
UNIT 2 ROMANTIC COMEDY AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The issues elaborated in this unit are

- The Romantic Comedy formula and how Shakespeare's altered it
- The language of the play, its many varieties, and how to use it for dating the play

We have also given you a list of books and journals you may wish to read on this play and on Shakespeare's stage. Most importantly, we have given details of the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that you should try and use.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Generic criticism looks at the form or genre in which a piece of literature is written. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a Romantic Comedy, and in 2.2 we will tell you about the rules of such comedy and how much Shakespeare followed them.

In 2.3, you will first learn of the poetry in the play and how Shakespeare varied it. Then, from the myriad interesting studies of language in Shakespeare's drama, we have chosen the business of dating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by analysing its language.

The second part may seem like an obscure and irrelevant exercise to you but some of you may wish to go on to research or teaching and it will help you to know how meticulously scholars have worked to make the texts of Shakespeare's plays as authentic as possible. Remember, the plays were initially written as performance texts. Prompters, actors, copiers all added and subtracted from them. This is why scholars have tried to discover what they were originally like.

2.2 ROMANTIC COMEDY

Romantic Comedy is one of the many kinds of comedy performed on the 16th century stage in England, and it has an identifiable formula which is similar to popular Hindi films. In the second half of 2.2 we will consider some of Shakespeare's alterations of the formula.

The Romantic Comedy Formula:

Romantic Comedy has a main plot and a subplot. In the main plot an eligible aristocratic man and woman fall in love with each other but cannot marry for some reason. They may be socially incompatible or their families may have a long-standing quarrel or it could be that the man or the woman do not even realise they are in love, as is the case with Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Then some external agency like the disclosure of a secret or a trick by others brings the lovers together. Their marriage or intention to marry is celebrated with a dance and/or a feast in which all disharmonious elements are eliminated or made to fit in with the general joy. The presiding deity is Hymen, the God of marriage. In short, although the action focuses on courtship, the play ends in marriage.

The characters of the subplot are from the lower strata of society (servants, constable, Mechanicals) or behave as if they were (Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*). The two major functions of the subplot are to parody the main plot and wittingly or unwittingly sort out the problems of the characters in the main plot. In short, there are points where the main plot and the subplot interact, and at the end, everyone, whether they are aristocrats or not, joins in the celebrations.

The setting for Shakespeare's Romantic Comedy is some place remote and distant from England, such as Messina, Padua, or Athens. This remoteness adds to the fairy-tale quality of the comedy. The action begins in the court but since it is in the court that the lovers' marriage is obstructed, they leave for some place that is close to nature, such as a forest or village or some ideal pastoral setting that encourages love and fertility. Having found fulfilment, they return to the court or city, which is transformed by their joy into a healthier place that no longer stands in the way of love.

The purpose of Romantic Comedy is to emphasise accepted social values. Thus love, which ends in marriage, is allowed, but adulterous or obsessive love is not. Anything that threatens the harmonious functioning of society is gently but firmly eliminated or corrected. But the chief function of Romantic Comedy is to entertain, not correct.

In Shakespeare's use of the Romantic Comedy formula in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we will consider three of his adaptations of the formula.

First, the forest obviously represents the pastoral world which the aristocratic Athenians, Lysander and Hermia, run away to when their love is prevented by Hermia's father and Duke Theseus. But even though Oberon would like to see the right men and women paired together, so much unhappiness occurs in the forest that the Athenians long for Athens. As soon as they return to the court and city, their marriages are fixed as they desire and not as the father or Duke desire. The play ends with a celebration.

Secondly, Shakespeare has not one but two subplots instead of two sets of characters, one aristocratic and the other plebeian, he has three sets of characters. The Fairies are

the additional group but its aristocrats, King Oberon and Queen Titania, seem to detest every value of Romantic Comedy. They quarrel and threaten to live apart even though they are married. Titania quite enjoys her extra-marital affair with Bottom, and she falls in love with an animal headed mortal who is quite below her in status and not even a fairy. Oberon uses deceit to get the Indian boy they are quarrelling over.

