3 THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

The Four Lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

A Midsummer Night's Dream is popular with theater audiences all over the world but unpopular, as a rule, with the more philosophical critics. They like the poetry of rural England but they dislike the love *rhetoric,* which they declare artificial. They look in vain for intellectual and spiritual nourishment. George Orwell observed that this "most actable play" is one of the least admired in the theater of Shakespeare, and he obviously found nothing admirable in it.[1] The tradition behind this disdain goes back very far into the past. After attending a performance of the play, Samuel Pepys commented in his diary that "it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life."

The three subplots seem equally pointless. The mindless lover are not even responsible for what they do; Puck, the hobgoblin, Oberon's lieutenant, keeps pouring his love juice "in the wrong eyes." Who really cares for jealousies and infidelities that have nothing to do with "true love"? Who really cares for the antics of some local bumpkins preposterously rehearsing a wretched caricature of a drama for the wedding feast of Theseus, duke of Athens? The only link between the two stories is the tenuous fairy tale, but the connection seems purely formal, empty of significant content.

My own view of the play is different: I regard *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as Shakespeare's first mature masterpiece, a veritable explosion of genius. The action has no direct ethical "relevance," but a play can be interesting on other grounds. It can deal with incoherence and yet be coherent as a work of art and as an intellectual statement. Greek tragedy perpetually deals with chaos but is far from chaotic. At first glance, Shake-

1. George Orwell, "Lear, Tolstory and the Fool," in J. Frank Kermode, ed., *Four Centuries of Shakespearean Criticism* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 519.

speare seems to have invented the caprices of his lovers at random, with no purpose in mind, but their genius for desiring at cross-purposes is too infallible to result from chance. They always select the course that holds the greatest potential for frustration and conflict.

For this miracle in reverse, there must be some explanation. The name of the magical flower supposedly responsible for all mischief, "love-in-idleness," suggests that the young aristocrats portrayed in the main subplot are spoiled adolescents; social and even political implications are not lacking in this play. I do not think, however, that their role is paramount. The lovers themselves explain the night's events through the actions of the fairies, and we must take their explanation with a grain of salt even within the context of the comedy. The play itself suggests something more plausible.

My readers will immediately guess what I have in mind. The midsummer night is mimetic, but in a more complex manner than the plots of the earlier works. Instead of a single relationship, we have an entangled web of mimetic interaction, a long escalation of rivalry so fierce at the climax that it turns to violent chaos. As soon as the whole structure hits bottom, however, it bounces back toward the light, and a happy end is in sight.

When we read the play in its own mimetic light, we can dispense with the love potion and account for every incident most satisfactorily. The play, then, ceases to be the mosaic of heterogeneous themes that the critics have always portrayed. It becomes a single dynamic process embracing all three subplots, a constantly worsening formlessness suddenly turning back into orderly form. A tour de force of dramatic organization, it is also a dazzling feat of linguistic virtuosity. Here mimetic desire, instead of being defined explicitly, as in the works already discussed, speaks through the seemingly insignificant rhetoric of the lovers that blossoms once in a while into supremely enlightening puns.

This is the work in which the mimetic desire that governs human relations in Shakespeare was fully mastered for the first time and dramatized as a global system, the source of all social integration as well as disintegration. Behind its frivolous appearance, this play constitutes a stupendous theory not only of the conflictual side of mimesis but of its cohesive power, which manifests itself as ritual and theater.

Oberon, Titania, the other fairies, and the whole fantastic subplot are the mythical *dream* generated by the mimetic interplay in the two other subplots. Shakespeare turns his play into an immensely powerful interpretation of its own dramatic trickery as mythical morphogenesis. As the hysteria of the night increases, it produces monstrous hallucinations that ultimately trigger the apparition of the fairies, both among the craftsmen rehearsing their mimetic play and among the lovers rehearsing their mimetic grievances against one another.

