4 O TEACH ME HOW YOU LOOK

Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Only one character, Helena, does not change the aim of her desire at any time before or during the midsummer night. She is the one exception in a world of mimetic infidelities, but her constancy does not mean that her desire is truly her own—far from it. During much of the play Helena seems very different from the self-assertive Hermia. At the climax of the night, however, even this sweet girl angrily replies to the insults of her friend: her gentleness briefly succumbs to the hurricane of mimetric rivalry.

The relationship is the same as that of Valentine and Proteus. The girls have been raised together, and their mutual imitation and its consequences are portrayed at much greater length than in the earlier play. One can see that Shakespeare has thought about this a great deal and, on this subject, he writes a beautiful poem that is also a powerful mediation on mimetic *doubling:*

> [*Helena:*] Is all the counsel that we two have shar'd,
> The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent,
> When we have chid the hasty-footed time
> For parting us—O, is all forgot?
> All school-days friendship, childhood innocence?
> We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
> Have with our needles created both one flower,
> Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
> Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
> As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds
> Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
> Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
> But yet an union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
> So with two seeming bodies, but one heart,

Two of the first, like coats in heraldry,
Due but to one, and crowned with one crest.
And will you rest our ancient love asunder,
To join with men in scorning your poor friend?
It is not friendly, 'tis not maidenly.
Our sex, as well as I, may chide you for it,
Though I alone do feel the injury.

Hermia: I am amazed at your passionate words.
I scorn you not; it seems that you scorn me.

(III, ii, 198–221)

Samplers are teaching samples, exemplars. The girls have always imitated the same models and they themselves have always been each other's models. The result is the perfect unity so aptly expressed by the metaphor of the two cherries on the same stem: they have the same voice, the same mind, the same hands, the same sides. The image of structural symmetry is the favorite one of Claude Lévi-Strauss: the coat of arms.

The love and the hate involved are likewise one and the same; mimetic desire is the essence of both. The two antagonists misunderstand what happens in exactly the same manner. Neither one can believe that she has sinned in any way against the friendship or the friend, and indeed neither one has; each feels betrayed by the other.

Doubles is the term of mimetic theory for this relationship, which is not imaginary, as Lacan claims, but quite real, since it provides the basis for comic misunderstanding and tragic conflict. Everything we said in our first chapter about Valentine and Proteus can be repeated of Helena and Hermia. There is great emphasis, this time, on something that was barely suggested in the previous play, the continued identity and reciprocity of the two protagonists in the midst of their conflict. This emphasis implies a better grasp of the central paradox; the author is gradually discovering the implications of his own thinking.

The lines attributed to Helena are often the most interesting from the standpoint of mimetic theory; they represent a significant advance over the works already studied. At the beginning, Hermia is the embodiment of erotic success; the two boys are in love with her, and Helena is contagiously affected by their enthusiasm. It is no exaggeration to say that she treats her lifelong friend as if she were some kind of divinity.

Being purely mimetic, the convergence of the boys' desire upon Hermia has no objective justification. Hermia is not prettier than her friend, and Helena should be believed when she says a little later:

Through Athenes I am thought as fair as she.

(I, i, 227)

This is similar to the statement by Proteus quoted in my chapter on *The Two Gentlemen of Verona:*

She is fair; and so is Julia that I love . . .

(II, iv, 199)

Here again, Shakespeare tells us that mimetic desire is indifferent to reality. A few years ago the director of a BBC *Midsummer Night's Dream* decided that Hermia should be prettier than Helena. This was a mistake. for Helena's unpopularity with the boys, at the beginning tells us nothing about her physical charm. When, later in the night, the whole mimetic scheme is reversed in her favor, must we assume that her looks have miraculously improved?

Helena is just as pretty as Hermia and she knows it, but it is no comfort to her. Objective facts are one thing, mimetic fads are another. The two do not necessarily contradict each other, but neither do they necessarily coincide. In human relations, mimesis is the dominant factor. A mimetic defeat can destroy a girl's self-esteem regardless of how pretty she "really is." Our psychologies and psychoanalyses invariably emphasize the role of the single subject and mask the formidable role of mimetic phenomena not only in our love affairs, but also in our professional lives, politics, literary and artistic fashions, and so on. At the beginning of the night, Helena seems more "neurotic" than Hermia, but there is no sound reason to believe that she is.

