

**“Past the Wit of Man”:  
*A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s debt to Praise of Folly***

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There have been several attempts to explore Shakespeare’s debt to Erasmus, notably Walter Kaiser’s in *Praisers of Folly* (1964), which concentrates on the figure of Falstaff. But on account of the Christian-Classical tradition both writers share, and on account also of Erasmus’s widespread influence in the sixteenth century, direct borrowing is generally hard or impossible to prove. This is not the case however with the parallels between *Praise of Folly* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Shakespeare’s play contains so many echoes of the *Moriae Encomium*, and some so singular, that they provide clear evidence of a debt.

A connection between the two works has already been established. In her article, “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Praise of Folly*”, Thelma N. Greenfield, as well as pointing to a common paradoxical temper, identifies an impressive number of correspondences. Several involve Shakespeare’s and Erasmus’s employment of traditional figures and themes: dreams, moonshine, ass’s ears; Cupid’s blindness and the madness and delusions of lovers; life as a play and the world as a stage on which humanity provides sport for immortals; and the poet as dreamer and madman. But others are more unconventional — such as the notion of actors unmasked in mid-performance, and the fool who has glimpsed paradise. These, together with unmistakable verbal echoes from the Chaloner translation of 1549, place *Praise of Folly’s* influence beyond doubt. What I propose here is not to repeat or expand Greenfield’s investigation, but to examine the nature and degree of Erasmus’s influence and to reconsider the play’s themes in the light of it. Many of the parallels I consider in the following pages have already been noted by Greenfield, but their implications not explored.

2

*Praise of Folly* is an astonishing work, combining a mock classical encomium with medieval *contemptus mundi* themes. The result is a teasing, paradoxical revaluation of the traditional view of folly. “[P]erhaps”, says Chaloner, the first English translator, in his “Preface to the Reader”, Erasmus “delited to mocke men, in calling it [i.e. folly] one thyng and meanyng another”. In part, the work is straightforward satire, condemning error and ignorance by pretending to admire them, but there are some sections which are not at all satiric, and which pull in the opposite direction, cheerfully subverting the values of reason and control that the satire upholds.

The speaker of the *Encomium* is of course Folly, personified as a Goddess. Eloquent in praise of herself and her benefactions to man, Folly claims to be the source of all happiness, achievement and virtue, and even of life itself. It is that “selie membre”, which cannot be named without laughter, that is “the onely fountaine, whens all thynges receive

life" (6). Other gods are unequal in their distribution of favour, Folly alone bestows her gifts — error, ignorance, delusion and self-love — impartially to all. The world is her goodly temple, mankind her congregation of devout, if surreptitious, worshippers. While paying lip service to respectable gods, men give their true devotion to Folly, taking her to their hearts and imitating her assiduously in all that they do.

In her disquisition on folly and madness — the latter viewed here as folly in intensified form — the Goddess's attitude to her subject is continually shifting. Her tone ranges from harsh invective, through milder forms of satire, irony and gay mockery to a humour so benign as to contain no mockery at all. Underlying this constantly changing perspective is the idea that there are two fundamentally different types of irrationality. The first is noxious, and, sent by the Furies, includes such iniquities as parricide, insatiable lust for wealth, and vengeful rage. "But", continues the Goddess, "there is another kynde of madness, farre unlike the former, which procedeth from me wholly, and is most to be embraced" (32). This type of insanity she defines as a "certaine pleasant raving or errorr of mynde" (32) that frees the heart of its possessor from care and endows it with joy and delight.

As Kaiser indicates (50-62 *passim*), it is in the handling of benign types of folly and madness that Erasmus's book is most paradoxical and challenging. Iconoclastic in its treatment of traditional values, the *Encomium* transposes conventional attitudes to reason and folly. Instead of being deplored, a whole range of follies is praised as conducive to happiness or wisdom. Thus the lovable absurdities of babies, youths, simpletons and of old men restored by Folly's bounty to a semblance of their childhood, are tenderly admired. These innocents are happy themselves, and give pleasure to others. The delusions of lovers, friends and doting parents, all of which involve being blind to others' defects and imagining their faults to be virtues, are commended, not only because they are a source of joy to the deluded, but because they are morally preferable to a sharp-eyed awareness of the imperfections of one's fellow men. In a world where no man is perfect, folly is "the glew that souldreth and interteigneth friends together" (14). Citing Plato and Saint Paul, Folly is also able to point to such forms of irrationality as the divinely inspired frenzies of poets, prophets and lovers, and the folly-in-the-world of holy men, that have the approval of classical wisdom and the church. The climax of the book is an entirely serious and moving description of the transcendent folly of the mystic, who has been given a foretaste of heaven.

While folly, when truly viewed, turns out to be wisdom, reason conversely is dismissed as folly. The Senecan ideal of the rational man who has conquered his passions, Folly rejects as an impossible fiction, no man indeed, but a statue, or some new kind of god, more fitted for Plato's non-existent Republic than for real life where the company of a fool is much to be preferred: "treatable to his wyfe, gladly seen of his friendes, mearie in companie, and lastly [who] woulde thinke nothyng unbecomyng hym other men use commenly to dooe" (24). Folly also derides the idea that reason is the highest part of man's nature, pronouncing it rather the smallest part, and certainly the least significant:

Consider now (I praie you) how mucche more Affection, than Reason, Jupiter hath put in men, to the end theyr lyfe shoulde not altogether be heavy, and unpleasant. As if ye shoulde compare an ounce to a pounde. Furthermore, he shutte up Reason within the narowe compasse of mans head, leavyng all the rest of the bodie to affections.