And then there is Puck who is not ruled by either Oberon's values or Athenian ones. He simply wants to laugh at everyone's expense and arranges events for his own amusement however much it hurts others. Some critics feel that Puck is like a playwright who can make a tragedy or a comedy out of a situation but remains unmoved himself. They have a point. Had Oberon not been firm with Puck, the play may have ended in sorrow. It is, after all, very much like *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers cannot marry because their families have quarrelled. A friar tries to help them come together but, as with Oberon's efforts to help Lysander and Hermia, things go wrong and *Romeo and Juliet* die. At this point, their Prince orders the two families to make up but the lovers are not alive to see this.

Experiments like this made Shakespeare different to other playwrights of the time. More than that, the serious and comic plays comment on each other, forming a sort of balance between idealism and grim reality.

Finally, we have a false ending on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon and Titania end their quarrel and the three marriages occur in Act IV, not the last Act. Act V is reserved for the Mechanicals' play, and it is here that all three sets of characters are together on the stage. Yet harmony eludes them as the Fairy and Mortal aristocrats comment, sometimes very rudely, on the play, and finally walk away, leaving the Mechanicals behind. It is as if Shakespeare kept some disharmony in as a reminder that real life is not like Romantic Comedy.

2.3 LANGUAGE

The two aspects of the language of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* you will find useful to know more about are its variety of styles and dating the play by using its language as evidence

The variety of styles:

In Shakespeare's time and for a long time after that, drama was called "dramatic poeise" because it was classified as poetry and was written in verse. Like many of his contemporaries, Shakespeare used blank verse which is supposed to be closest to spoken English.

Blank verse is unrhymed verse in iambic pentametre. Poetic lines have a regular rhythm. Each rhythmic unit is called a foot. A rhythmic foot has a fixed number of syllables (and not necessarily whole words). Rhythms vary, and each has a name. An iamb is a rhythmic unit or foot made up of two syllables. The first syllable is unstressed, the second stressed. E.g., "the cow" is an iamb because we emphasise "cow" but not "the" when we speak. A pentametre means that there are five feet of a particular metre to the line. Here is an example of iambic pentametre from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We have divided it into feet:

"O why / rebuke / you him / that loves / you so?" (II ii 43)

Shakespeare varied the blank verse in this play by:

- Changing the length of lines: Shakespeare increased or reduced the number of syllables in a line. Sometimes he used short sentences for speakers at some points, as in the famous quarrel between Hermia and Helena in III ii:

Hermia. You juggler! You canker-blossom!

You thief of love! What, have you come by night
And stol'n my love's heart from him?

Helena. Fine, i'faith!

Have you no modesty, no maiden shame,
No touch of bashfulness? What, will you tear
Impatient answers from my gentle tongue?

Fie, fie, you counterfeit! You puppet you! (III ii 282-288; see also I i 194-201).

At other times, Shakespeare shifted from direct information to long, romantic, lyrical passages, as in Act I, sc.i, lines 157-179. Lysander provides information, Hermia is lyrical:

Lysander. I have a widow aunt, a dowager
Of great revenue, and she hath no child__
From Athens is her house remote seven leagues__
And she respects me as her only son.
There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee,
And to that place the sharp Athenian law
Cannot pursue us. If thou lov'st me then,
Steal forth thy father's house tomorrow night;
And in the wood, a league without town

...

There will I stay for thee.

Hermia. My good Lysander,
I swear to thee by Cupid's strongest bow,
By his arrow with the golden head,
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,
And by that fire which burn'd the Carthage queen
When the false Trojan under sail was seen;
By all the vows that men have broke
(In number more than ever women spoke),
In that same place thou hast appointed me,
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee.