As our mediators prevent us from possessing the object that they designate to us, we prize the designated objects more and more, but this is true only in a first phase; when the rivalry further intensifies, the object recedes into the background and the mediator looms larger and larger. This evolution is remarkably expressed in Helena's first speech, when she appears for the first time and defines the role of the mediator in her own existence, speaking to the divinity herself, Hermia, her best friend:

> *Hermia:* God speed, fair Helena: whither away?
> *Helena:* Call you me fair? that 'fair' again unsay.
> Demetrius loves your fair: O happy fair!
> Your eyes are lode-stars, and your tongue's sweet air
> More tuneable than lark to shepherd's ear,
> When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.
> Sickness is catching. O, were favour so,
> Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go!
> My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye,
> My tongue should catch your tongue's sweet melody.
> Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated,
> The rest I'd give to be to you translated.
>
> (I, i, 180–91)

The reason for this language is obvious. If she could turn into Hermia, Helena could seduce not only Demetrius but all the other boys who are or might be in love with Hermia. We well understand why Helena wants to *be* Hermia. Demetrius is what Helena wants to *have* and Hermia is what she wants to *be*. Being is obviously more important than having.

In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, an investigation of five great novelists led me to define the ultimate goal of desire in the following fashion:

> The object is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at the mediator's *being*. Proust compares this terrible desire to be the Other with thirst: "Thirst—like that which burns a parched land—for a life which would be a more perfect drink for my soul to absorb in long gulps, all the more greedily because it has never tasted a single drop."
>
> . . . Like Proust's, Dostoevsky's hero dreams of absorbing and assimilating the mediator's being. . . .[1]

Words like "being" and "ontological" seem pompously philosophical in the context of flighty adolescents, yet they cannot be avoided. *Being* is what mimetic desire is really after, and Helena says so explicitly.

Helena wants to be "translated" to Hermia. The word is a key one in *A Midsummer Night's Dream;* it links the ontological desire of the four lovers to the mythical metamorphoses of the midsummer night. Just as in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* the desire for *being* goes hand in hand with a process of quasi-divinization; but in the first play this process is still directed toward the object, whereas now it is directed toward the mediator. We may call this evolution "irrational," "obsessive," even "pathological," but it is always logical in the sense of fulfilling the essential nature of desire.

Helena is desperately in love with Demetrius, but he is hardly mentioned; gigantic in the absence of Hermia, his stature shrinks to almost nothing in her presence. Thus the real priorities of mimetic desire are revealed: however desirable the object may be, it pales in comparison with the model who gives it its value.

A remarkable aspect of our text is its sensuousness. Helena wants to catch Hermia's "favour" as she would a disease, contagiously, through physical contact. She wants every part of her body to match Hermia's corresponding part. She wants the whole body of Hermia. The homosexual connotations of this text are not "unconscious" but deliberate, and it is difficult to see what kind of help psychoanalysis could provide. Shakespeare portrays the tendency of unsuccessful desire to focus more and more on the cause of its failure and to turn the mediator into a second erotic object—*necessarily* homosexual, if the original desire is heterosexual; the erotic rival is an individual of the same sex as the subject. The homosexual connotations are inseparable from the growing emphasis on the mediator.

Helena will show a little later that she has not forgotten Demetrius; her behavior with him is more "masochistically" erotic during the night than that of any other character. Yet at this point her lover is eclipsed by her mediator, though not because of some "latent homosexuality" à la Freud, an unconscious something that would suffuse the text in spite of the author's conscious intention. It is Shakespeare's intention to communicate this very significance to us.

To Helena, Hermia is the model/obstacle/rival of mimetic desire; the mediated subject is hysterical because of her extreme frustration at the

1. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 53.

hands of her victorious mediator. Shakespeare deliberately illustrates this logic; to see him as a deluded puppet whose threads could be unraveled by our own superior power of demystification is a pretentious absurdity. He is writing less about Helena and her friends than about desire itself. He wrote this scene at a crucial point in his assimilation of the mimetic process. Having fully grasped for the first time the role of the mediator, he does his best to express his insight in dramatic form, his own form; he does what any writer must do when he discovers something really important: he turns it into literature.

Desire makes its own mimetic truth more and more visible as its own internal history unfolds. This evolution has "always already" begun; it is the *destiny* of mimetic desire, which fulfills itself whenever it has a chance to pursue its career to the end. As we said before and we will say again, the internal history of Shakespeare's theater is the history of desire itself.

