom like that of shepherds in arcadias, but raised to a higher power: they are free not only of the limitations of place and purse but of space and time.

The settled content of regular pastoral is possible because it is a "low" content, forgoing wealth and position; Shakespeare's fairies too can have their fine freedom because their sphere is limited. At times their tiny size limits them, though this is less important than is generally suggested by summary descriptions of "Shakespeare's fairy race." The poet plays the game of diminution delightfully, but never with Titania and Oberon, only with their attendants, and not all the time with them. It seems quite possible that Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed were originally played by children of the family—their parts seem designed to be foolproof for little children: "Ready.—And I.—And I.—And I." Diminutiveness is *the* characteristic of the Queen Mab Mercutio describes in *Romeo and Juliet*, and, as Dr. Latham has shown, it quickly became the hallmark of the progeny of literary fairies that followed;[21] but it is only occasionally at issue in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. More fundamental is their

21. Dr. Latham (*Fairies*, pp. 194–216) traces the way fairies derived from Shakespeare were perpetuated by Drayton and William Browne and others by elaborating conceits about their small size and their relationship to flowers. She develops the point that other writers had suggested earlier, that Shakespeare's influence soon altered popular conceptions of the fairies—and in the process of making them benign and tiny, made them purely literary creatures, without a hold on belief.

limited time. Oberon can boast that, by contrast with horrors who must "wilfully themselves exile from light,"

> we are spirits of another sort.
> I with the Morning's love have oft made sport;
> And, like a forester, the groves may tread
> Even till the eastern gate, all fiery red,
> Opening on Neptune, with fair blessed beams
> Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.
>
> (III.ii.388–393)

But for all his pride, full daylight is beyond him: "But notwithstanding, haste; . . . We must effect this business yet ere day." The enjoyment of any sort of pastoral depends on an implicit recognition that it presents a hypothetical case as if it were actual. Puck's lines about the way the fairies run

> From the presence of the sun,
> Following darkness like a dream,
>
> (V.i.392–393)

summarizes the relation between their special time and their limited sort of existence.

This explicit summary comes at the close, when the whole machinery is being distanced to end with "If we shadows have offended. . . ." But the consciousness and humor which I am concerned to underline are present throughout the presentation of the fairies. It has been easy for production and criticism to ignore, just because usually amusement is not precipitated out in laughter but remains in solution with wonder and delight. In the scene of the quarrel between Titania and Oberon, the fragility of the conceits corresponds finely to the half-reality of their world and specialness of their values. The factitiousness of the causes Titania lays out for the weather is gently mocked by the repeated *therefore*'s: "Therefore the winds . . . Therefore the moon . . . The ox hath therefore. . . ." Her account makes it explicit that she and Oberon are tutelary gods of fertility, but with

an implicit recognition like Sidney's about Cupid's dart—"an image . . . which for ourselves we carve." And her emphasis makes the wheat blight a disaster felt most keenly not for men who go hungry but for the green wheat itself, because it never achieves manhood:

> and the green corn
> Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard.
>
> (II.i.94–95)

Her concern for the holiday aspect of nature is presented in lines which are poised between sympathy and amusement:

> The human mortals want their winter cheer;
> No night is now with hymn or carol blest . . .
> The seasons alter. Hoary-headed frosts
> Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
> And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown
> An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
> Is, as in mockery, set.
>
> (II.i.101–102, 107–111)

Part of the delight of this poetry is that we can enjoy without agitation imaginative action of the highest order. It is like gazing in a crystal: what you see is clear and vivid, but on the other side of the glass. Almost unnoticed, the lines have a positive effect through the amorous suggestion implicit in the imagery, even while letting it be manifest that those concerned are only personifications of flowers and a pageant figure wearing the livery of the wrong season. Titania can speak of "the human mortals" as very far off indeed; the phrase crystallizes what has been achieved in imaginative distance and freedom. But Titania is as far off from us as we are from her.

