Shakespeariana
ISSN 2283-8759
DOI 10.13133/2283-8759/14504
pp. 40-53 (2018)

A Bitter Comedy of a Midsummer Night

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"A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry"

Contradiction seems to be at the core of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, suggestively symbolized in *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play the workers are going to perform at court to celebrate the nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta. It is the director Peter Quince who informs the company about it, quite at ease with the inconsistencies of the title: neither he nor the others are unsettled by the oxymoron attributing woefulness ("most lamentable") to a genre which should be identified instead by mirth and levity ("comedy"). The effect on the public cannot but be ludicrous, even if the additional references confirm the mournful nature of the entertainment emphasizing it through symmetry – "most cruel" mirroring "most lamentable" – and reversal – "death" contradicting "comedy". Both rhetorical devices question the nature of what is actually being proposed by the artisans, as "comedy" does not seem to be the formal structure containing the plot but rather appears as one of the two terms concerned, "death" being the other: according to Quince, it is not

the comedy *of* (i.e. a play containing a story) but the comedy *and* (i.e. a play and a story), which rather complicates the issue[1]. The wording may of course depend on the messy attitude of the would-be players, but there may also be more challenging hypotheses involving metatheatre, thus raising first of all the question whether the "comedy", apparently just a component of the title not identifying the play itself, might focus on the comic ineptitude of clowns attempting a tragic action: an entertaining trial likely to account for Bottom's anticipation of merriness[2].

The suggestions contained in the second part of the title are different: here the tune changes and a positively violent image ("and most cruel death") defines the fate of the two characters concerned. The reference to Pyramus and Thisbe brings into play a further important issue directly involving the main source of the story, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, here masterfully revisited by Shakespeare. The Latin poem constitutes the inspiring force of the play, spreading from the centre of the artisans' 'interlude'[3] to the other levels of the plot, where specific elements of *The Most Lamentable Comedy* are reproduced, as in the case of the older generation's hostility towards the young people (Egeus vs. Hermia), responsible for triggering the action in the *Dream* (flying from the court into the forest). Ovid's influence pervades the whole play, and the insisted symbol of the ever-changing moon effectually exemplifies it.

Shakespeare's use of *Metamorphoses* is singular, however, in that it ignores the motive justifying the existence of the episode in the poem: the changing colour of the mulberries, that is, soaked by Pyramus's spurting blood when he commits suicide. In *The Most Lamentable Comedy*, the metamorphosis of the berries is no longer mentioned, and the tree itself, named eight times in Ovid's work, is

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1 As Peter Holland points out in his edition of the play, the title parodies contemporary works, such as Thomas Preston's *A lamentable tragedy mixed full of pleasant mirth, containing the life of Cambises king of Persia* or *A new tragical Comedy of Apius and Virginia*; see William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Peter Holland, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 147. It will be noticed that both the "lamentable tragedy" and the "tragical comedy" actually identify the plays containing the story of Cambises and that of Apius and Virginia, which is not the case with Pyramus and Thisbe's unfortunate passion.

2 The title of the paragraph quotes Bottom's appreciation of the play (I.ii.13).

3 The episode occurs in *Metamorphoses*, Book 4, ll. 55-166.

fleetingly quoted just once by Quince, on the occasion of the lovers' double suicide. Introducing the play to the Athenian court, he obviously strives to stress its tragic nature, employing what he very likely considers a fit rhetorical strategy; producing instead a ridiculous overload of alliterations, he removes the tree to the background, reducing it to a purely descriptive image, a sort of neutral mediation between the two deaths and the 'glorious' hammering of the letters B for Pyramus and D for Thisbe:

> Anon comes Pyramus, sweet youth and tall,
> And finds his trusty Thisbe's mantle slain;
> Whereat with blade – with bloody, blameful blade –
> He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast;
> And Thisbe, tarrying in mulberry shade,
> His dagger drew and died. (V.i.143-48)