The scene of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in which Valentine literally offers his beloved to his rival is an anticipation of what Shakespeare expresses more fully in Helena's speech: the preponderance of the model over the object. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel,* the homosexual implications of this drift are defined as follows:

> An attempt should be made to *understand* at least some forms of homosexuality from the standpoint of triangular desire. Proustian homosexuality, for example, can be defined as a gradual transferring to the mediator of an erotic value which in "normal" Don Juanism remains attached to the object itself. This gradual transfer is not, a priori, impossible; it is even likely, in the acute stages of internal mediation, characterized by a noticeably increased preponderance of the mediator and a gradual obliteration of the object. Certain passages in *The Eternal Husband* clearly show the beginning of an erotic deviation toward the fascinating rival. (p. 47)

The Helena–Hermia relationship clearly dramatizes what this text tries to express conceptually. That is why Shakespeare so emphasizes Helena's fascination for her mimetic model; he does not try to suggest that it is necessarily a permanent part of her psychic makeup. The Freudian conception seems rigid and essentialist in comparison with Shakespeare.

What Helena is going through is part of her "midsummer night." Many adolescents experience an intense fascination for successful school friends, and it may or it may not affect them permanently. Shakespeare is a marvelous example of what seems impossible in our barbarous times, a balanced and humorous view of questions now so loaded with ideological baggage that almost any mention of them makes us feel as if a ton of bricks had been unloaded upon us.

Our mimetic reading of the homosexual connotations in Helena's speech throws light on a very similar text in a vastly different play—*Coriolanus*. In the eyes of Aufidius, who has always been defeated by his rival on the battlefield, Coriolanus appears as the god of war himself, a model of every-

thing that he, Aufidius, the lesser man, wants to *be*. Helena too has been defeated, in a very different type or war, no doubt, but one just as important to her as the wars of Aufidius and Coriolanus in their own context. The consequences are exactly the same: Aufidius is a victim of ontological desire. All Shakespearean characters want to *be* their victorious rivals.

When Coriolanus is expelled from Rome and proposes an alliance to his ancient enemy, Aufidius answers in the following manner:

> O Martius, Martius!
> Each word thou hast spoke hath weeded from my heart
> A root of ancient envy. If Jupiter
> Should from yond cloud speak divine things,
> And say " 'Tis true," I'd not believe them more
> than thee, all-noble Martius. Let me twine
> Mine arms about that body, where against
> My grained ash an hundred times hath broke,
> And scarr'd the moon with splinters. Here I cleep
> The anvil of my sword, and do contest
> As hotly and as nobly with thy love
> As ever in ambitious strength I did
> Contend against thy valor. Know thou first,
> I lov'd the maid I married; never man
> Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee here,
> Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart
> Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
> Bestride my threshold. Why, thou Mars, I tell thee,
> We have a power on foot; and I had purpose
> Once more to hew thy target from thy brawn,
> Or lose mine arm for't. Thou has beat me out
> Twelve several times, and I have nightly since
> Dreamed of encounters 'twixt thyself and me;
> We have been down together in my sleep,
> Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat,
> And walk'd half dead with nothing.
>
> (IV, v, 102–26)

When Aufidius brings his wife into the picture, we cannot doubt that the homosexual connotations are deliberate; their significance is obviously the same as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In both plays Shakespeare describes an eroticization of the mediator that also occurs in the same fashion in the works of other mimetic writers such as Dostoyevski and Proust.

As I said before, Aufidius and Coriolanus become close friends for a while, until the negative aspect of the ambivalence reasserts itself violently and Aufidius murders Coriolanus. Even though it expresses itself less tragically, the ambivalence is exactly the same in the case of Helena and Hermia.

Was Shakespeare sexually attracted to the boys who played not only the role of Aufidius and Coriolanus but also those of Helena and Hermia? Is the sexual drift toward the mediator something he can detect because he experienced it in his own life? Possibly yes and possibly no; there can be no

definite answer to this question. Our intelligence of the mimetic process depends on the force of our own mimetic insight, which has nothing to do with sexual preference. Mimetic factors may affect sexual preference but they also may not. There are strong reasons to believe, on the other hand, that the mimetic dimension of our desires is not modified by sexual preference; it is the same in heterosexual and in homosexual desire, in men and in women.