This chapter and the next four are dedicated primarily but not exclusively to the disorderly dimension of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Thereafter I will return to this play a first time after my examination of *Troilus*

Cressida and a second time after we learn about sacrifice from *Julius Caesar.* Only then will I be able to deal with the ritual dimension of the play, the rebirth in it of sacrificial order. Only then will I be able to defend my overall thesis regarding this prodigious comedy. It is the work in which the Shakespearean focus on mimetic desire broadens into a total anthropological vision. Magical religion is the most pervasive and perfect mask of mimetic interaction, the original mask, human culture itself. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the mask is lifted. This play should be compulsory reading for all modern anthropologists.

To demonstrate this thesis, I must first point up the similarities with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is in some ways a more complex and systematic illustration of the principle that already governed its predecessor.

In the first comedy we had a father who was also a duke and who tried to prevent the marriage of his daughter with the hero, Valentine. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the father and the duke are separate characters but join forces against Hermia who, just like Silvia, has decided to marry Lysander against the wishes of her father. If she refuses to marry Demetrius, Hermia must either die or spend the rest of her life in a pagan equivalent of the traditional convent. After this formidable edict, the father figures majestically depart and play no further role in the affairs of the younger generation. Like Valentine and Silvia in the first play, Hermia and Lysander decide to elope.

Being in no hurry, they indulge in a little lyrical poetry until they are interrupted by Helena, who listens avidly as her good friend Hermia proudly and excitedly tells her about the planned elopement. Hermia confides in her friend for the same reason as Valentine confides in Proteus. All these mimetic lovers are looking for mimetic gratification and, in the process, they provide their imitators and rivals with weapons that are invariably turned against the providers.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Valentine tells Proteus about his intention to elope, and this treacherous friend rushes to the duke with this hot information. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the traitor is Helena, who goes straight to Demetrius. Demetrius is in love with Hermia and will follow her wherever she goes. Helena, in turn, is in love with Demetrius and follows him wherever he goes. Thus two disgruntled lovers will accompany Lysander and Hermia at all times during the night, eager to stir up discord. Just as Valentine was responsible, at least in part, for the hostile interventions that spoiled his love affair, so Hermia is responsible, in part, for the disruption of her relationship with Lysander and for the whole turmoil of the midsummer night.

At the beginning of the night both Lysander and Demetrius are furiously in love with Hermia; the possibility that either one could forsake her seems

preposterous. "True love" is the author's official perspective in this play; it goes without saying that all lovers are supposed to remain eternally faithful to each other. Yet almost immediately the unthinkable happens. Lysander abandons Hermia and falls in love with Helena. Hermia has just entrusted her reputation, even her life, to this young man and now, with no advance warning, callously taking advantage of her sleep, he leaves her alone on the ground, a potential prey to the wild beasts of the forest. This beastly behavior should disqualify Lysander as a "true lover" unless, of course, it can be shown that he was not in his right mind when he sinned so grievously against "true love." The magical love potion of Puck solves this problem. With fairies at his disposal, there is little that a smart playwright cannot do.

Events are fast moving during the midsummer night: before we can recover from the shock of Lysander's infidelity, Demetrius likewise forgets Hermia and falls in love with Helena. Just a moment before, he was mistreating the poor girl abominably, insulting her vociferously, but now, with equal vociferousness, the two boys celebrate her heavenly beauty. When something that seemed hardly believable the first time it occurred almost immediately occurs a second time, our astonishment greatly increases—unless, of course, we realize that the repetition is due to mimicry, in which case our astonishment evaporates. The believers in "true love" have a great capacity for faith and never suspect the possibility of mimicry in the realm of passionate sentiments. Given the slightest opportunity, they will always embrace love potions as an explanation in preference to mimetic desire. Shakespeare does not want to upset their faith, so he has a second round of "love-in-idleness."