- Using rhetorical sets: Rhetoric is the theory and practice of spoken or written eloquence, and the art of literary expression. Different kinds of rhetoric are called "sets." Antithesis, for example, is a familiar rhetorical set much used in courtly love sonnets in which lovers repeatedly "burn and freeze." The young lovers' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seem to have read so much of this love poetry that their speeches have been described as being "pestered with antithesis" (Brooks xlii; see also xlv-1 for more on rhetorical sets in the play).
- Using internal pauses or caesurae: That is, the pause does not come at the end of the line only but also in the middle of a line.
- By using prose: It used to be said that Shakespeare used prose for his "low" characters and poetry for the rest. This is noticeable in Titania's conversation with Bottom in III i, but it is not always the case. During the Mechanicals' play,

the aristocrats' comments are in prose. This is partly because of rhetorical courtesy (see the section on sestets below). We find a similar exchange in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Leonato answers Dogberry using the same confused numbering of points as Dogberry has used.

- Using rhymed lines: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has over four hundred rhymed lines, the most of any of Shakespeare's plays. These include couplets, variations on the sonnet, doggerel, and songs.

Couplets are used chiefly, but not solely, by the fairies, so much so that it has even been called "fairy language" in some essays on the play. The two variations on the sonnet are the quatrain or four lines rhyming alternately, and the sestet or six lines rhyming ababcc. In III ii 122-133, Lysander addresses Helena in such a sestet, and in the manner of learned courtesy, she replies in the same form:

Lysander. Why should you think that I woo in scorn?
Scorn and derision never came in tears.
Look when I vow, I weep; and vows so born,
In their nativity all truth appears.
How can these things in me seem scorn to you,
Bearing the badge of faith to prove them true?

Helena. You do advance your cunning more and more.
When truth kills truth, O devilish-holy fray!
These vows are Hermia's: will you give her o'er?
Weigh oath with oath, and you will nothing weigh:
Your vows to her and me, put in two scales,
Will even weigh; and both as light as tales.

Notice that both speeches rhyme ababcc. Rhetorical courtesy requires a speaker to reply in the speech style used by the person he or she is responding to.

The Mechanicals' play has a crudely jogging sort of verse called doggerel. Low characters unwittingly parody the use of verse in drama because they do not have the same educational resources as those above them in society. Finally, there are songs in varied verse forms and dance rhythms. In fact, this play's lyricism is probably why it was set to music by the composer Mendelsohn, and some of its most famous productions have emphasised the ballet element at the expense of the dramatic, as, for instance, in the black and white film mentioned in Unit 5.

Dating the play:

Here is a very brief overview of some of Brooks' arguments on how we can date the play through its language.

The great variety of styles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* led the critic John Dover Wilson to argue that it was written at three different times, the earliest being 1592. Brooks, however, says that it was written between 1594 and 1598.

Brooks says that the language serves a dramatic function and is varied to suit the occasion. After Lysander and Hermia have been ordered to separate, one would expect them to be emotionally direct in their speeches, but they speak as if they only know love through what they have read. They are especially funny in Act I, part of which we have already quoted to show how they speak in partial sonnets. Consider this:

Lysander. How now my love? Why is your cheek so pale?

How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

Hermia. Belike for want of rain, which I could well
Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.

Lys. Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth;
But either it was different in the blood—

Her. O cross! Too high to be enthrall'd to low.

Lys. Or else misgraffed in respect of years—

Her. O spite! too old to be engaged to young. (I i 122 f).

And so on. But when *Hermia* and *Helena* quarrel later in the play, they insult each other convincingly because their language is as direct as their emotions (see III i 282-344). In any case, Brooks says, when we compare *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Shakespeare other plays of 1594-98, especially *Richard II* (history play), *Romeo and Juliet* (tragedy), and *Loves Labours Lost* (Romantic Comedy), we notice that whether it was a history, a tragedy, or a comedy, Shakespeare did not restrict himself to any single style of language. *Richard II*, for example, has several long lyrical passages. As in *Richard II*, the rhetoric of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is displayed rather than hidden. In short, it has similarities with the other plays of the same period.

The difference is that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has many more passages of passionate lyricism, not because it is an early play (and) Shakespeare's stylistic immaturity made him overdo the lyricism, but because the decorum of the play permitted it. Stylistic decorum is the fairly strict rule of the kind of language a writer could use for a specific theme, occasion, or character. For example, the high seriousness of tragedy could not be expressed in doggerel, nor could the bawdy language of the Mechanicals' play (see V i 174-175, 186-189, 198) be used by the chief lovers. But exaggerated lyricism was perfectly acceptable in a romantic drama with fairies in it.