The effect of wit which in such passages goes along with great imaginative power is abetted by the absence of any compelling interest in passion or plot. Producers utterly ruin the scene when they have the fairy couple mouth their lines at each other as expressively as possible. Titania, after all, leaves before that point is reached:

"Fairies, away! / We shall chide downright if I longer stay" (II.i.144–145). At moments of dramatic intensity, the most violent distortion can go unnoticed; what the poet is doing is ignored in responding to what his people are doing. But here a great part of the point is that we *should* notice the distortion, the action of the poet, the wit. Plot tension launches flights of witty poetry which use it up, so to speak, just as the tensions in broad comedy are discharged in laughter. Rhetorical schematizations, or patterns of rhyme, are often used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to mark off the units of such verse. But blank verse paragraphs are also constructed so as to form autonomous bravura passages which reach a climax and come to rest while actor and audience catch their breath. Oberon's description of the mermaid, and his tribute to Elizabeth (II.i.148–164), are two such flights, each a rhythmical unit, the first punctuated by Puck's "I remember," the second by Oberon's change of tone at "Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell." The formal and emotional isolation of the two passages is calculated to make the audience respond with wonder to the effortless reach of imagination which brings the stars madly shooting from their spheres. In a tribute to Elizabeth, the prominence of "the idea of the poet" in the poetry obviously was all to the good. By Oberon's remark to Puck, "that very time I saw, but thou couldst not," courtly Shakespeare contrived to place the mythology he was creating about Elizabeth on a level appropriately more sublime and occult than that about the mermaid.

Moonlight and Moonshine: The Ironic Burlesque

The consciousness of the creative or poetic act itself, which pervades the main action, explains the subject matter of the burlesque accompaniment provided by the clowns. If Shakespeare were chiefly concerned with the nature of love, the clowns would be in love, after their fashion. But instead, they are putting on a play. That some commoners should honor the wedding, in their own way, along with the figures from pageantry, is of course in keeping with the purpose of gathering into a play the several sorts of entertainments

usually presented separately. But an organic purpose is served too: the clowns provide a broad burlesque of the mimetic impulse to become something by acting it, the impulse which in the main action is fulfilled by imagination and understood by humor. Bottom feels he can be anything: "What is Pyramus, a lover, or a tyrant? . . . An I may hide my face, let me play Thisby too . . . Let me play the lion too." His soul would like to fly out into them all; but he is *not* Puck! In dealing with dramatic illusion, he and the other mechanicals are invincibly literal-minded, carrying to absurdity the tendency to treat the imaginary as though it were real. They exhibit just the all-or-nothing attitude towards fancy which would be fatal to the play as a whole.

When the clowns think that Bottom's transformation has deprived them of their chief actor, their lament seems pointedly allusive to Shakespeare's company and their play.

> *Snug*. Masters, the Duke is coming from the temple, and there is two or three lords and ladies more married. If our sport had gone forward, we had all been made men.
>
> *Flute*. O sweet bully Bottom! Thus hath he lost sixpence a day during his life. He could not have scaped sixpence a day. An the Duke had not given him sixpence a day for playing Pyramus, I'll be hanged! He would have deserved it. Sixpence a day in Pyramus, or nothing!
>
> (IV.ii.15–24)

The repetition of "sixpence a day" seems loaded: if Bottom in Pyramus is worth sixpence, what is Kempe in Bottom worth? For Bottom is to Theseus as Kempe was to the nobleman for whom the play was first produced. The business about moonshine brings this out:

> *Quince*. . . . But there is two hard things: that is, to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for, you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight.
>
> *Snout*. Doth the moon shine that night we play our play?
>
> *Bottom*. A calendar, a calendar! Look in the almanac. Find out moonshine, find out moonshine!

Quince. Yes, it doth shine that night.

Bottom. Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window, where we play, open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.

Quince. Ay; or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine.