The place of the forest where the lovers are supposed to meet thus loses its original setting, and the majestic tree no longer dominates the scene. What remains of the old place is the tomb over which the mulberry used to cast its shadow: it is where Semiramis' former husband lies, evoked quite often both in his 'official' name of "Ninus" and in the workers' homely revision of "Ninny". Worth noticing is that a further distraction from the source appears in the non-Ovidian tree, the "Duke's oak" mentioned by Quince as meeting point for the rehearsal (I.ii.99). And yet, the vanishing mulberries of the play-within-the-play still exist outside it, quoted by Titania when asking the fairies to feed Bottom with all sorts of delicious fruits and berries (III.i.157-59). As already mentioned, the fading of the tree does not entail a reduction of the metamorphic motif, which, in the *Dream*, is ubiquitous, even if displaced, as it were, to a more functional context. Removed from the artisans' theatrical experiment, it is in fact woven into the sentimental texture of the plot to better emphasise the weight of the theme of love. The revisiting goes unexpectedly and amazingly so far as to harbour in the new context the metamorphosis of the tree itself, whose glorious abundance of 'snow-white' fruits shrinks to a humble little flower, which quietly preserves the Ovidian sign in its 'milk-white' colour which, like the mulberries, it is eventually going to lose. The change is once again due to a violent action, no

longer caused by Pyramus' sword or blood, but nonetheless provoked by a sharp weapon, Cupid's arrow accidentally hitting it. Becoming "purple with love's wound" (II.i.167), the flower does not only modify its aspect but also alters its nature, developing into an active vehicle of change and setting off a chain of physical and psychological transformations. Some of them are comical but some are not, owing to the ability of the little red flower to overturn expectations and leading the characters into irrationality and loss of self. The destabilizing process intended to affect Hermia, Helena and Titania is significantly anticipated by Oberon, drawing for Robin Goodfellow a disturbing alliance between stars and humans:

> Thou rememb'rest
> Since once I sat upon a promontory
> And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
> Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
> That the rude sea grew civil at her song
> And certain stars *shot madly* from their spheres
> To hear the sea-maid's music? (II.i.148-54, my emphasis)
>
> Fetch me that flower; the herb I showed thee once.
> The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
> Will make or man or woman *madly dote*
> Upon the next live creature that it sees. (II.i.169-72, my emphasis)

The wiping out of the original plan – the mulberries preserving the memory of tragic love – produces the side effect of drawing attention to the chain of events building up *The Most Lamentable Comedy* and leading to its own end. Focussing on the 'new' plot, it also contributes to discovering the fascinating ground tested by Shakespeare in the mid-nineties, when, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, he explores comic and tragic modes, sometimes contrasting and often blending them so as to reach unforeseen unities. The different genres of the two plays do not prevent us from realizing how far-reaching their alikeness is, made perceivable at once by the titles themselves. Echoing the same word, *The Most Lamentable Comedy* and *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy* seem to preserve the common sign of sadness.

Leaving aside the comic and tragic tones, and reducing the plots to the essentials, the sequence of events in both *Romeo* and the play-

within-the-play in the *Dream* shows compelling similarities: they share the parents' hostility, the young lovers' secret encounters, the man's misinterpretation of facts and consequent suicide, the woman's consciousness of the partner's tragic misunderstanding and her ensuing suicide, the lovers' common burial place (crypt / urn). The pattern can even be refined by pointing out the coincidences in the death scenes, where both female characters commit suicide by stabbing themselves and using their partner's weapon. Even stronger is the correspondence shown in the lovers' desperate final act: no last 'encounter' is granted to them, no look or word softens the emptiness of Juliet's and Thisbe's solitary end. Which again, in the case of the *Dream*, significantly works as a disproval of the source: where, in Ovid, on hearing Thisbe's voice, Pyramus opens his eyes looking on her for a short moment before slowly closing them again and dying, in Flute's (highly ludicrous) lament[4], no 'contact' is allowed, there is no single last look. The intentional distancing from *Metamorphoses* brings *A Midsummer Night's Dream* closer to *Romeo and Juliet*, paradoxically emphasising at a deeper level what is rejected on the surface, thus identifying the Latin poem as the primary source for both plays. If, on the one hand, Ovid outweighs Boccaccio and Chaucer, on the other, he does the same with Bandello, Brooke and the long line of rewriters.

