

Conundrum

By David Lips

An address before the Literary Club of Indianapolis
April 17, 2023

Gentlemen, brace yourselves, for I am about to lead you into the very depths of perdition! The person I am about to introduce you to tonight is notorious, nefarious, naughty, and nasty. Listen to the following description and try not to be afraid.

“On thee ... I charge whate’er of such lawless idleness and immodest folly hath defiled the land since thy day! ... This ... book [of his writings] is the wellhead and source of all those evils which have overrun the land like a torrent, making men scoffers, doubters, deniers, murderers, makebates, and lovers of the wine-pot, haunting unclean places, and sitting long at the evening-wine. Away with him, away with him, men of England!”

Who is this malevolent malcontent? Who is this this poisoner of men’s souls? Who is this devil in human form?

Why, Shakepeare, of course!

The preceding quote is from a novel by Sir Walter Scott.

The words were put into the mouth of a Puritan during the reign of Oliver Cromwell.

Let's pick one of his plays at random. How about A Midsummer Night's Dream? Is that alright with you? Of course it is!

So what's this play about? Well, here's the deal.

The Duke is a few days away from getting hitched to Hippolyta. Hermia and Lysander also want to get hitched. But her daddy wants her to marry Demetrius. Hermia says, No way. So and Lysander skedaddle into the woods to avoid her daddy and the Duke. And in the woods at night, all hell breaks loose!

Following Hermia and Lysander are Demetrius and Helena. Demetrius loves Hermia. Helena loves Demetrius. Elsewhere in the forest some guys are rehearsing a play they want to perform before the Duke on his wedding day.

Also in the woods are fairies. Now, I know what you're thinkin': there's no such things as fairies. Well, tough bananas! There's such things as fairies in this play. The King and Queen of the fairies are on the outs because the Queen is looking after a human child that the King wants as his servant. The Queen tells the King, you ain't havin' him. The King thinks to himself, Well, I'll get even with you. So the King plots with his assistant named Puck to get a love potion for the Queen's eyes so that when she

wakes, she'll fall head over heels for the first thing that comes along. The King is betting that once the Queen is nuts over some creature, the King can wheedle the child away from her.

So the King sends Puck to get the love potion, and then the King does the job. Now, while Puck is going to and fro, according to Shakespeare, Puck watches the guys rehearsing the play and puts an ass's head on one of the actors, the poor schmuck. His name is Bottom. Now, here we get into a problem because I know some of you are squeamish and don't like curse words or anything that sounds like them. So from this point on, we won't use that horrid word. We'll use "donkey" instead.

The Queen is crazy about Bottom when she wakes up, donkey's head and all. Meanwhile the King spots Demetrius, who is trying to get away from Helena. He tells Puck to put ointment on Demetrius' eyes to make him love Helena. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and puts the love potion on Lysander's eyes. Helena enters the scene, and, lo and behold, Lysander wakes and goes nuts over her, just like that! The King tells Puck, ya got the wrong guy! So Puck puts the ointment on Demetrius' eyes. Demetrius sees Helena when he wakes up. Now both guys go after Helena. She thinks their joshing at her expense. As my granddaughter would say, this is a big nasty mess!

Lysander and Demetrius want to duke it out to see who gets Helena. The King has Puck fog up the forest so they

can't fight. After getting the child from the Queen, he tells Puck to take the spell off of her, and put love potion on Lysander's eyes so that he'll see Hermia when he wakes up and fall in love with her again. Puck also removes the donkey's head from Bottom.

The Duke enters the forest and finds the two pairs of lovers. They wake, and the Duke says they can get married when he gets married. So they all get married at the same time. Afterwards the guys in the forest perform their play for the Duke. And everything is hunky dory, and they live happily ever after. As some old coot once said, all's well that ends well.

Okay, now that I've got your attention, let's cut the tomfoolery, cut out the shenanigans, cut to the chase and get down to brass tacks.

I love this play, partly because of the aura of mystery that surrounds it. The title — A Midsummer Night's Dream — suggests a strong element of unreality. Much of the action takes place at night, when it's hard to tell what is real and what isn't. Also the two couples and Bottom aren't sure whether what happened to them actually took place. Was it real or a dream? Allusions to dreams abound in this play, underscoring the sense of mystery.