(11-12)

There is more than a touch of mockery in this, of course. But the irony is so good-natured as virtually to preclude a "correct" moral response, the tone inviting one to relish rather than regret the irrational nature of man.

Although she is given some telling points about the unnaturalness of treating the passions as if they were so many diseases and about the pride and lack of charity that may accompany a search for spiritual perfection, Folly's attack on reason is not very serious. One does not have to be familiar with Erasmus's other works, such as *Enchiridion*, *Complaint of Peace* or his edition of Seneca, to realise that he does not share his goddess's complete disdain for the rational. *Praise of Folly* itself invokes rational norms in its satire, and several times employs the despised ideals of that "Archeostoike Seneca" (23) to judge men's behaviour and morals.

Ambivalent as the work's treatment of reason may be, however, there is no ambiguity about the high value set on the benign forms of folly. In a fallen world, where reason and true knowledge are not easily accessible to man, those forms of delusion that spring from a charitable heart have a genuine moral validity. And at the book's close, which quotes Plato's view "that the passion and extreme rage of fervent lovers [is] to be desired and embraced, as a thing above all other most blissful" (85), and which identifies as a "verie madnesse" the condition of "suche as are totally ravished, and enflamed with the ardent zeale of Christian charitee" (81), forms of unreason which transcend mere wisdom as the world knows it, are profoundly and movingly celebrated.

## 3

Folly, who "gladde[s] both the godds and men" (1), has most of the heavens and all of earth for empire. With its more limited focus on lovers, fairies and artists, *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* debt to the *Encomium* is not immediately obvious, nor is it of the same nature as the debt in those plays where Shakespeare borrows extensively from his sources (such as Plutarch or Holinshed). From *Praise of Folly* he draws sparingly, taking hints and ideas, rather than plot or character, and reworking them freely into something new in content, yet close in paradoxical spirit to the original. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as in *Praise of Folly*, unreason is no aberration, but the norm of human behaviour, and it is at least as approvingly depicted. Shakespeare, moreover, displaying none of Erasmus's bias towards reason, presents an even greater challenge to orthodox views.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* echoes *Praise of Folly* in cheerfully dismissing the idea that reason should regulate the passions. "The will of man is by his reason swayed", announces the infatuated Lysander, in the process of demonstrating that the opposite is true: "And reason says you are the worthier maid" (2.2.121-22). Lovers do not govern their emotions, but, on the contrary, are governed by them, and the lunatic state of enchantment that ensues is treated with a tenderness for human absurdity worthy of the goddess herself.

Shakespeare defines and accounts for the nature of love by an inspired and preposterous blend of fairy lore, Cupid's power, and Plato's view that love is a benign frenzy conferred by the gods. The tiny fairies are able to make human beings fall hectically in and out of love in a way which leaves no scope for their reason to operate. The fairies' power derives from Cupid, and they combine something of his mischief and traditional cruelty with their own essential benevolence which explains why love is such a paradoxical force for both mayhem and joy.

The miseries a lover suffers are hellish, but his joys are literally sublime. Demented as his vision may appear to the rest of the world, he perceives, as Plato (or Socrates) taught,

the divine in the object of his love. Thus Bottom can appear as an Angel, and Helena shine “as glorious / As the Venus of the sky” (3.2.106-07), to the enraptured Demetrius: “goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!” (3.2.138). A similar notion accounts for the erotic adventures of Theseus, acrimoniously remembered during the fairy quarrel (2.1.74-80). Without presumably understanding his own behaviour, for he doesn’t believe in fairies, Theseus has abandoned human lover after human lover in quest of Titania, who symbolises the immortal perfection that is love’s goal. This perfection Bottom briefly attains. Returned from Fairyland and Titania’s embrace, he babbles of heaven, “past the wit of man” (4.1.203), which Saint Paul seeks to describe in I Corinthians. Here Bottom is a mystic, who, in his “transported” (4.2.4) state, has encountered the Divine. Speaking in the mystic’s riddling tongue, he will “publish and not publish”<sup>1</sup> the rare vision to his astonished friends: “Masters, I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what . . . I will tell you everything . . . Not a word of me” (4.2.26-30). The experience of the lover, as in *Praise of Folly*, is simultaneously a lunacy and a transcendence of the ordinary world. Love is like “lightning in the collied night” (1.1.145), giving a glimpse, however briefly, of heaven itself and a transformed earth. It is from heaven that the new bent moon looks down on the solemnising of lovers’ vows, and from heaven too that their nuptials are consecrated by immortals.

For many critics, perhaps most, the irrationality of the young lovers is a deviant form of behaviour, which in the happy ending of the play yields to the reasonableness and orderly values that Theseus and Hippolyta have exemplified all along. Nothing could be further from the truth. Madness and turbulence are love’s normal state: “The course of true love never did run smooth” (1.1.134); “Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind . . . Nor hath love’s mind of any judgement taste” (1.1.234-36); “Lovers and madmen have such seething brains . . .” (4.1.4). The essentially irrational nature of love is symbolised by the removal of the young lovers from the daylight reason of Theseus’s court to the forest where they come under the “night-rule” (3.2.5)<sup>2</sup> of the fairies. But the return to court is no signal for a return to sanity. At the end of the play Demetrius continues in that state of enchantment which caused Titania to love an ass, while Lysander is restored to the condition which, in the dispute with Hermia’s father, was carefully delineated as opposed to reason, judgment, law and authority. That the lovers are paired and their problems resolved has nothing to do with their own maturity, rationality or enlightenment. It is simply that the fairies have matched them properly at last, by a process of which they themselves are bemusedly unaware. They can have learnt nothing from their experience, for they do not know what happened, and must imagine the little they do know to have been a dream.