"A crew of patches"

Considering the different threads along which the multiple plot develops, the amount of dramatic space occupied by the comic portion is amazing; somehow obviously, one would think, given the remarkable metatheatrical potentialities offered by clowns piecing together a play. A powerful metaphor, centred on the growth of a theatrical project dealing with a work that needs to come to terms with several issues, such as the actors' personality and attitude, the challenge of verisimilitude posed by the play, and the possible reactions of the audience; all conditions that allow the

[4] "Asleep, my love? / What, dead, my dove? / O Pyramus, arise. / Speak, speak. Quite dumb? / Dead, dead? A tomb / Must cover thy sweet eyes. / These lily lips, / This cherry nose, / These yellow cowslip cheeks / Are gone, are gone. / Lovers, make moan. / His eyes were green as leaks" (V.i.318-29).

Athenian workers to fulfil crucial functions and to be on a par with the highest hierarchies involved in the plot. Even more significant is the theatrical levelling, considering the social gap plainly referred to and emphasised in the play. On the one hand, there are the workers, a carpenter, a weaver, a joiner, a tailor, a tinker, a bellows-mender, the men introduced by Robin to Oberon in Act III and by Egeus to Theseus in Act V, using roughly the same concepts:

> ROBIN
> A crew of patches, rude mechanicals
> That work for bread upon Athenian stalls,
> Were met together to rehearse a play
> Intended for great Theseus' nuptial day. (III.ii.9-12)

> EGEUS
> Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,
> Which never laboured in their minds till now,
> And now have toiled their unbreathed memories
> With this same play against your nuptial. (V.i.72-75)

On the other hand, there are the 'upper classes' belonging to the highest levels of classical myth (Theseus, Hippolyta, Egeus) and Celtic folklore (Oberon, Titania, Puck): inhabitants of diurnal and nocturnal courts, who plainly diverge in their spheres of existence (regarding action, use of time, relation to environment) but are easily comparable when exercising their power. In between, bridging as it were the two worlds, the labourers carry on their theatrical action, ludicrous at first sight because of its awkwardness, momentous and far-reaching on closer inspection.

Particularly interesting in this perspective are the scenes in Act I, III and V that show the performance in its making and follow the grievous work in progress of the artisans. They initially cope with their roles, trying to adapt them to their temperaments, then 'refine' them through various devices, and finally put all their energy into rendering the proposal acceptable and above all safe. Incidentally, their presence in Act IV is relevant but implies different issues, and specially Bottom's monologue in the first scene.

In the workers' build-up of the performance, the actual irrelevance of the story itself is paradoxical, synthesized by Quince in the bare mention of the title and two single lines. The first, when

he answers Bottom wondering whether Pyramus is a tyrant or a lover: "A lover, that kills himself, most gallant, for love" (I.ii.20); the second, when he explains the role of Thisbe to Flute: "It is the lady that Pyramus must love" (I.ii.40) – where "must" sounds like an intriguing reference to the source.

Around this basic core the troupe tries to dispute with the director, contesting his choices. Bottom is vaguely reluctant to interpret romantic roles and definitely prefers loud Senecan characters – "I could play Ercles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in" (I.ii.25) – even if his passion makes him anxious to get on stage and therefore ready to play any part. Flute objects to identifying with Thisbe, wanting to preserve his masculinity made evident by the growing beard. Snug is worried about the part of the lion, which he would like to be given in written form, being "slow of study" (I.ii.60). Not to be overlooked are Quince's solutions proposed to Flute and Snug – the first intended to wear a mask, the second to roar "extempore" (I.ii.61) – interestingly alluding to the modes of the *commedia dell'arte*[5].