If we take the trouble to read the text, we shall find clues to a more cynical interpretation everywhere. The first thing to observe is that, even though the two boys are never in love with any girl for very long, both of them at any given time are always in love *with the same girl*. We can also observe great similarities in their two discourses, which remain unchanged when both of them shift from one girl to the other, except, of course, for the minor adjustments required by the fact that Helena is a tall blonde, whereas Hermia is short and dark-haired. Here Lysander speaks:

> Content with Hermia? No, I do repent
> The tedious minutes I with her have spent.
> Not Hermia but Helena I love.
> Who will not change a raven for a dove?
> The will of man is by his reeason sway'd;
> And reason says you are the worthier maid.
> (II, ii, 111–16)

Lysander and Demetrius are both firmly convinced that their new love at first sight is the most spontaneous and rational move they ever made. This "rationality" is even less convincing than the love juice of Puck. In his desperate effort to catch up with Lysander, Demetrius sounds even more bombastic and stereotyped, but the difference is not worth mentioning:

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!
To what my love shall compare thine eyne?
Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show
These lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
That pure congealed white, high Taurus' snow
Fann'd with the easter wind, turns to a crow
When thou hold'st up thy hand. O, let me kiss
This princess of pure white, this seal of bliss!
(III, ii, 137–44)

The critics do not go so far as to assume that Shakespeare himself believed in the fairies, but they feel that he really structured his comedy around them, which is almost as bad. They mistake *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for a fantastic play. But in spite of its fairies, this work is supremely realistic; everything in it makes sense in terms of a mimetic logic that can be easily deduced from the various incidents. Let us begin with Demetrius, whose case is most obvious: he imitates Lysander because Lysander took Hermia away from him, and like all defeated rivals, he is horribly mediated by his victorious opponent. His desire for Hermia remains intense as long as Lysander provides it with a model; as soon as Lysander shifts to Helena, Demetrius also shifts. This perfect parrot is a more comic version of Proteus. Imitation is so compulsive with him that, were there a third girl in the group, he would certainly fall in love with her, but not before Lysander did.

What about Lysander himself? When he shifts to Helena, he has no possible model, since no one is in love with the poor girl. Does that mean that his desire is truly spontaneous? To persuade ourselves that it is not, we must turn to what happened *before the play begins*. The first scene summarizes what must be called the *prehistory* of the midsummer night. It is a tale of erotic substitutions and betrayals like the events in the play itself. The information is given succinctly and has no dramatic impact; the only possible reason for having it at all is the light that it sheds on the systematic nature of all erotic shenanigans among the four lovers.

In the beginning Helena was in love with Demetrius and Demetrius with her. This happy state of affairs did not last. The gentle Helena explains in a soliloquy that her love affair was destroyed by Hermia:

For ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne,
He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and show'rs of oaths did melt.
(I, 1, 242–45)

Why should Hermia attempt to seduce Demetrius away from her best friend? Since Hermia now wants to marry the other boy, Lysander, she could not be motivated by genuine "true love." What else could it be? Do we have to ask? The mimetic nature of the enterprise is suggested by the close similarity, once again, with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Hermia and Helena are the same type of friends as Valentine and Proteus: they have

lived together since infancy; they have been educated together; they always act, think, feel, and desire alike.

In our prehistory we have a first mimetic triangle like the one in *The Two Gentlemen*, with the genders reversed. Helena is the Valentine of the new comedy, Hermia its Proteus, and Demetrius a more treacherous Silvia. The beginning is the same but the outcome is different: the energetic Hermia succeeds where Proteus failed.

Demetrius is still very much in love with Hermia because she is the one who jilted him, just as Demetrius himself had jilted Helena a little before. The enterprising Hermia first stole the lover of her best friend and then lost interest in him, thus making two people hysterically unhappy instead of one. If Hermia lived in our time, she would probably claim that a bright, modern, independent young woman like herself needs *more challenging friends* than Demetrius and Helena. Demetrius and Helena seem insufficiently challenging to Hermia because she found it too easy to dominate them. First, she roundly defeated Helena in the battle for Demetrius, which destroyed the prestige of this friend as a mediator. Being no longer transfigured by the power of mimetic rivalry, Demetrius too lost his prestige and did not seem desirable any longer. Whenever an imitator successfully appropriates the object designated by his or her model, the transfiguration machine ceases to function. With no threatening rival in sight, Hermia found Demetrius uninspiring and turned to the more exotic Lysander.