Let's look at the play more closely. At the beginning, the Duke is happy about his upcoming marriage to Hippolyta. He tells his Master of the Revels to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments,/ ... Turn melancholy forth to

funerals./ The pale companion is not for our pomp.” Almost immediately, the father enters complaining about Hermia. He demands that she either marry Demetrius or he will have her killed. In light of the father’s entrance, the Duke’s earlier statement that “The pale companion is not for our pomp” ironically foreshadows the father’s arrival.

Left alone on stage, Lysander and Hermia bemoan their fate. Lysander remarks, “The course of true love never did run smooth.” He mentions several things that tend to impede the course of love. Even when the couple is truly in love and is well matched, circumstances beyond their control make love short lived. As Lysander talks, listen to these beautiful lines of poetry.

... if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary 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.

Think about that imagery. Love is like lightening in a black night that comes and goes so quickly that before someone can say, Behold, it is gone. Likening the black night to a creature that eats the lightning, Lysander states, “The jaws of darkness do devour it up.” Isn’t that a

marvelous metaphor?

Later in the same scene, Lysander and Hermia confide in Helena. They tell her of their plans to escape into the forest “To seek new friends and stranger companies.” That line foreshadows the adventure in the woods and the behind-the-scenes encounters with the King fairy and Puck. Helena says,

Things base and vile ...
Love can transpose to form and dignity:
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind....

Love, she says, does not look at the world realistically but only through imagination. Her lines are central to the play because they are shown to be true in the infatuation that the Queen fairy has for Bottom, in the craze that Lysander eventually has for Helena, and even for the devotion that Demetrius develops for Helena. In short, Helena summarizes the chief actions of the play before they happen.

The first scene with the fairies begins with a nameless fairy meeting Puck and calling him “thou lob of spirits” — essentially a country bumpkin. Puck is well known in the fairy world. So in so doing, the nameless fairy commits an error typical in this play — making a false judgment on the basis of mere appearance. Puck tells the fairy how he played pranks on people, including taking the form of a stool that is pulled out from under a lady who is about to

sit. According to Puck, people watching the lady fall held their hips and roared with laughter. Puck notes, "A merrier hour was never wasted there." Immediately he looks up and sees trouble because the King is about to enter from one side, and the Queen is about to enter from the other side. Shakespeare moves us instantly from light-heartedness to trepidation, a trick he employs in several plays and one he used at the beginning of this play, when the King is happily thinking about his upcoming wedding only to be confronted with the angry father who insists that Hermia marry Demetrius.

So the King and Queen meet, or as the King says they are "Ill met by moonlight." When the Queen refuses to give the King the little boy she has been caring for, and she walks away, the King remarks, "Well; go thy way. Thou shalt not from this grove till I torment thee for this injury." Note how reminiscent this is of the father earlier, who threatened Hermia with death if she didn't marry Demetrius. After the King instructs Puck to get the love potion so that the King could anoint the Queen's eyes, Demetrius and Helena enter. Demetrius tells Helena that she is taking a chance, being alone in the woods at night with a man who doesn't love her. She replies, "Nor does this wood lack worlds of company,/ For you in my respect are all the world./ Then how can it be said I am alone,/ When all the world is here to look on me?" These are wonderfully inventive lines, but also they are ironic because, as Helena proclaims she is not alone, the King of the fairies is watching the whole thing. And then, too, Helena is right, without realizing it, that the woods do not

“lack worlds of company.” The fairies are there, and so are the men rehearsing the play for the Duke.

In the next scene, fairies sing a lullaby to bring protection to the Queen as she sleeps. The incantation ends with one fairy standing sentinel to guard her. Immediately the King enters, apparently unseen by the sentinel, to put the potion on the Queen’s eyes. Once more the audience is told something — that a sentinel stands guard — that is instantly contradicted in the action. After the Queen’s eyes are anointed, Lysander and Hermia enter and go to sleep, Lysander avowing his never-ending love to her and commenting, “sleep give thee all his rest.” Hermia answers back, “With half that wish the wisher’s eyes be press’d!” Puck enters immediately to put the ointment on Lysander’s eyes. So Hermia gets her wish. Lysander’s eyes are “press’d,” but differently than she imagined. Lysander wakes to see Helena, with whom he falls instantly in love, and he leaves Hermia alone. Hermia wakes to find she is by herself and gets frightened.