The scroll Quince consults, matching interpreters and roles, implies only a general though significant outline of the story, inferable from the list of characters. Besides Pyramus, Thisbe and the lion, it initially comprises three additional roles that give the full company the chance to be involved: Starveling is going to be Thisbe's mother, Snout Pyramus' father, Quince himself Thisbe's mother. Strangely enough, Pyramus' mother is missing: an absence that may depend on the necessary coincidence of roles and individuals, as doubling was apparently not an option; or, more suggestively, on a further captivating allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* and to the almost inexistent Lady Montague[6].

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[5] A revisiting of the *commedia dell'arte* echo-scene is in III.ii.400-30, with Robin cheating Lysander and Demetrius. A further variation of the same device is in *The Tempest*, III.ii.40-83, with Ariel tricking Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo.

[6] But she definitely cannot be undervalued in her function. She does not speak more than three lines in the first scene of the play and yet gains the dignity of a character caring for her husband ("Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe", I.i.78) and worrying for her son ("O where is Romeo, saw you him today? / Right glad I am he was not at this fray", I.i.114-15). See Marisa Sestito, "Diseguaglianze femminili nello spazio drammatico", *Memoria di Shakespeare*, 5 (2004), ed. Agostino Lombardo, pp. 73-91.

The minimal references to the script leave room for the 'actors' to display their own personalities. Absolute leader is Bottom, who literally tries to play all the roles. He begins by taking on the function of director and telling Quince what to do and how to proceed with the company: "You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip. […] First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors; and so grow to a point" (I.ii.2ff). As for the contents of the play, he is perfectly satisfied with the title, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which he seems to find sufficiently exhaustive to pretend to be acquainted with the script and to placidly comment on its quality, "A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry", before resuming right afterwards his directorial attitude: "Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll. Masters, spread yourselves".

Eventually, leaving Quince alone, Bottom goes through some exhibitions in a riot of hilariously funny energy. He yearns for a role of tyrant – which unfortunately Pyramus is not – and offers it in "Ercles" style:

> The raging rocks
> And shivering shocks
> Shall break the locks
> Of prison gates,
> And Phibbus car
> Shall shine from far
> And make and mar
> The foolish fates. (I.ii.26-33)

If given the chance to use a mask, he would interpret Thisbe as well, speaking "in a monstrous little voice: 'Thisne, Thisne!'". And though indifferent to the parents' roles, if allowed to play "extempore", the lion could be definitely attractive: "I will roar that I will do any man's heart good to hear me" (I.ii.64). If the wild beast frightened the ladies, he would know how to handle the situation – much less does he know how to handle similes: "I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale".

In their first meeting, the artisans map out the context of the "comedy", contrasting with fun and laughter the preceding first scene of the play, ennobled by the mythical figures of Theseus, the killer of monsters, and Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. The issues discussed at court are weighty and appropriate to the lofty context, ranging from the maiden's rebellion against her father, possibly subject to the death penalty, to equality in the application of justice. The light-hearted dialogues of the second and last scene of the act relieve ambiguity and tensions. So far.

When the artisans meet for the rehearsal in the first scene of the third act, the attitudes manifested in their first appearance are widely confirmed. Bottom dominates the scene as before and assumes control over the situation at once, speaking the very first line of the scene ("Are we all met?"). In his further interventions, determined to prove his theatrical competence, he seems to lay traps for Quince by asking him questions he is unable to answer: "Peter Quince? […] There are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please. First, Pyramus must draw a sword to kill himself, which the ladies cannot abide. How answer you that?" (III.i.6ff). Quince remains silent while Starveling suggests leaving the killing out. "Not a whit", Bottom retorts, "I have a device to make all well".