(III.i.47–63)

Shakespeare, in *his* play, triumphantly accomplishes just this hard thing, "to bring the moonlight into a chamber." The moonshine, here and later, shows how aware Shakespeare was of what his plastic imagination was doing with moonlight. Since the great chamber Bottom speaks of was, at the initial private performance, the very chamber in which the Chamberlain's men were playing, "Pyramus and Thisby" adorns Theseus' fictitious wedding just as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adorns the real wedding. Bottom's proposal to open a casement reduces the desire for realism to the absurdity of producing the genuine article. Translated out of irony, it suggests that "if you want real moonlight, you put yourself in Bottom's class." It is amusing how later producers have labored with ever greater technical resources to achieve Bottom's ideal. Hollywood's Max Reinhardt version omitted most of the poetry to make room for cellophane-spangled fairies standing in rows on ninety-foot moonbeams.

The difference between art and life is also what the clowns forget in their parlous fear lest "the ladies be afeared of the lion" and the killing. Bottom's solution is to tell the ladies in plain language that fiction is not fact:

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.18–23)

Now this expresses Bottom's vanity, too. But producers and actors, bent on showing "character," can lose the structural, ironic point if they let the lines get lost in Bottom's strutting. What the clowns forget, having "never labour'd in their minds till now," is that a killing or a lion in a play, however plausibly presented, is a mental event.[22] Because, like children, they do not discriminate between imaginary and real events, they are literal about fiction. But they are not *un*imaginative: on the contrary they embody the stage of mental development before the discipline of facts has curbed the tendency to equate what is "in" the mind with what is "outside" it. They apply to drama the same sort of mentality that supports superstition—it is in keeping that the frightening sort of folk beliefs about changelings are for them an accepted part of life: "Out of doubt he is transported."[23]

22. What Shakespeare exhibits in Bottom's dramatics by reduction to absurdity is expressed directly in the Prologues of *H.V*. There the dramatist is dealing with heroic events which cannot be presented "in their huge and proper life" (Pro. V, l. 5) and so appeals to his audience repeatedly to "eke out our performance with your minds," . . . "minding true things by what their mock'ries be" (Pro. III, l. 35, and Pro. IV, l. 53). The prologues insist continually on the mental process by which alone a play comes to life (Pro. I, ll. 23–25 and 28):

> Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
> Into a thousand parts divide one man
> And make imaginary puissance . . .
> For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings . . .

In reference to the rapid shifting of his locale, Shakespeare uses an image which might describe Puck's powers to do what men can only conceive (Pro. III, ll. 1–3):

> Thus with imagin'd wing our swift scene flies,
> In motion of no less celerity
> Than that of thought . . .

Even in a play where, by contrast with *Dream*, Shakespeare is concerned to realize actual historical events, he insists that this realization must be by imaginative projection, not literal reproduction.

23. IV.ii.2. In their terrified response to Puck's intervention, Bottom's companions are like the colored man in the Hollywood ghost thriller. In showing the whites of his eyes and running without even an effort at courage, he is more credulous than the heroes

Because this uncritical imaginativeness is the protoplasm from which all art develops, the clowns are as delightful and stimulating as they are ridiculous. Even while we are laughing at them, we recover sympathetically the power of fantasy enjoyed by children, who, like Bottom, can be anything, a train, an Indian or a lion.

In the performance of *Pyramus and Thisby*, Shakespeare captures the naïveté of folk dramatics and makes it serve his controlling purpose as a final variant of imaginative aberration. The story from Ovid, appropriate for a burlesque in an Ovidian play, is scarcely the kind of thing the simple people would have presented in life; but their method and spirit in putting it on, and the spirit in which the noble company take it, are not unlike what is suggested by Laneham's account of the bride-ale show at Kenilworth. "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves," Theseus observes of the Athenian artisans, "they may pass for excellent men" (V.i.218). The comedy of the piece centers not so much on what is acted in it as in the continual failure to translate actor into character. Shakespeare's skill is devoted to keeping both the players and their would-be play before us at the same time, so that we watch, not Pyramus alone, nor Bottom alone, but Bottom "in Pyramus," the fact of the one doing violence to the fiction of the other.