The lovers are irrational, but their irrationality is presented with total sympathy. In the opening of the play, when Hermia and Lysander are in conflict with Egeus and Theseus, conventional morality is obviously on the side of the latter, who urge obedience to authority and law, and rational control of the passions. But traditional morality is being subverted here. Egeus’s insistence on his legal right to have his daughter killed if she doesn’t obey him, shows both law and authority in a repulsive light. Theseus’s combination of sympathy and firmness, on the other hand, is attractive; but paradoxically this makes the case against law and reason even stronger. His conventional advice — “To you your father should be as a god . . .” (1.47), “Question your desires. / Know your youth, examine well your blood” (1.1.67-8) — ought to be correct, but is not. It is Hermia, resisting authority with a modest boldness (1.59) and unswervingly loyal to the love who has “stol’n the impression of her fantasy” (1.32), who is right, both in her choice and her adherence to it — as the audience at once recognises and the fairies will confirm. (He has

“some true love turned,/And not a false turned true” (3.2.91), Oberon admonishes Puck.) Theseus is able to offer Hermia only the unsatisfactory and unjust, though legal, options of marriage to a man she doesn’t love, or punishment either by death or life as a barren sister. It is the lovers, indifferent to reason, disobedient to authority and evading the law by elopement, who are right. Their flight brings them under the dominion of the fairies who are able, as their human ruler was not, to arrange a happy and just solution. Theseus’s only contribution to this happy outcome is to over-rule Egeus and illogically waive the Athenian law that at the outset he said he was unable even to modify (I.1.120). As Oberon has already declared that the lovers’ nuptials will be celebrated with Theseus’s own (4.1.90-1), Theseus here is apparently acting in unconscious obedience to fairy decree. It is the powerful law of love, not the law of man, that prevails.

Far from the young lovers conforming to Theseus’s standards, it is he who must conform to theirs. With his championship of reason, his love of order and cool common sense, Theseus is undoubtedly sane. But love does not cease to be a madness when a sane man falls under its spell. Theseus’s emotional history, a pixie-led turmoil of rape and betrayal, guarantees that. As the *Encomium’s* Goddess insists, the wisest men and the gods themselves (we see this in Titania) have recourse to her when they fall in love. Theseus’s relationship with Hippolyta differs from his earlier affairs, not in being rational, but in being happy and right. Titania, who lured him away from his earlier liaisons, has come to Athens to bless this one.

The dialogue with which Shakespeare opens the play would be strange if it were the reasonableness of Theseus’s and Hippolyta’s love that he wanted to stress. To highlight in such an emphatic position, the moon-governed arrangements for the wedding, the ardent impatience of the groom and the exquisite, dreamy impracticality of the bride, is to set the keynote for a relationship quite the opposite of reasonable. Theseus’s rationality is as irrelevant to his own love, as it is to Hermia’s, at which in the ensuing scene it is directed. His method of wooing Hippolyta has been sheer lunacy: he has won her love by making war on her. (That she should have fallen in love with his violence says much for her own irrational state.) It is true that he promises to wed her in “another key” (I.1.18), a sign taken by critics who concede the unreasonableness of his wooing, to indicate that his winning will be conducted in a sober and mature manner. But the new key that Theseus speaks of is not sobriety, but far more appropriately, revelry and joy. He will marry Hippolyta “With pomp, with triumph and with revelling” (I.1.19); and a fortnight’s “revels” (5.1.362-63) will celebrate the wedding.

Some of the play’s most pleasing ironies are generated by the incongruity between Theseus’s essentially rational nature, and the irrational state into which love has thrown him. His sensible advice to Hermia contrasts amusingly with his own hot-blooded impatience at having to wait four days, and eventually “this long age of three hours”, and a final anguished, “torturing hour” (5.1.33-7) for the consummation of his love. An even more delightful irony accompanies his mockery of the imagination-dominated lover, who, frantic as a madman, sees “Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt” (5.1.11). What Theseus doesn’t realise is that his intelligent and acute observation of insanity in other lovers applies equally to himself. For the lady whom he tenderly perceives as his “gentle sweet” (5.1.87) — the epithet echoes Titania’s endearment of Bottom as her “gentle joy” (4.1.4) — is a heroic virago, a bear-hunting, man-quelling Amazon Queen.

Near the end of Act Four, in an ostensible celebration of Theseus’s sanity, Shakespeare has Theseus and Hippolyta display a further type of madness. At dawn, as the fairies fade from the forest to the strains of an exquisite lullaby, there is an abrupt transition to the mortal world with the entry of Theseus and Hippolyta. They are accompanied by a very

different music, horns winding, dogs barking, mountains echoing, “the musical confusion/Of hounds and echo in conjunction” (4.1.109-10).<sup>3</sup> The effect is splendid, but it is also distinctly absurd. The episode stresses Theseus’s love of order, but here it takes on a fantastic quality, expressed as it is in his selection of hunting dogs for their ability to bay out an octave: “Slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like bells / Each under each” (lines 122-23). To the Goddess, Folly (who has contributed her mite to the scene),

. . . such folkes also rave pleasantly, as preferre huntynge before all other pastimes, protesting what an incredible pleasure thei conceive, so often as thei here that foule musike, which a horne maketh, beyng touted in, or the howlyng of a meny of dogs.