His solution ("Write me a prologue") works on many levels. To start with, it underlines Bottom's rampant personality in his trying to appropriate any part of the project. In this case, he does not simply tell Quince to write, he also tells him what to write and how to explain the harmless nature of the show: there is no real suicide, Pyramus is not Pyramus but Bottom the weaver, and the lion is no lion but Snug the joiner. On the one hand, Bottom's aim is to neutralize any possible dangerous reaction of the court; therefore, he wants additional lines to be inserted and appropriate costumes to be worn. On the other hand, he comically faces the issue of verisimilitude, worrying due to the scary realism of the lion and, vice versa, endeavouring to find convincing solutions for the improbable roles of Moonshine and Wall.

The mention of Moonshine and Wall and the necessity of having them on stage sounds like a novelty which implicitly modifies the list of characters and opens the way to captivating metatheatrical suggestions. At this point, the scheme formerly made known by

Quince leaves some pieces behind, forgetting the parental figures – and the allusion to Montague and Capulet. The point is that, in the dress rehearsal, close to the actual staging (III.i.5), the "comedy" requires consistency with the story itself and the primary source needs to be considered. And Quince is aware of it: "you know Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight" (III.i.44); "Pyramus and Thisbe, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall" (III.i.59-60).

The return to Ovid comically exploits the difficulties in presenting the 'characters' of Moonshine and Wall, producing exhilarating dialogues and weird scenic proposals, with Bottom shining as usual. Looking beyond the brilliant surface, the closeness to *Metamorphoses* is even more surprising on a deeper level, where it reveals the structural relation of theatre and change: the artisans' rehearsal – their work in view of the first night – becomes a powerful metaphor of theatre itself, of its having to take many complex factors pragmatically into account and having to be always ready to modify previous assumptions. All of which Bottom and the others masterly exemplify.

The influence of *Metamorphoses* and metamorphosis goes even farther, in what could be at a first glance considered an oversight or a mistake:

> BOTTOM
> Are we all met?
> QUINCE
> Pat, pat; and here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal. This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn brake our tiring-house, and we will do it in action as we will do it before the Duke. (III.i.1-5)

The change of place for the rehearsal is at this point the right answer to the needs of the performers, giving them the illusion of being on stage and acting in front of the Athenian court. But it also subtly fits in the revisited Ovidian perspective, shifting from the mulberry tree to the little western flower to the hawthorn brake, whose flowers (white or pink or red) and berries (dark red) reproduce the ancient colours of Babylon. Interestingly enough, the disappearance of the symbolic image of the Duke with the dislocation of the rehearsal is somehow redressed by evoking his

name, and so vaguely recalling the past and still encouraging to look ahead towards the next and last step. Incidentally, not concerning the present issue but all the same worth noticing is Bottom's line, which anticipates Caesar's question a few instants before he is killed: "Are we all ready?"

"A tedious brief scene"

The artisans' play, chosen by Theseus as a fit entertainment for the court before bed-time, consistently undergoes further changes, first of all losing its original title. In the list of "sports" read to the Duke it is the last item and of the past preserves only the names of the protagonists and the tragi-comic contradiction: *A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe: very tragical mirth*. The re-naming, probably due to Egeus, who knows the 'play' having seen it rehearsed, has quite interesting implications if compared with the old title, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, both because of what is kept and what is cancelled. The most evident change regards the disappearance of "death", a word certainly unfit for a triple wedding celebration; replaced by its opposite, "love", it is associated to the youth of the couple, certainly an agreeable suggestion tuned into the festive occasion. So, apart from the names, the only other coincidence with the past seems to be the contrast of laughter and tears, apparently sustained by grammatical symmetries as well: the superlative forms ("the most" / "very"), the analogous meaning of the adjectives ("lamentable" / "tragical") and that of the nouns ("comedy" / "mirth"). But after all, the similarity does not go beyond the surface, as here again the optimistic perspective prevails with the stress falling, as it does, on the last word which is "mirth".