This explanation is also valid for Demetrius, our first example of infidelity. He yielded to Hermia's blandishments because Helena was too gentle and loving; she did not make things difficult enough for her lover. When mimetic desire is thwarted, it intensifies and, when it succeeds, it withers away. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the play in which these two aspects are discreetly but systematically exploited. The two together make up the dynamics of the midsummer night.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare emphasized the strength and *stability* of *unfulfilled* desire. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this emphasis remains, but it is supplemented by an equal emphasis on the *instability* of *fulfilled* desire. We can now understand why Lysander abandons Hermia, for all desertions are rooted in the disenchantment of peaceful possession. Lysander has triumped over his mimetic rival Demetrius. Hermia truly belongs to him, so he lacks the indispensable stimulus of mimetic rivalry. Helena must seem attractive at this point because she has given no indication of being interested in Lysander; besides, there is no one else to turn to.

The history of the night continues its prehistory with different characters in the various mimetic roles. Before the midsummer night began, in other words, it had already begun. First Demetrius was unfaithful to Helena, then Hermia was unfaithful to Demetrius, then Lysander to Hermia, and finally Demetrius to Hermia. The four infidelities are arranged in such a way that the minimum number of incidents illustrates the maximum amount of mimetic theory.

It is important to observe that the love juice cannot be invoked as an excuse for the infidelities that occur *before the midsummer night*. Everything can and must be explained mimetically, that is, rationally. If we had only the infidelities that occur before our eyes, the examples would be too few to lead us unquestionably to the mimetic law, but the addition of the prehistory and the history is sufficient to the purpose. So instead of a single triangular conflict that remains unchanged until the conclusion, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests a kaleidoscope, a number of combinations that generate one another at an accelerating pace. Shakespeare gives several objects in succession to the same mimetic rivals for a comic demonstration of the mediator's predominance in the triangle of mimetic desire. *A Midsummer Night's Dreams* is to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* what general relativity is to the Newtonian system.

The permanent restlessness inherent in the mimetic principle necessarily entails that no single combination will ever satisfy any lover for any length of time. Given enough time, therefore, all possible combinations should be tried, and indeed they are. Even if the play cannot deal with all possibilities exhaustively, which would be tedious, exhaustiveness is suggested. I can think of only one other play in theatrical literature that pursues more or less the same goal and achieves it as elegantly as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro*.

Since there are the same four protagonists in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* it would seem, at first glance, that the same law could not generate the greater complexity of the second play; but the difference lies in the handling of the female characters. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* the women are erotically passive, mere objects of a struggle between male rivals. As I observed earlier, we even have the impression, at times, that mimetic desire is limited to Proteus alone. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* the girls are just as mimetic as the boys, and there are four active players instead of two or one.

Infidelity has been traditionally regarded as more shocking in women than in men; Shakespeare does not have any woman unfaithful *on the stage*. He shows the two boys fighting for the same girl, but not the girls fighting for the same boy. He reserves the most scandalous incidents for the prehistory of the midsummer night. We should not be fooled, however, by this discreet handling of the women; the play needs a feminine counterpart to the masculine interaction and has one. In the total economy of the comedy, the mimetic rivalry of Helena and Hermia, plus the infidelity of Hermia, play the same role exactly as the events of the night that involve primarily the boys. Hermia is no more faithful to Demetrius than Demetrius and Lysander are faithful to her. Just like the boys, the girls are rivals first and lovers second and, just like the boys, the girls end up at each other's throat. At bottom there is no difference: each lover is a mirror image of the other three, regardless of gender.