(33)

As Folly regards hearing sweet music in the cacophonies of the hunt comparable to hearing it in an ass’s bray (33), there can be no question that Shakespeare is making conscious use of the *Encomium* here. “Foule musike”; “musical . . . discord” and “sweet thunder” (line 117) are — like merry and tragical, tedious and brief — “hot ice and wondrous strange snow” (5.1.58-9). It is inconceivable that Theseus’s hounds, hideous to the point of deformity, “With ears that sweep away the morning dew, / Crook-kneed, and dewlapp’d like Thessalian bulls” (lines 120-21), should produce sounds to enrapture any but the most deluded. Yet, by a mysterious alchemy the last act of the play will help to explain, Folly’s “foule musike” and “howling”, though they lurk in the scene, are transformed to a tumultuous harmony that is almost sublime:

Never did I hear  
Such gallant chiding, for besides the groves,  
The skies, the fountains, every region near  
Seemed all one mutual cry.

(lines 113-16)

What really triumphs in this joyous episode is unreason on a heroic scale.

Theseus’s reasonableness is given one last exposure before, in the course of his wedding night, a strange tenderness for fools comes over him, teaching him to speak in a deeper vein. Too rational to believe in fairies, he dismisses the young couples’ stories as evidence of love’s typical madness (5.1.1-17). Comparing, rightly, the lover’s imagination to the poet’s, Theseus, however, reduces both to the level of ordinary lunacy. He mocks the poet’s divine furor as a mad, eye-rolling fit, but even as he describes it, his words take on a strange and haunting beauty. This beauty, contradicting his own logic, testifies to a creative miracle. Yet, as the bathos of his concluding lines reveals, all he is aware of is mundane illusion.

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 supposed a bear!

(lines 18-22)

Theseus is wrong about fairies, partly wrong about the lovers, and especially wrong about the poet. For surely a frenzy of the very kind he derides has created from "airy nothing" his own inspired mockery of itself. Hippolyta here is wiser than Theseus, recognising what his "cool reason" cannot comprehend, that a reality beyond human knowledge underlies the transformations of the lovers and their new-found happiness.

But all the story of the night told over,  
 And all their minds transfigured so together,  
 More witnesseth than fancy's images,  
 And grows to something of great constancy,  
 But howsoever, strange and admirable.

(lines 23-7)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as in the *Encomium*, reason and folly change places. The same paradox that makes Theseus's intelligence a barrier to understanding the irrational nature of love, gives to the fool the power to express its sublime mystery. The scene in which Bottom reawakens to the mortal world is closely modelled on Folly's description of the Holy Fool, the ecstatic who has glimpsed "eternall felicittee".

For this undoubtedly is evin the very gwerdone that the Prophete promyseth, saiying, was never mans eie sawe, nor eare heard, nor thought of hert yet compassed, what, and how great felicittee god hath prepared unto suche as dooe love him . . .

Who so ever therefore have such grace (which sure is gevin to few) by theyr life tyme to tast of this saied felicittee, they are subjecte to a certaine passion muche lyke unto madnesse or witravyng, whan ravished so in the sprite, or beyng in a traunce, thei dooe speake certaine thyngs not hangyng one with an other . . .

For now shall ye see them of glad chere, now of as sadde againe, now thei wepe, now they laugh, now they sighe, for brief, it is certaine that they are wholly distraught and rapte out of them selves. In sort that whan a little after thei come againe to their former wittes, thei denie plainly thei wote where thei became, or whether they were than in their bodies, or out of theyr bodies, wakyng or slepyng: remembring also as little, either what they heard, saw, saied, or did than, savyng as it were through a cloude, or by a dreame.

(86)

Echoing the same passage that Folly quotes from St Paul (I Corinthians 2: 9-10), in words "not hangyng one with an other", Bottom seeks to recall, as a fading dream, the unearthly experience that has all but vanished from his mind.

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t' expound this dream. Methought I was — there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had — but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no

bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke.  
Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

(4.1.198-215)

Bottom's words, as he returns to his "former wittes" — not very acute in the first place — are pure "madnesse". Lacking all logic ("I will call it 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom") and absurdly mingling subliminal memories of divine perfection and ass's ears ("methought I was, and methought I had . . ."), his speech nonetheless conveys wonder and yearning, and in its addled echo of St Paul, a bewildered ecstasy, tinged with the sadness of loss. For all his confusion, Bottom knows he has experienced something beyond mortal comprehension, and beyond human power to describe. Thus, with a reverence for poetry that Theseus lacks, he will turn to Peter Quince for a ballad of his dream. This he will sing before the Duke at Thisbe's death, and so pay tribute to the love he has lost, in the loftiest way that he knows.

4

The transcendent madness of lovers is counterpointed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by another of the *Encomium's* themes, the madness of the artist or poet. Whether this too is divinely conferred is a question both works treat ambiguously. The ambiguity is itself a curious point of resemblance, for normally the madness of the poet is identified with divine inspiration. At one point in her argument, Folly enlists the support of Plato, who "put the ravyng of poetes, prophetes, and lovers amonges the principal weales, and benefites of this life" (32). She says no more, hurrying on with her pressing concerns, but this is enough to remind the reader of Plato's four categories of divine madness. Subsequently she returns to speak eloquently of the sublime frenzies of love and religious ecstasy, but to the poet, her further references are less than exalted. Repeatedly lumping him together with other artists, among whom at various times she includes actors, orators, singers, musicians and painters, she treats them all with indulgent amusement rather than respect. The only divine inspiration she appears to accord them is her own, and, as she is so very free with her favours, this is hardly a matter for regard.