Almost half of *Pyramus and Thisby* is taken up with prologues of the sort one gets in the mummers' plays:

> I am king of England,
> As you may plainly see.[24]

Such prologues suit Shakespeare's purpose, because they present the performer openly climbing in the window of aesthetic illusion, where he can get stuck midway:

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are, and more than we are. For a moment we laugh at the fear of the uncanny which we ourselves have just experienced, and this comic relief prepares us for another spell of the creeps.

24. J. M. Manly, *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearean Drama* (Boston, 1897), I, 293, from *The Lutterworth Christmas Play*.

> In this same enterlude it doth befall
> That I, one Snout by name, present a wall . . .
> This loam, this roughcast, and this stone doth show
> That I am that same wall. The truth is so.
>
> (V.i.156–163)

"The truth is so," by warranting that fiction is fact, asks for a laugh, as does the Prologue's "At the which let no man wonder," or Moon's

> Myself the man i' the moon *do seem to be*.

The incarnation of Wall is a particularly "happy-unhappy" inspiration, because the more Wall does, the less he is a wall and the more he is Snout.

There is a great deal of incidental amusement in the parody and burlesque with which *Pyramus and Thisby* is loaded. It burlesques the substance of the death scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in a style which combines ineptitudes from Golding's translation of Ovid with locutions from the crudest doggerel drama.[25] What is most remarkable

25. The familiar Ovidian story which Shakespeare elected to make into "very tragic mirth" is extremely similar, on the face of it, to the story of *Romeo*, which also hinges on surreptitious meetings and an accidental misunderstanding leading to double suicide. The similarity seems to be underscored by allusions (V.i.355–359):

> *Theseus*. Moonshine and Lion are left to bury the dead.
> *Demetrius*. Ay, and Wall too.
> *Bottom*. [starts up] No, I assure you; the wall is down that parted their fathers.

Perhaps there is another allusion to *Romeo* when, after Wall's earlier exit (V.i.210), Theseus makes the mock-sententious observation: "Now is the mural down between the two neighbours." There is nothing in Ovid about a reconciliation, but there is a great deal at the end of *Romeo*. Parts for Thisby's mother and father and Pyramus' father are assigned by Peter Quince in first mustering his actors (I.ii.62). Perhaps Shakespeare planned to make tragical mirth of their laments before he thought of Wall and Moonshine. Miss M. C. Bradbrook, in *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 39, notes that when Romeo, before the balcony scene, "ran this way and leap'd this orchard wall" to get away from his friends and into the Capulets' orchard, the staging of

about it, however, is the way it fits hilarious fun into the whole comedy's development of attitude and understanding. After the exigent poise of the humorous fantasy, laughs now explode one after another;

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the wall presented an unusual problem. She adds that "it is amusing to note the parody of this same orchard wall" in *Dream*. Snout's "you can never bring in a wall" certainly seems a likely by-product of Shakespeare's having recent experience with the difficulty. The effect of the burlesque does not, of course, hinge on specifically recognizing *Romeo* as a prototype. An awareness of the connection adds point but the remarks about reconciliation are funny enough simply as comic versions of the *kind* of sentiment to be expected at the end of a tragedy.

The style of *Pyramus and Thisby* imitates with a shrewd eye for characteristic defects what Marlowe, in the Prologue to *Tamburlaine*, called the "jigging veins of rhyming mother wits." The most common devices used by inept early poets "to plump their verse withall" turn up in Shakespeare's parody. The leaden ring of the expletives "same" ("This *same* wall") and "certaine" ("This beauteous Lady, Thisby is *certaine*") recalls many pieces in Dodsley's *Old English Plays* and many passages in Golding's translation of Ovid. Golding's style may well have been Shakespeare's most immediate model. The comic possibilities of the story are very obvious indeed in the translation, whose fourteeners here are often incapable of carrying the elaborate rhetoric. One bit of this high-flown rhetoric is the apostrophizing of the wall, which appears in Golding thus (*Shakespeare's Ovid / Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses*, ed. W.H.D. Rouse [London, 1904], pp. 83–84, Bk. IV, ll. 90–100):