If we had to designate an arch troublemaker before the midsummer

night begins, it would be Hermia, but we must not consider our prehistory apart from our history. To emphasize the singularity of any character would be contrary to the spirit of a play, which focuses on the paradoxical uniformity produced by the mimetic law. Shakespeare neither satirizes nor glorifies women in this play. His interest lies in the portrayal of the mimetic process; his comedy has no more to do with sexual difference than with any other difference. The mimetic process seems to emphasize differences, but in reality it destroys them. This hidden consequence, not the appearance of diversity, is what the playwright has decided to dramatize.

With our mimetic lovers, no love affair can succeed unless it fails, and none can fail unless it succeeds. They secretly abhor the tranquil enjoyment of "true love" that their rhetoric celebrates. At any moment of the midsummer night broadly understood, each member of the quartet desires another member who does not desire him or her, and is desired by a third member whom he or she does not desire. At all times communication is minimal and frustration maximal among these lovers.

Everybody is so mimetic that, at any given time, all mimetic desires tend to agglutinate and form a single huge desire for one and the same object. At the beginning everybody is in love with Hermia, including Helena and even Hermia herself, who obviously feels that she richly deserves all the desire that is directed toward her. At the climax of the night, it is no longer Hermia but Helena who is at the center of the group: everybody is obsessed with her, including Hermia, so insane with jealousy that she physically attacks her friend.

All four lovers worship the same erotic absolute, the same ideal image of seduction that each girl and boy in turn appears to embody in the eyes of the others. This absolute has nothing to do with real qualities; it is properly metaphysical. The four lovers are like birds on the same telephone wire, always fighting and yet inseparable. From time to time, for no apparent reason, they all fly to another wire and start fighting again. Their desire is obsessed with the flesh, yet totally divorced from it. It is never instinctive and spontaneous, cannot rely on such things as the pleasure of the eyes and the other senses. It perpetually runs to desire just as money runs to money in a speculative economy. We may say, of course, that the four characters are "in love with love." That would not be inaccurate, but there is no such thing as love *in general*, and such a formulation obscures the crucial point, the presence of a model that is inevitably transformed into a rival, the necessarily jealous and conflictual nature of the mimetic convergence on the same objects.

This erotic instability is frivolous, no doubt, but its representation is far from trivial. The subject matter is nothing; the playwright's genius lies in the subtly systematic handling of it. Shakespeare satirizes a society of would-be individualists completely enslaved to one another. He is mocking a desire that always seeks to differentiate and distinguish itself through the imitation of someone else but always achieves the opposite result: *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream is an early triumph of unisex and uni-everything else. It involves a process of increasing symmetry among all characters, yet not so obviously perfect a one that the demonstration becomes heavy-handed.

Unlike the skeptical Puck, who mocks the lovers because he understands everything, Oberon is full of reverence for "true love," but his language plays occasional tricks upon him and suggests the very reverse of what he intends to say. After Puck has picked the wrong man for his dispensations of love juice, Oberon sounds indignant, as if the difference between "true" and "false" love were so huge that Puck's mistaking the two were unforgivable. His actual words suggest the very reverse:

> What hast thou done? Thou hast mistaken quite,
> And laid the love-juice on some true-love's sight.
> Of thy misprision must perforce ensue
> Some true love turned and not a false turned true.
> (III, ii, 88–91)

Who will tell the difference between some "true love turned" and "a false turned true"? It all sounds the same, and the distinction upon which the pious Oberon insists is humorously undermined. The supposed discrepancy between "true love" and its mimetic counterfeit echoes the inferiority of the *copy* versus the *original* in traditional aesthetics. The problem is that no original is available: everything is imitation.

The cacophonic circularity of "true love turned" and "false turned true" ironically suggests the paradoxical contribution of differential and individualistic ideologies to the growing mimetic uniformity; *differentialism* is the ideology of the mimetic urge at its most comically self-defeating. All this amazingly resembles our own contemporary world.