Poetes are somewhat lesse beholding unto me [than grammarians, whose debt is particularly great] . . . a free kynde of men, that lyke peincters maie feigne what they list, whose studie tendeth naught els, than to fede fools cares with mere trifles and foolishe *fables*. (42, emphasis mine)

A little later she refers, with perhaps some affection, to "my scribes" who, taking few pains with their writing, jot down "what so ever *toie* lighteth in their head, or falleth in their thought, be it but theyr dreme . . ." (48, emphasis mine).

Possible echoes of these passages occur in "I never may believe / These antique fables, nor these fairy toys", suggesting Shakespeare may have had them in mind when composing Theseus's speech on the madness of poets and lovers. It is this speech which in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directs attention to the artist, but the idea of his madness has already been anticipated. Just as the erratic and passionate behaviour of the young couples provides a model to which all lovers must inevitably conform, so the lunatic proceedings of the mechanicals, as they write, direct, rehearse and perform their play, offer a wild paradigm for all creative activity. "The best in this kind are but shadows, and



the worst are no worse if imagination mend them" (5.1.210-11) is an assertion that their play, however deficient in quality, is no different in kind from any other.

The antics of these hempen homespuns are beyond even the bounds of madness prescribed by the Goddess. In the *Encomium* Folly declares that anyone insane enough to unmask actors during a play would deserve to be stoned out of the theatre. The behaviour she regards as wholly improbable Shakespeare borrows for his mechanicals when he has them systematically destroy their play's illusion as they try to create it. From a delightfully misplaced anxiety about the effect their too-convincing portrayal of violence would have on the ladies in the audience, the actors decide to strip themselves of their own disguises. They plan, in Folly's phrase, "to disciphre unto the lokers on the true and native faces of eche of the plaiers" (21).

Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm  
with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for more better  
assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the  
weaver. This will put them out of fear.

(3.1.16-20)

In the event no prologue is needed. Bottom's irrepressible behaviour is enough to disrupt his performance without artificial assistance. He cannot resist breaking through his part to share with the audience his superior knowledge of theatre. "'Deceiving me' is Thisbe's cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I told you. Yonder she comes" (5.1.183-86). And after Pyramus's death the corpse quickly reverts to the lively Bottom who starts up to explicate the play's theme ("the wall is down that parted their fathers" (lines 345-46)), and to offer an epilogue. Lion, "a very gentle beast and of a good conscience" (line 225), as Theseus appreciates, is given the other Prologue proposed by Bottom, revealing that Lion is no lion, but Snug the joiner, and reassuring the ladies that he is less dangerous than the "smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor" (line 215). For good measure, "the true and native face" of Snug has been left peering through a hole in the lion costume's neck (3.1.33-4). Whatever illusion the actors do not deliberately set out to destroy, is ruined by the simple incompetence of their script, direction and acting. C.L. Barber, without any reference to *Praise of Folly*, recognises the violation of theatrical illusion as the main point of the mechanicals' performance. The comedy of it, he observes, derives largely from "the continual failure to translate actor into character" (151). He could be paraphrasing the very words of the Goddess.

The sheer insanity of these proceedings Shakespeare compounds by suddenly imitating his artisan's outlandish example. "The best in this kind are but shadows . . ." serves to shatter the illusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the same thoroughness Peter Quince and his crew achieve in their play. Theseus and his court, whose "reality" till now the audience has had little trouble accepting,<sup>4</sup> are transformed into a fiction as flimsy as the one they are watching. Unquestionably, the madness of the artist is demonstrated here, as Shakespeare identifies his own creation with that of his clowns.

Yet this translation of "reality" into fiction, though mad, is deeply serious. In the *Encomium*, Folly's reference to the extreme unlikelihood of any one unmasking actors introduces the argument that just as everyone accepts that illusion is the substance of theatre, so one should accept that illusion and uncertainty are the condition of man's existence. For "lykewise all this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certain kynde of stage plaie?" (22). Shakespeare unmasks his actors only to reach by a route opposite to

Folly's, her own metaphor of *Theatrum Mundi*. The mechanicals' play holds a mirror up to the real life symbolised by Theseus and his court, to show that reality itself is made of the same dream-material as a play.

The mechanicals' folly is their inability to distinguish between illusion and reality. It is because they are afraid of their lion that they expect ladies to be so. And it is because of their sense that a stage wall and stage moonshine should somehow be real ("You can never bring in a wall" (3.1.60)) that they encounter such extraordinary difficulties in conjuring them from "airy nothing". But, by the wildest of paradoxes, their stupidity takes them to the heart of profound revelation. The failure to understand the nature of illusion which leads to such a hash in creating it, leaves illusion nakedly exposed for what it is, not only in art but in life. The unreality of Pyramus and Thisbe mirrors Theseus's, and Theseus's mirrors our own.

The idea that man's life is composed of illusion is an integral part of Shakespeare's presentation of love. Images of insubstantiality, dissolution and change express the instability of the emotion. Love is "Swift as a shadow, short as any dream" (I.1.144). Days steep themselves in night and lovers dream away the time. In the forest of the lovers' behaviour seems unreal, playlike: to the fairies a "fond pageant", and to each other a jesting pretence. Dark night ("that from the eye his function takes" (3.2.178)) and the beautiful but uncertain illumination from moon, stars or glimmering fairy tapers are the symbolic accompaniment of ecstatically bewildered senses. ". . . you, the murderer, look as bright, as clear / As yonder Venus in her glimmering sphere" (3.2.60-1). Not only the lover's emotions, but his very existence seems fluid and unstable, as though he is composed of the same faint, perishable stuff as his dreams. Demetrius "dissolve[s]" (I.1.245) with the melting of his oaths to Helena; and to Hermia both Lysander and herself seem to lose their identities when he betrays her. "Am I not Hermia? Are not you Lysander?" (3.2.274). Hippolyta, the "bouncing Amazon", Oberon's "buskined mistress" and his "warrior love" (2.1.70-1), is strangely transformed to Theseus's gentle sweet", while retaining her incongruous passion for bear-hunting. What she is seems dependent on how she is perceived, whether through the jealous gaze of Titania, or the adoring eyes of her love.