Egeus' 'critical appreciation' of the entertainment sounds anything but inviting, described as "a tedious brief scene" (V.i.56), which is an interesting definition, considering that it again highlights the clash of opposites, as Theseus points out:

> 'Merry' *and* 'tragical'? 'Tedious' *and* 'brief'? –
> That is hot ice and wondrous strange black snow.
> How shall we find the concord of this discord? (V.i.58-60)

It is as if the contrast that, in the first act, did not in the least annoy the artisans, here, emerged in all its evidence. Theseus' questions motivate Egeus, who is the only one who knows what the whole thing is about, to explain the contradictions – while trying to persuade the Duke not to see the show:

> A play there is, my lord, some ten words long,
> Which is as 'brief' as I have known a play;
> But by ten words, my lord, it is too long,
> Which makes it 'tedious', for in all the play
> There is not one word apt, one player fitted.
> And 'tragical', my noble lord, it is,
> For Pyramus therein doth kill himself;
> Which when I saw rehearsed, I must confess,
> Made mine eyes water; but more merry tears
> The passion of loud laughter never shed. (V.i.61-70)

But of course, Theseus wants to see the play, thus enabling the spectators of the *Dream* to disprove the reliability of Egeus' description. Basically, the play is not brief at all, as it consists of about hundred and fifty lines, and, all things considered, it is not at all badly organised. After his first comic mispunctuated address ("If we offend, it is with our good will", V.i.108ff), Quince as Prologue explains who the figures of the dumb show are and, for the first time, carefully summarizes the story, known so far in bits and pieces. Whereupon, each character, correctly interpreting Bottom's suggestions at the rehearsal, describes his role; rather than "too long", it all sounds necessary and "apt" if the perspective, since these are the 'actors' concerned, cannot but be comical – and Egeus, in this case correctly, appreciates with loud laughs and "merry tears" the ludicrous nature of the performance, particularly riotous in Pyramus' suicide.

The *comedy* (rightly mentioned in the original title) is exhilarating for the absurd associations proposed by the interpreters in what they imagine to be a tragic tone: Pyramus, invoking the "sunny beams" of the moon, mourning his lady being "deflowered" by Lion; Thisbe crying over the "lily lips" and "cherry nose" (again white and red), over the "yellow cowslip

cheeks" and the "eyes green as leeks". Both flooding their laments with endless – and awfully skilful – alliterations and rhymes, such as: "the fairest dame / That lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with cheer" (V.i.287-88), or:

> I trust to take of truest Thisbe sight.
> But stay, O spite!
> But mark, poor knight,
> What dreadful dole is here?
> Eyes do you see?
> How can it be?
> O dainty duck, O dear! (V.i.269-75)

And of course, this seems the right atmosphere to celebrate the happy end for the three wedding couples. But looking closer at the audience enjoying the clowns' comedy, among the brilliant comments of the courtiers, two voices are missing: Hermia and Helena, certainly present, do not speak. To hear their words, one needs to go back to the awakening of the four lovers after their night in the woods and to their difficulty in coming to their senses and perceive things clearly:

> HERMIA
> Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
> When everything seems double.
>
> HELENA
> So methinks,
> And I have found Demetrius like a jewel,
> Mine own and not mine own. (IV.i.186-89).

Demetrius, uncertain whether they are still dreaming, asks if the Duke was there. The two young women answer, sharing a single line and speaking for the last time: Hermia, "Yea, and my father"; Helena, "And Hippolyta" (IV.i.194).

Looking back at the beginning of the *Dream*, at Hermia's rebellion and refusal to obey her father and risking the death penalty; considering her determination and courage in flying alone into the woods at night, there to meet her beloved Lysander – imitated by Helena following Demetrius – and there suffering

betrayal and disillusionment, questions arise. How far, one wonders, do Ovid's lovers mirror these lovers, and how far do the clowns interpret their story? And then one wonders also if, for those two silent female bodies standing on stage, the happy comedy may not be lamentable.