The tradition of external obstacles and nonmimetic tyrants is the comic tradition par excellence. Today it is more powerful than ever; it is the ideology of psychoanalysis, of our "counterculture," of all sorts of "liberations," of the entire youth cult. It takes itself more seriously than ever. We must all pretend to believe that "youth" is somehow persecuted. Each generation proclaims this message as something brand-new that has never been formulated before. Ever since the Greeks, the theater has been an important vehicle of this ideology, but Shakespeare is an outstanding exception. His attitude is so unusual that it is ignored rather than acknowledged. We do not realize how revolutionary *A Midsummer Night's Dream* really is.

The myth of external obstacles is so powerful in the general culture and in the theater that even Shakespeare was not able to get rid of it at his first try. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a transitional play, half conventional and half Shakespearean, a hybrid comedy in which nonmimetic conflict and nonmimetic differences, such as the hero/villain dichotomy, are already undermined but not yet abolished.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* when Proteus learns about the planned

elopement of Silvia with Valentine, he turns to the duke, who effectively intervenes; Valentine must flee Milan without Silvia. Since the mimetic rival constitutes an even greater obstacle than the father, we can see that the father is on the decline but still alive and kicking. But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Helena does not even think of Egeus and Theseus when she learns that Lysander and Hermia are about to flee Athens; she goes straight to the mimetic rival, Demetrius. Fathers and dukes have become paper tigers.

The one and only source of conflict in all mature comedies is a crisscrossing of mimetic desires that keep converging on the same object because they imitate one another. In spite of the deceptive first scene, this is already true of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The only obstacles in the path of the lovers are the lovers themselves, the mimetic rivals. They are stronger, younger, and fiercer than any father can ever be. They are passionately eager to cause trouble, which is not the case, as a rule, with fathers.

A Midsummer Night's Dream represents the first example of a uniquely Shakespearean type of comedy that makes fun of desire itself, denouncing its perpetual lie about being the victim of some kind of repression—repressive gods, repressive parents, a repressive student dean, or whatever. In all purely Shakespearean plays, the happiness of lovers is threatened from *inside* a group of peers, never from *outside*. The public's prejudices are so entrenched, however, that all it takes to accredit the myth of a conventional *Midsummer Night's Dream* is to plant the old scarecrows at the entrance of the comedy. Four centuries later they still dominate the interpretation of a play that has strictly nothing to do with them.

The first scene tantalizingly dangles in front of us all the cherished stereotypes: children against parents; youth against old age; handsome and sincere lovers unjustly deprived of their freedom of choice; hypocritical adults holding the reins of power. This is pure make-believe. Parental authority is as dead as a doornail; never again will it play a significant role anywhere in the theater of Shakespeare.

The conventional aspects of the first scene—it has other aspects as well that we will discuss later—may well have been conceived and written, at least in part, at a less mature stage than the rest of the play. It may be a last remnant from an earlier conception, closer to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a fragment from a theatrical heritage that Shakespeare had not yet completely discarded. Shakespeare deliberately retained this archaic first scene, I believe, because it suited his strategy of semiconcealment in regard to mimetic rivalry. As noted before, he is always suggesting two different interpretations of what he is doing. The misleading first scene plays a role in this scheme; thanks to it, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can pass for a reassuring comedy in which the triumph of "true love" is only temporarily postponed by a coalition of father figures and supernatural beings.

Shakespeare had a good reason, it seems, to refrain from making the most flippant aspects of his play too conspicuous. It is probable that *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream was written for a princely wedding at the court of Elizabeth.[2] Inconstancy does not mix well with a festive matrimonial mood: Shakespeare had to be careful. His comedy had to seem innocuous and conventional in the eyes of conservative courtiers. At the same time he knew that there would be some very clever people in his audience and did not want to disappoint them. They expected him to be delightfully daring, scandalous, and witty. He attempted to write for both groups at the same time, in such a way that each group would find in his play what suited its own taste and temperament; he probably succeeded with some of his more subtle contemporaries but sadly failed with posterity. The comic dimension of the play is inseparable from its mimetic substance and has never been recaptured.

2. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *A New Variorum Edition*, Horace Howard Furness, ed. (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1953), 259–67