The uncertainty of lovers' experience is extrapolated for the rest of mankind. The shape-changing power of the fairies is a symbol for disordered senses, but its deceptions are not confined to lovers. While Oberon in the shape of Corin can make love to Phillida, and Puck bemuse a fat and bean-fed horse by neighing in likeness of a filly-foal, Puck can also be the will-o'-the-wisp that leads travellers astray, or a horse, a hound, a headless bear, or an embarrassingly disappearing three-foot-stool. When Puck's nightmarish transformations (3.1.103-06) send the mechanicals fleeing wildly from the forest, their own fears take over the function of misleading their senses that his magic had begun:

Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong,  
Made senseless things begin to do them wrong.  
For briars and thorns at their apparel snatch;  
Some sleeves, some hats — from yielders all things catch.

(3.2.27-30)

As Theseus observes, ". . . in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear". Though of course that bear could be Puck.

Before the end of Act Four, the way has been prepared for the paradoxical investigation of reality that is one of the play's chief concerns. With the dawn-abdication of fairies, and

the entrance of Theseus and Hippolyta, immortal and human realms are sharply juxtaposed. The forest, which by night is a fairy kingdom, undergoes a complete transformation. Darkness, secret bowers and magic yield to daylight, wide mountain-topped vistas and Theseus's well-ordered world. Yet the effect is far from a simple contrast between the "real", waking world and a region of "shadows" and dream. However sublimely hills and sky seem to echo it, the noisy music of Theseus's hounds is comically inferior in its mortal grossness to the fairy song it supplants. And while the long ears of these hounds may sweep away the last traces of enchantment — for what to Theseus is mere "morning dew", to fairies is "pearls" (2.1.15), the tears of "pretty flowrets" (4.1.54-5) and "field dew consecrate" (5.2.45) — there is no suggestion of a triumph for Theseus's version of reality. Rather, it is implied, there is another kind of reality, of which Theseus, like his hounds, is unaware. As Harold F. Brooks (cx/ii) and others have pointed out, the audience has seen the fairies and knows them to be as real as Theseus himself. Though just how real this is, is a question about to be raised.

The lovers' awakening is marked by total bewilderment, not only about what happened during the night, but also about the ordinary human world to which Theseus's horns have just summoned them. Oberon has decreed that when the lovers awake, their chaotic experience of fairyland will "seem a dream and fruitless vision" (3.2.372). And so it does. As they turn toward Athens, they begin to recount to each other their "dreams". But not before they have found great difficulty in distinguishing their waking world from a dream one.

DEMETRIUS   it seems to me  
 That yet we sleep, we dream. Do you not 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.

(4.1.192-97)

The lovers' doubts about the mortal world are expressed through metaphors of cloud and dream, borrowed from the same passage in the *Encomium* which served as a model for Bottom's awakening. In the *Encomium*, the images describe the mystic's baffled recollection of transcendence, but here they are applied to the apprehension of a reality generally taken for granted. "These things seem small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds" (11.186-87), says Demetrius. The phrase, "these things", echoed by Hermia with similar uncertainty, would seem, both grammatically and logically, to refer to the present and what has just taken place, namely, the dreamlike encounter with Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus, rather than the remoter events of the night. But at very least, the phrase is ambiguous, allowing no distinction between the strangeness of night and the continuing strangeness of day.

It is hardly surprising that those who have been transported to immortal realms should, on their return, find things of the earth out of focus ("Methinks I see these things with parted eye" (line 188)), but the scene has a significance beyond the lovers' immediate predicament. The image of "far-off mountains turned into clouds" is an example drawn

from common experience of the way our senses deceive us. At a far distance we do perceive mountains as clouds, the senses sending false information to the brain. Further, the image is one of what Barber calls the play's "teeming metamorphoses". The woods, he observes, "are . . . a region of metamorphosis, where, in liquid moonlight or glimmering starlight, things can change, merge and melt into one another" (133). The forest is not only a region where metamorphosis takes place, it is subject to metamorphosis itself, changing in an instant from one kind of world to another, just as solid mountains can "turn" or dissolve into clouds. The play's myriad instances of uncertain perception and unstable phenomena turn the lovers' momentary confusion into a genuine case of Philosophic Doubt, such as Descartes was to encounter when he asked himself what he could really be certain was true.

The lovers' problem reflects one of the perennial problems of philosophy. How do we tell reality from our dreams? When we wake we know we have been dreaming, but while asleep we experience shadows as substance, with the same conviction that assures us of the reality of our waking lives. The problem is insoluble. We can never know that "out there" is a reality independent of our consciousness, let alone to what extent, if it exists, it resembles our experience. Yet in order not to be paralysed by doubt, some rough gauge of truth is needed, such as the coherence of experience, which is the test the lovers use. Assuring each other that each had similar sensations, that all saw Theseus, Hippolyta and Egeus, and all heard Theseus say the same thing, they conclude, their minds having been "transfigured . . . together", that their experience must be real, and with some relief, turn home.