> O thou envious wall (they sayd) why letst thou lovers thus?
> What matter were it if that thou permitted both of us
> In armes eche other to embrace? Or if that thou think this
> Were overmuch, yet mightest thou at least make roume to kisse.
> And yet thou shalt not finde us churles: we think ourselves in det
> For this same piece of courtesie, in vouching safe to let
> Our sayings to our friendly ears thus freely to come and goe,
> Thus having where they stood in vaine complayned of their woe,
> When night drew nere, they bade adew and eche gave kisses sweete
> Unto the parget on their side, the which did never meete.

In addition to the top-heavy personification which in Golding makes the wall into a sort of stubborn chaperon, Shakespeare's version exploits the fatuous effect of suddenly reversing the wall's attributes from envious to courteous, when the wall, after all, is

and yet they are still on the subject, even though now we are romping reassuringly through easy-to-make distinctions. Theseus can say blandly

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perfectly consistent. Bottom at first wheedles a "courteous Wall" and then storms at a "wicked Wall." The would-be pathetic touch about kissing the parget (plaster) instead of each other's lips also reappears (V.i.204).

To fill out a line, or to make a rhyme as false as "Thisby . . . secretly," the mother wits often elaborate redundancies, so that technical ineptitude results in a most inappropriate and unpoetical factuality. Shakespeare exploits this effect repeatedly:

> My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones,
> Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee. (V.i.192–193)

There are also many redundant synonyms, like "Did scare away, or rather did affright." In imitating the use of such homemade stuffing, Shakespeare goes far back (or down) for his models, notably skipping an intermediate, more pretentious level of sophistication in bad Tudor poetry, where fustian classical allusions, "English Seneca read by Candlelight," replace bald redundancy as the characteristic means of plumping verse. Pistol's discharges are Shakespeare's burlesque of such bombast. Most of Bottom's rhetoric is a step down the ladder: the "Shafalus" and "Limander" of *Pyramus* are classical names as these appear in such pieces as *Thersites*.

Perhaps when Bottom starts up, very much alive despite his emphatic death, to correct the Duke in the matter of the wall, his comic resurrection owes something, directly or via the jig, to the folk play. When the St. George, or Fool, or whoever, starts up, alive again, after the miraculous cure, the reversal must have been played as a moment of comical triumph, an upset, more or less grotesque or absurd, no doubt, but still exhilarating—to come back alive is the ultimate turning of the tables on whatever is an enemy of life. The most popular of Elizabethan jigs, "The Jig of Rowland," involves a device of playing dead and pretending to come back to life which may well be a rationalized development of this primitive resurrection motif. Rowland wins back Margaret from the Sexton by getting into a grave and playing dead; she laments him and then starts to go off with his rival; but Rowland jumps up behind them, astonishes the Sexton, sends him packing and wins the wench. (Baskervill, *Jig*, pp. 220–222.) Such brief comic song and dance dramas as this were used as afterpieces following the regular play. *Pyramus and Thisby* almost amounts to a developed jig which has been brought into the framework of the play instead of being presented as an afterpiece, in the usual fashion. The dance element comes in when Bottom, after coming back alive, concludes by dancing a bergomasque.

> The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.
>
> (V.i.214–216)

Although we need not agree (Hippolyta says "It must be your imagination then, and not theirs"), Theseus expresses part of our response—a growing detachment towards imagination, moving towards the distance from the dream expressed in Puck's epilogue.