It is difficult, of course, not to read the *Sonnets* in an existential light, and if we do, they suggest a bisexuality that accords very well with what the theater also seems to suggest. Speculations about Shakespeare's private life are inevitable, of course, but cannot lead to any certainty; even if they did, their interest would still be limited. I find the coincidence between Shakespeare's conception of desire and current mimetic theory much more interesting than biographical considerations. This coincidence is something that can be decisively documented through close comparative readings of as many Shakespearean texts as possible. I find this task more rewarding than the eternal question about what kind of a man Shakespeare *really* was.

The Shakespearean mimetic theory unfolds almost didactically in *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* Helena's speech deals with the ontological nature of the desire for the model, then is followed by a conversation dealing with the means of implementing this desire. How can a girl transform herself into her mediator? Her life must be a mystic *imitatio* of Hermia, and since the divinity is on hand, Helena seeks advice directly from her:

> O teach me how you look, and with what art
> You sway the motion of Demetrius' heart.
> (I, i, 192–93)

She sounds like a pupil asking her teacher for help with her homework. Hermia regards herself as incompetent but gives a most pertinent answer:

> I frown upon him, yet he loves me still.
> (194)

Why should a man as ill treated as Demetrius cling so desperately to his persecutor? In a mimetic context it is perfectly clear: successful rivalry extinguishes desire, whereas failure exasperates it. Hermia's relation to Demetrius illustrates the first proposition, and Helena's the second: Demetrius loves Hermia because of her contemptuous indifference to him; Helena loves Demetrius because of his contemptuous indifference to her. As a teacher of erotic strategy, Hermia is more competent than she thinks, but the message is beyond Helena's grasp, as her inept comment shows:

> O, that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill!
> (195)

The more mimetic we are, the less we perceive the mimetic law that governs our behavior as well as our language. All these lovers keep teach-

ing each other a lesson that not a one of them ever understands. All the pieces of the puzzle are in place and fit perfectly; as the two girls keep exchanging observations, the picture becomes more and more manifest, yet those who paint it remain blind to its meaning. What about the spectators? In order to enlighten them, Shakespeare has Hermia and Helena go through their little routine once again:

> *Hermia:* I give him curses, yet he gives me love.
> *Helena:* Oh, that my prayers would such affection move!
> (196–97)

For a second time Hermia suggests the only effective strategy, and for a second time Helena gets the message backward. All four lovers pursue the same ontological dream through the same absurdly self-defeating method. The more they persist, the more they get lost in the maze of the midsummer night; very soon the ridiculous misunderstanding will turn to nightmarish violence. They all share in the responsibility for what happens, but they never find out. Yet Shakespeare gives us one more chance to see what they never see:

> *Hermia:* The more I hate, the more he follows me.
> *Helena:* The more I love, the more he hateth me.
> (198–99)

After passively suffering the unpleasant effects of its own absurdity, mimetic desire takes the bull by the horns, so to speak, and seeks these same effects actively; it turns the worst consequences of past mimetic rivalry into the prerequisites of present and future desire. On the strength of a most painful and sadly misinterpreted experience, it focuses directly on whatever obstacle seems most discouraging. Every pleasant and willing object is spurned, and every desire that spurns our own desire is passionately embraced; only disdain, hostility, and rejection appear desirable. Mimetic desire efficiently programs its victims for maximum frustration.

The psychiatrists and psychoanalysts tear apart the seamless robe of mimetic desire, trying to cut it up into separate "symptoms" that do not really add up to well-differentiated psychic ailments; we must stay away from their language and the mental habits that go with them. They do not perceive the weird kind of *inverted* war, that all these lovers are waging against one another. The lovers' desires need *victorious opponents;* if we invoke some reified notion of "masochism" to account for Helena's attachment to Demetrius, or some reified notion of "sadism" to account for Hermia's detachment from him, or for his own detachment from Helena, we lose sight of the single mimetic principle that governs all antithetical attitudes.

What appears to the nonmimetic observer as a desire for failure *as such,* or for suffering *as such,* is really part of the ontological desire defined earlier—part of Helena's desire to be Hermia, or of anybody's desire to be a

mediator transfigured by victory, that is, by the desiring subject's defeat. Defeat and failure are not worshiped *as such*, at least at this stage; they are *signs* of the model's validity as a model. We should never believe that these characters truly *are* such as their behavior seems to imply; they always respond to some mimetic signal, and all situations can reverse themselves at any moment.