But, of course, they are wrong. Their experience is not real, nor are they, nor is the world whose truth they have cautiously tested. In Act Five, all are disclosed as "shadows" in the dream of a poet, whose imagination has produced them from "airy nothing". Once Theseus has made the pronouncement which so devastatingly exposes his world as "shadows", *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues its convincing imitation of reality, as if nothing has happened. But the audience, I think, watches the rest of the play with "parted eye, / When everything seems double", both real and unreal at once. The play ends with a final dislocation of material reality, as the Athenian world reverts to fairyland. At midnight Theseus's palace becomes Oberon's territory. "Following darkness like a dream" (5.1.372), the fairies take over the palace and, with their glimmering tapers and field dew consecrate, resume control (if they ever lost it) of the sleeping mortals' lives.

Even beyond the end of the play the assault on reality continues. In his apparently innocent epilogue with its conventional apology and request for applause, the impish Puck turns his attention to an audience who has just watched a solid-seeming group of people dissolve into the same illusion as the play they are watching. And the process is repeated once more. Nothing could be more equivocal than Puck's directive that if we have not enjoyed the play we should imagine we dreamt it. This is just what Oberon decreed should happen to the young lovers, that they should imagine they dreamed what really did occur. Puck's epilogue holds a mirror up to us, in which we see not the familiar features of ourselves and our world, but those bewildered creatures in a play who mistook reality for a dream and a dream for reality. Identifying himself as a shadow, both fairy and illusion, and speaking from a world of "airy nothing", Puck dissolves the boundaries between that world and our own, telling us what the *Encomium's* Goddess told us, ". . . all this life of mortall men, what is it els, but a certain kynde of stage plaie?" and, "Good lorde, what a Theatre is this worlde".

Shakespeare's presentation of illusion, however, differs from the *Encomium's* in one important respect. For Folly, only the mystic's frenzy is an apprehension of invisible

reality. Other forms of insanity, though essential for happiness, are based on delusion. If a man rejoices in the beauty of his wife, no matter that in reality she should be as ugly as sin. Or if those in Plato's cave are happy to marvel at shadows, they are as well off as the philosopher who has emerged from the cave to contemplate real things. Better in fact, for they are contented more easily. Yet the shadows are not other than shadows, nor is the happy husband other than deluded.

But Shakespeare's paradoxes are more astounding than Folly's. For the mystic's glimpse of invisible reality he grants to the lover and the poet, and to any one who employs his imagination rightly. That the visible world can never be certainly known becomes the corollary of the claim that invisible truths can be apprehended with at least no greater uncertainty.

The speech disparaging the imagination, with which Theseus opens Act Five, is one of the most ironic in the play. Nothing could be more delightfully inappropriate than his condescension to lovers, himself being one, or towards poets, himself the product of a poet's pen. And nothing could be more deluded than this imaginary figure's assurance that "cool reason" can distinguish the imaginary from the real, or his assumption that what is imagined is therefore not true. Apart from these ironies and the ambiguity in the tone of the speech which undermines the position of the speaker, the whole play discloses a world too puzzling and irrational for reason to cope with. Only those who, like lovers and poets, are "of imagination all compact" have access to some of its mysteries.

The last act of the play focuses on the paradoxical relationship of imagination to truth, deepening and completing our understanding of the preceding action. Hippolyta's recognition of "something of great constancy" underlying tales that appear to be products of seething fantasy contributes to this understanding. But the key figure in the explication of imagination's power is, oddly, Theseus.

The speech about the lunatic, the lover and the poet is the last really sensible speech Theseus makes. Thereafter he abandons his logical position to champion the imagination and to employ it creatively himself. His choice of the mechanicals' play for the wedding entertainment, despite the protests of Philostrate and Hippolyta, shows him using his imagination to pluck from a "nothing" as airy as the poet's, the loving tribute his subjects intend, but are unable to express.

#### HIPPOLYTA

He says they can do nothing in this kind.

#### THESEUS

The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.  
 Our sport shall be to take what they mistake,  
 And what poor duty cannot do,  
 Noble respect takes it, in might not merit.  
 Where I have come, great clerks have purposed  
 To greet me with premeditated welcomes,  
 Where I have seen them shiver and look pale,  
 Make periods in the midst of sentences,  
 Throttle their practised accents in their fears,  
 And in conclusion dumbly have broke off,  
 Not paying me a welcome. Trust me, sweet,  
 Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome,  
 And in the modesty of fearful duty  
 I read as much as from the rattling tongue  
 Of saucy and audacious eloquence.

Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity  
 In least speak most, to my capacity.

(5.1.88-105)

What Theseus is saying here corresponds to his later observation that imagination needs to “amend” the defects of actual performance. “. . . what poor duty cannot do, / Noble respect takes it in might, not merit.” As with the “great clerks” who are reduced to petrified silence by loving awe of their ruler, it is not the failure, but the inexpressible love behind it that Theseus regards. For, in order to perceive rightly, in “nothing” or in “silence”, where no physical welcome exists, the unspoken words must be heard. Theseus’s paradoxes come startlingly close to the wise folly of the *Encomium*’s Goddess who claimed as a genuine virtue, blindness to the defects of one’s friends. Yet Theseus’s wisdom transcends even hers, for in bypassing the inadequate world of the senses, which, after all, is “but shadows”, his amending imagination finds not illusion, but truth.

Thus the idealising imagination of the lover who sees beauty in a “brow of Egypt” or even in an ass’s ears is finally vindicated. For the end of the play seems to validate even the craziest of love’s visions, Titania’s idealisation of an ass. In yet another scene indebted to the *Encomium*, where Folly declared Cupid to be the blinding god of friendship as well as of love, Bottom’s friends lament the absence of the only man in Athens worthy to play the part of their hero.