The meeting in the woods of Bottom and Titania is the climax of the polyphonic interplay; it comes in the middle of the dream, when the humor has the most work to do. Bottom in the ass's head provides a literal metamorphosis, and in the process brings in the element of grotesque fantasy which the Savage Man or Woodwose furnished at Kenilworth, a comic version of an animal-headed dancer or of the sort of figure Shakespeare used in Herne the Hunter, "with great ragged horns," at the oak in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. At the same time he is the theatrical company's clown "thrust in by head and shoulder to play a part in majestical matters" and remaining uproariously literal and antipoetic as he does so. Titania and he are fancy against fact, not beauty and the beast. She makes all the advances while he remains very respectful, desiring nothing bestial but "a peck of provender." Clownish oblivion to languishing beauty is sure-fire comedy on any vaudeville stage. Here it is elaborated in such a way that when Titania is frustrated, so is the transforming power of poetry:

> *Titania*. I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
> Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note;
> So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
> And thy fair virtue's force (perforce) doth move me,
> On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee.
>
> *Bottom*. 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. The more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends. Nay, I can gleek, upon occasion.

Titania. Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.
Bottom. Not so, neither . . .

(III.i.140–152)

From a vantage below romance, the clown makes the same point as sceptical Theseus, that reason and love do not go together. Titania tells him that she

. . . will purge thy mortal grossness so
That thou shalt like an airy spirit go.

(III.i.163–164)

But even her magic cannot "transpose" Bottom.

The "low" or "realistic" effect which he produces when juxtaposed with her is much less a matter of accurate imitation of common life than one assumes at first glance. Of course the homely touches are telling—forms of address like "Methinks, mistress" or words like *gleek* suggest a social world remote from the elegant queen's. But the realistic effect does not depend on Bottom's being like real weavers, but on the *détente* of imaginative tension, on a downward movement which counters imaginative lift. This antipoetic action involves, like the poetic, a high degree of abstraction from real life, including the control of rhythm which can establish a blank verse movement in as little as a single line, "Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful," and so be able to break the ardent progression of the queen's speech with "Not so, neither" When Bottom encounters the fairy attendants, he reduces the fiction of their existence to fact:

Bottom. I cry your worships mercy, heartily. I beseech your worship's name.
Cobweb. Cobweb.
Bottom. I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb. If I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you.

(III.i.182–187)

Cobwebs served the Elizabethans for adhesive plaster, so that when Bottom proposes to "make bold with" Cobweb, he treats him as a *thing*, undoing the personification on which the little fellow's life depends. To take hold of Cobweb in this way is of course a witty thing to do, when one thinks about it. But since the wit is in the service of a literal tendency, we can take it as the expression of a "hempen homespun." There is usually a similar incongruity between the "stupidity" of a clown and the imagination and wit required to express such stupidity. Bottom's charming combination of ignorant exuberance and oblivious imaginativeness make him the most humanly credible and appealing personality Shakespeare had yet created from the incongruous qualities required for the clown's role. The only trouble with the part, in practice, is that performers become so preoccupied with bringing out the weaver's vanity as an actor that they lose track of what the role is expressing as part of the larger imaginative design.

For there is an impersonal, imaginative interaction between the clowning and the rest of the play which makes the clowns mean more than they themselves know and more than they are as personalities. Bottom serves to represent, in so aware a play, the limits of awareness, limits as limitations—and also, at moments, limits as form and so strength.

> *Bottom*. Where are these lads? Where are these hearts?
>
> *Quince*. Bottom! O most courageous day! O most happy hour!
>
> *Bottom*. Masters, I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what. For if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything, right as it fell out.
>
> *Quince*. Let us hear, sweet Bottom.
>
> *Bottom*. Not a word of me. All that I will tell you is, that the Duke hath dined. Get your apparel together, good strings to your beards . . .
>
> (IV.ii.26–36)

It is ludicrous for Bottom to be so utterly unable to cope with the "wonders," especially where he is shown boggling in astonishment

as he wordlessly remembers them: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was" (IV.i.207–209). But there is something splendid, too, in the way he exuberantly rejoins "these lads" and takes up his particular, positive life as a "true Athenian." Metamorphosis cannot faze him for long. His imperviousness, indeed, is what is most delightful about him with Titania: he remains so completely himself, even in her arms, and despite the outward change of his head and ears; his confident, self-satisfied tone is a triumph of consistency, persistence, existence.