Psychiatric labels create an impression of permanent difference where none exists. Defeated from the start, Helena seems more intrinsically "masochistic" than her three companions, but she is not. The other three will catch up with her during the night.

Although less essentialist than the old "characterization," psychoanalysis is still too static for the constantly accelerating kaleidoscope of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Its false differentiations can only obscure the perfect transparence of what happens. The only way to grasp the mechanism of universal frustration is to face up to the implications of a multiplicity of desires, all radically imitative of each other, with no fixed and permanent model anywhere.

The rules of the game explain why all participants undergo the same total sequence of experiences before the night is over. The order in which these experiences occur is indifferent; we must not be fooled by the mirage of some original difference that would be the "true" difference. The four lovers keep desiring because, each time, they magnify purely positional differences into a false absolute. A revolving illusion of transcendance propels the entire system.

The midsummer night is not a portrayal of this or that character's more or less stable "neurosis" or "complex," but a *noche oscura* that affects all characters in the same way and to the same degree—a collective ordeal and, ultimately, a kind of initiation ritual that they all successfully complete.

These characters never listen to each other or even to themselves. They all speak the same truth but do not grasp it. They do not believe enough in what they actually say. The density of content in this supposedly insignificant play is extraordinary, but both the characters inside the play and the critics outside react to the language and to the events of the play in the same wrong manner; they all sincerely proclaim the incoherence of a marvelously coherent work.

The lovers use a perfectly stereotyped language, full of flamboyant figures of speech; they constantly borrow from two equally sinister domains of human activity: black magic on the one hand, and vengeance and violence, war and military destruction, on the other. In addition to being "rhetorical" in the habitual sense, this language is used "rhetorically" in the sense of being repeated unthinkingly and mechanically by mindless *amateurs* of time-honored clichés: the four lovers do not listen to what they say because they say it too often:

> Where is Lysander and fair Hermia?
> The one I'll slay; the other slayeth me.
> (II, i, 189–90)

Our mimetic reading can exorcise once and for all the specter of "bad taste" that has always haunted the critic of these passages. The predilection for oxymora is not a matter of stylistic choice; it reflects the "ambivalence" of desire toward a mediator simultaneously idolized as a model and execrated as an insurmountable obstacle. Here is one more example of "rhetorical" speech. Helena exclaims:

> You draw me, you hard-hearted adamant;
> But yet you draw not iron, for my heart
> Is true as steel. Leave you your power to draw,
> And I shall have no power to follow you.
> (II, i, 195–98)

Demetrius's harsh treatment of Helena is truly the shortest and surest road to her heart. All rhetorical statements become literally true at some moment or another; everybody is the "hard-hearted adamant" of someone else. We are blind to this truth because it is neither objective nor subjective but *interdividual*. Every statement is true relative to the speaker's position within his configuration of desire. Since the number of such positions is limited and all members of the group occupy all of them in turn, the rhetoric is always a correct portrayal of what is going on.

The violence and war of traditional rhetoric expresses the essentially conflictual and destructive nature of mimetic desire. The violence seems purely "metaphorical" and the language of blood and destruction passes for a ridiculous exaggeration, a purely "rhetorical effect," sheer preciosity, but it *becomes* the literal truth at the height of the midsummer night, when Lysander and Demetrius draw their swords and truly attempt to *slay* one another, not figuratively anymore but actually.

With second-rate writers, the creative effort moves from reality to metaphor, whereas with real geniuses this direction is reversed: they go from metaphor back to reality. But theirs is not the reality of those who try to reach it by "doing away with rhetoric." Shakespeare transcends the combination of linguistic nihilism and idolatry that characterizes all rhetorical ages, our own as well as his. He plunges the rhetorical discourse of the four lovers back into the "interdividual" furnace that justifies its dreadful connotations, and it comes out transfigured. If we let him guide us, we will see the most exhausted clichés turn to red-hot lava; all we need do is *hear* the violence in them and compare it to the way these young people really treat one another. They spell out the tragic fate that almost engulfs them all at the climax of the night. The four lovers narrowly escape through the sheer luck of being characters in a comedy rather than in the tragedy that they richly deserve, the tragedy that they do their best to bring about.