FLUTE No, he hath simply the best wit of any handicraft man in Athens.

QUINCE Yea, and the best person, too; and he is a very paramour for a sweet voice.

FLUTE You must say ‘paragon’. A paramour is, God bless us, a thing of naught.

(4.2.9-14)

There is surely something “strange and admirable” in the “great constancy” with which Bottom appears as supremely intelligent, handsome and sweet-voiced, not only to his lover, but to his friends. If coherence of experience is the best gauge of its truth (and it seems the play’s only gauge, “cool reason” being discredited), then Bottom’s perfections, so widely attested, are perhaps as real as anything in an uncertain world. Indeed, if we could follow Theseus’s strange advice, and imagine no worse of Bottom than he of himself, we might catch for ourselves in the silence of his unsung elegy, an echo of those angelic notes once heard by the fairy queen.

As he praises the folly of the lover, so Shakespeare praises the folly of the artist, though in terms nearly as ambiguous as Folly’s own. On the one hand the most exalted claims for art are hinted at. An image occurring early in the play significantly equates artistic composition with divine creation: “To you your father should be as a god / One that composed your beauties . . . ” (I.1.47-8). This, together with the Platonic allusion and unconscious tribute to the poet in Theseus’s speech on the imagination, suggests that Shakespeare entertained a view of poetry close to that expressed by Puttenham.

A poet is as much as to say a maker. And our English name well conformes with the Greek word: for of [poiein] to make, they call a maker Poeta. Such as (by way of resemblance and reuerently), we may say of God: who without any trauell to his diuine imagination, made all the world

of nought. Even so the very poet makes and contrives out of his own  
braine, both the verse and matter of his poeme.

(Lib. 1, Ch. 1, 19)

Puttenham goes on to suggest that the poet's skill may derive from "some diuine instinct, the Platonicks call it *furor*" (20).

On the other hand, Theseus's view of the mad artist, though immediately countered by his own unwitting eulogy, is never allowed to disappear entirely. It is kept alive by the mechanicals and confirmed by Shakespeare's deliberate imitation of their folly. The resemblance between his masterpiece and their madly-inspired playlet is finally clinched by Puck. The epilogue, which begs for a charitable response to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, does so in phrases which recall the mechanicals' play and Theseus's generous reaction to it. Puck echoes the notion of actors "offending" ("if we offend, it is with our good will" (5.1.108)), the image of "shadows", and the idea of the imagination amending performance. The words, "mend" and "amend" recur in the epilogue four times.

Puck's attitude to the play from which he has emerged appears to be entirely dismissive. But it would be unwise to take his deprecation at face value. Seeming to dismiss the play as "no more yielding than a dream", Puck could be insinuating the most ample claims for it, as a revelation of ultimate truth. After all, this is hardly more than Theseus suggested when, his words taking on a power unintended by himself, he described the poet's imagination as bodying forth "the forms of things unknown".

Yet the intimations that the poet's power is godlike and visionary, and his indubitable madness divinely inspired, remain as equivocal as the tone of Puck's epilogue. Exalted claims for art coincide with the most outlandish examples of it. Theseus's hound-chorus, the product of orderliness taken to lunatic extremes, is, like the mechanicals' play, a concordance of discords and a work of art. As David P. Young points out, "Theseus the hunter creates harmony in the western valley by matching the voices of his hounds. Man is a much better artist than he knows" (148). Half-ludicrous, half-magnificent, Theseus's music, like Bottom's ballad, is promised though not performed; but Hippolyta's rapture induces us to imagine it awakening an echo from the skies. Theseus briefly provides a similar service for the mechanicals' play. When Moon's premature withdrawal of his "sunny beams" (5.1.261) leaves Thisbe to seek her Pyramus in pitch darkness, Theseus's amending imagination lends the playlet a touch of that sublime beauty that the artists believe themselves to be creating. "She will find him by starlight" (line 302), he says gently, momentarily bathing the mechanicals' forest with the "spangled starlight sheen" (2.1.25) that illuminated the wood outside Athens.

It is probably in the figure of Bottom that Shakespeare's paradoxical view of the artist is most nearly adumbrated. Puck's equation of the play with visions and dreams prompts recollection of its most notable dreamer and visionary. As his sublime experience is transmuted to a fading dream, Bottom knows that it can only be expressed in a poem and perhaps become part of a play. In unconscious imitation of his creator, he proposes the title, "Bottom's Dream", for his poem, "because it hath no bottom". With a humility that takes the breath away, Shakespeare signals a resemblance between his own artistic achievement and the still-born aspiration of his clown. Yet, in its blend of folly, transcendence and illimitable profundity, the resemblance is strangely compelling. Absurdly yearning for unattainable perfection, yet curiously assured he has known it, Bottom becomes the satisfying symbol for the poet, as for the lover, and perhaps for all human contact with gods.

## NOTES

1. *Editos esse et non editos*, as Edgar Wind, quoting Pico della Mirandola's *De Hominis Dignitate*, points out (11-12), was the riddling language adopted by the mystagogue. By its means he could communicate mysteries to fellow initiates, while protecting them from profane ears.
2. C.L. Barber observes that this is a version of Holiday Misrule (120).
3. Apart from the winding of horns, we do not literally hear this music as we do the fairy song, but it is powerfully suggested by the poetry.
4. Although Theseus's mockery of the poetic frenzy to which he owes his own existence has caused a momentary suspension of illusion, and the mechanicals' declaration that "this green plot" will be their stage another.

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