The Sense of Reality

The value of humor, and the finest pleasure in it, depends on the seriousness of what it makes into fun. It is easy to be gay by taking a trivial theme, or by trivializing an important theme. The greatness of comedy, as of every other art form, must rest, to use Henry James' phrase, on the amount of "felt life" with which it deals in its proper fashion. After examining the structure and artifice of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can now ask how much reality it masters by its mirth. This comedy is the first that is completely, triumphantly successful; but it has the limitations, as well as the strength, of a youthful play.

The role of imagination in experience is a major preoccupation in other plays of the same period. Dreams are several times presented as oracles of irrational powers shaping life, and inspire dread and awe. In the death scene of Clarence, in *Richard III*, the poet had presented the experience of oppression and helplessness on waking from the grip of nightmare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents a resolution of the dream forces which so often augur conflict. To indulge dreamlike irrationality with impunity is, as Freud pointed out, one of the basic satisfactions of wit. The action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows the same pattern on a large scale: it suggests the compulsion of dream, and then reconciles night's motives with the day's as the lovers conclude, "Why then, we are awake":

Demetrius. These things seem small and undistinguishable,
Like far-off mountains turned into clouds . . .
Helena. And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,
Mine own, and not mine own.
Demetrius. Are you sure
That we are awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. Do not you think
The Duke was here, and bid us follow him?
Hermia. Yea, and my father.
Helena. And Hippolyta.
Lysander. And he did bid us follow to the temple.
Demetrius. Why then, we are awake. Let's follow him,
And by the way let us recount our dreams.

(IV.i.190–202)

The fun which Mercutio makes of dreams and fairies in *Romeo and Juliet* is an attempt to do in a single speech what the whole action does in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His excursion on Queen Mab is designed to laugh away Romeo's dream-born misgivings about their fatal visit to the Capulets.

Romeo. . . . we mean well, in going to this masque;
But 'tis no wit to go.
Mercutio. Why, may one ask?
Romeo. I dreamt a dream to-night.
Mercutio. And so did I.
Romeo. Well, what was yours?
Mercutio. That dreamers often lie.
Romeo. In bed asleep, while they do dream things true.
Mercutio. O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

(*Romeo* I.iv.47–53)

—and then follow the delightfully plausible impossibilities about the fairies' midwife, implying that dreams accord with the dreamer's

wishes, and huddled rapidly one on another, to prevent Romeo's interrupting. The implication is that to believe in dreams is as foolish as to believe in Queen Mab's hazel-nut chariot. When Romeo finally interrupts, Mercutio dismisses his own fairy toys almost in the spirit of Duke Theseus:

> *Romeo*. Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!
> Thou talk'st of nothing.
> *Mercutio*. True, I talk of dreams;
> Which are the children of an idle brain,
> Begot of nothing but vain fantasy;
> Which is as thin of substance as the air . . .
>
> (I.iv.95–99)

Romeo's dream, however, in spite of Mercutio, is not to be dismissed so easily as airy nothing:

> . . . my mind misgives
> Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars . . .
>
> (I.iv.106–107)

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a play in the spirit of Mercutio: the dreaming in it includes the knowledge "that dreamers often lie." The comedy and tragedy are companion pieces: the one moves away from sadness as the other moves away from mirth.

One can feel, indeed, that in the comedy, as compared with Shakespeare's later works, mastery comes a little too easily, because the imaginary and the real are too easy to separate. The same thing can be said of the other plays of the period, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Richard II*. Theseus makes a generalization that

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.
>
> (*Dream* V.i.7–8)