To change the mood, Shakespeare now presents one of the most delightful scenes of the play. Workmen are rehearsing in the woods. The play’s director explains, “This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house.” He tells them to imagine that the scene in the woods is the scene before the Duke. But he and the other workmen do not believe that the Duke and the others have the same capacity to imagine. They think that ladies would see an actual lion when there is a make-believe lion on the stage. So the workmen make

several absurd changes in the costumes and dialogue to guard against people taking the appearance of things on stage as being real. Puck, of course, disrupts the scene by putting a donkey's head on Bottom. Bottom enters the scene with this line: "If I were fair ... I were only thine." At that exact point, everyone sees that he has been hideously transformed. The action of the play turns Bottom's prior line about being "fair" to mockery. Finally, the Queen wakes, sees Bottom, and instantly falls in love. She declares, "thy fair virtue's force (perforce) doth move me/ On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee." Bottom replies, "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 neighbors will not make them friends." What Bottom said underscores the conflict between reason and love — reason based on realism and common sense, love based on appearance and imagination.

In the next scene, the King thinks of the Queen and wonders "what it was that next came in her eye,/ Which she must dote on in extremity." As they watch, Demetrius and Hermia enter. Hermia accuses Demetrius of having killed Lysander. Puck notes dryly, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" Then Lysander and Helena enter. Helena believes that Hermia, Lysander, and Demetrius are mocking her. She reminds Hermia that they were best friends. Hear this beautiful image she uses. "So we grew together, Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,/ But yet an union in partition,/ Two lovely berries moulded

on one stem.” When the men seek a place to fight over Helena, the King makes Puck fog up the night so that when all four lovers “next wake, all this derision/ Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision.” Also he orders Puck to remove the donkey’s head from Bottom so that when he wakes, he will “think no more of this night’s accidents/ But as the fierce vexation of a dream.”

The next morning, the Duke and his hunting party enter the scene and wake the sleeping lovers. The lovers are stunned at what they remember from the night before. Demetrius explains, “These things seem small and undistinguishable,/ Like far-off mountains turned into clouds.”

After the wedding, the Duke and his wife, Hippolyta, discuss the stories of the young lovers. The Duke dismisses their account as “More strange than true.../ Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend/ More than cool reason ever comprehends.” We again see the theme that reason and imagination are at odds, especially when it comes to love.

The Duke decides that he and the lovers will see the play that the men in the forest have prepared, even though the Master of Revels tries to persuade the Duke to choose another form of entertainment. Hippolyta is skeptical that the men can perform the play. Here is their colloquy.

[Duke:] I will hear that play;

For never anything can be amiss,
When simpleness and duty tender it....

[Hippolyta:] I love not to see wretchedness o'er
charged
And duty in his service perishing.

[Duke:] Why, gentle sweet, you shall see no such
thing.

[Hippolyta:] He says they can do nothing in this kind.

[Duke:] 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 accent in their fears
And in conclusion dumbly have broke off,
Not paying me a welcome. Trust me, sweet,
Out of this silence yet I pick'd 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.

The Duke's statement is charming, wise, and kind.

As it turns out, the men from the forest bungle the play. The play is so badly rendered that, as the Duke mentioned, even the Prologue made "periods in the midst of sentences." The actors turn a tragedy — based, as you might guess, on false appearances — into comedy. Instead of laughing, as the young lovers do, Hippolyta is put off. The Duke is kind once more and is willing to extend good will to those who mean well.

[Hippolyta:]. This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard.

[Duke:] The best in this kind [i.e. the actors] are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

[Hippolyta:] It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

[Duke:] If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men.

Isn't that a nice sentiment — to judge someone based on the person's good intent rather than on whether he has succeeded?

After the play-in-the-play ends and after the people have gone to bed, the fairies re-appear, to consecrate the lovers and their offspring. Puck faces the audience and has the final words as A Midsummer Night's Dream

concludes:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream

This play is magical in so many respects. In typical Shakespearian fashion, the coarser language of the men rehearsing their own play is juxtaposed with the beautiful imagery and poetry spoken by the other characters. Underneath the hilarious comedy are elements of wisdom, seriousness, even danger, but above all, of mystery.

At the play's end, Puck's earlier premonition turns out to be right.

Jack shall have Jill;
Naught shall go ill;
The man shall have his mare again,
And all will be well.