In all these plays the young author gives dramatic urgency to poetic language by putting his heroes in situations which give the lie to what their minds imagine under the influence of passion. Tragedy is conceived chiefly as the contradiction between a warm inner world of feeling and impulse and a cold outer world of fact. Imagination, as the voice of this inner world, has a crucial significance, but its felt reality is limited by the way the imaginary and the real are commonly presented as separate realms. Imagination tends to be *merely* expressive, an evidence of passion rather than a mode of perception. This is true almost without qualification of *Titus Andronicus*, the earliest play of the group. In presenting the madness of Titus, Shakespeare's assumptions about reality are altogether those of Theseus' speech, empirical and fact-minded. The psychological factor is always kept in the foreground when the young poet, following, with more imagination but less profundity, Kyd's method in *The Spanish Tragedy*, expresses the intensity of Titus' grief by having his distraction take literally hyperboles and imaginative identifications. His delusions are very deliberately manipulated to conform to his predominant emotion; in the almost comical scene about killing the fly, Titus first bemoans the act because the fly is a fellow victim, then exults at the creature's death because its blackness links it with the Moor who has wronged him. Even in *Romeo and Juliet*, while the emotional reality of love is triumphantly affirmed we remain always aware of what in the expression is factual and what imaginary, and of how the poetry is lifting us from one plane to the other:

> A grave? O, no, a lanthorn, slaught'red youth,
> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light.
>
> (*Romeo* V.iii.84–86)

In the poetry of this period, there is room beside metaphor and hyperbole to insert a phrase like "so to speak." Marcus exclaims of Titus' distraction:

> Alas, poor man! Grief has so wrought on him
> He takes false shadows for true substances.
>
> (*Tit*. III.ii.79–80)

The same remark could be made about Richard II, whose hosts of grief-begotten angels prove so inadequate against the "true substances" mobilized by Bolingbroke. The plays present passionate expression or delusion by the use of relatively simple contrasts between fact and fiction, reason and feeling, keeping an orientation outside the passionate characters' imaginative expression.

In *Richard II*, however, the simple shadow-substance antithesis becomes something more: the divine right of kings gives one sort of objective validity to Richard's imaginings—although his guardian angels are ineffective immediately, they are grounded in moral perception, and Bolingbroke eventually finds their avenging power. Later in Shakespeare's work, the imagination becomes in its own right a way of knowing "more things in heaven and earth" than cool reason ever comprehends. Contrasts between real and imaginary are included in and superseded by contrasts between appearance and reality, as these unfold at various levels of awareness. How different Shakespeare's sense of reality finally became is evident if we set the proud scepticism of Theseus beside the humble scepticism of Prospero. The presiding genius of Shakespeare's latest fantasy also turns from a pageant-like work of imagination to reflect on its relation to life. But for him life itself is like the insubstantial pageant, and *we*, not just the Titanias and Oberons, are such stuff as dreams are made on.

The greater profundity of the later work, however, should not blind us to the different virtues of the earlier. The confident assumption dominant in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that substance and shadow can be kept separate, determines the peculiarly unshadowed gaiety of the fun it makes with fancy. Its organization by polarities—everyday-holiday, town-grove, day-night, waking-dreaming—provides a remarkable resource for mastering passionate experience.

By a curious paradox, the full dramatization of holiday affirmations permitted "that side" of experience to be boxed off by Theseus. If we take our stand shoulder to shoulder with Theseus, the play can be an agency for distinguishing what is merely "apprehended" from what is "comprehended." Shakespeare's method of structuring is as powerful, in its way, as Descartes' distinction between mind and body, the formidable engine by which the philosopher swept away "secondary qualities" so that mathematical mind might manipulate geometrical extension. If we do not in our age want to rest in Theseus' rationalistic position (any more than in Descartes'), it remains a great achievement to have got there, and wherever we are going in our sense of reality, we have come via that standing place.

Theseus, moreover, does not quite have the last word, even in this play: his position is only one stage in a dialectic. Hippolyta will not be reasoned out of her wonder, and answers her new Lord with

> But all the story of the night told over,
> And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
> More witnesseth than fancy's images
> And grows to something of great constancy;
> But howsoever, strange and admirable.
>
> (V.i.23–27)

Did it happen, or didn't it happen? The doubt is justified by what Shakespeare has shown us. We are not asked to think that fairies exist. But imagination, by presenting these figments, has reached to something, a creative tendency and process. What is this process? Where is it? What shall we call it? It is what happens in the play. It is what happens in marriage. To name it requires many words, words in motion—the words of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.