2.5 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Literature of the past, like history, is interpreted according to the interests and values of successive generations. Shakespeare has probably received more critical attention than any other writer anywhere in the world. As a result, there are many ways of reading his drama. You do not have to know all of these but it is important to know the main ways in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been interpreted. We have given you a three-part list of books and journals that will help you with this.

1. The text:

The most widely used and reliable edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is edited by Harold F. Brooks and is in the Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (1979; rpt. London: Routledge, 1989). Its excellent Introduction has information on different texts of the play, its dates, comments on its design, characters, setting, music, and themes. It also has very useful footnotes that elucidate the text as well as excellent appendices.

2. Criticism.

The list is not in alphabetic order but in descending order of usefulness.

- Dutton, Richard. Ed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in New Casebooks. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996

[These essays bring you up-to-date with criticism on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They cover historicist, psychoanalytical, feminist, and Marxist criticism. Dutton's lucid introductory remarks on the essays are further clarified by his explanations of the place of the critics in current schools of criticism at the end of each essay. His annotated list of books for further reading is very good but it does not carry information on older basic critical reading.]

- Barber, C.L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1959

[A seminal work. It is now fashionable to use Bakhtin's ideas to analyse the "carnavalesque" in comedy, but Barber was the earliest critic to see the comedies in terms of festivals. Most modern Shakespeare scholars begin their study of Shakespeare's comedies with Barber's book.]

- *Shakespearean and Jacobean Comedy*. Stratford-Upon-Avon series.

[This has essays on Kempe and Armin, comic players in Shakespeare's company who succeeded each other. Shakespeare wrote his comedies with their talents in mind. Critics say this explains why the early comedies differ from the later ones.]

- Andrew Gurr's two books (1970s, 1990s) on the theatre in Shakespeare's time are outstanding.

3. Journals:

Academic journals carry the results of the newest research and are therefore necessary to read. The ones in our list are reliable and relatively easy to get because good libraries have them.

- *Shakespeare Survey*

[This is published once every year. Sometimes an issue is on a single play or an aspect of drama. It also carries reports on performances of Shakespeare's plays during the year.]

- *Shakespeare Quarterly*

- *ELH*

[*ELH* is not exclusively a Shakespearean journal but often has excellent articles on Shakespeare's plays.]

2.6 LET US SUM UP

You have learnt about Romantic Comedy and how Shakespeare altered it in this play by making the forest less than ideal, and by continuing the disharmony at the end. You have also seen how he used the same plot in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream, turning it into a tragedy and a comedy, so that it seems that he deliberately kept in the darker elements of the latter.

You now know about the variety of language styles used and how we can date the play using the evidence of the language. You have seen how Shakespeare varied the blank verse by changing the lengths of lines and by using the caesura and rhyme. You have learnt about other rhymes in the play as well as who uses prose and why. You have also learnt how the language delineates character. For example, although Theseus uses poetry as well as prose, he maintains his status of Duke by using a dignified style and never descends to doggerel. In another instance, Shakespeare emphasises the fairies' non-human status by making them speak mostly in couplets or dance rhythms which are furthest from ordinary human speech.

You have also seen that this play has more passionately lyrical passages than Shakespeare is other plays of 1594-98. This is because of stylistic decorum which permits lyricism in a romantic drama with fairies in it.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. What is blank verse and why has Shakespeare used it for his drama?
2. How has he varied the blank verse?
3. What rhyme forms did Shakespeare use in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* other than blank verse?
4. Which set of characters speaks mostly in couplets?
5. What is rhetoric and what are rhetorical sets?
6. Pick out six rhetorical sets in the play. Try and identify them.
7. Shakespeare used two aspects of sonnets in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Name them. Give examples.
8. Based on the variety of language styles in the play, what did Dover Wilson infer about the dating of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
9. What three arguments does Harold Brooks give to counter Dover Wilson?
10. What is stylistic decorum? What does it have to do with the extensive lyricism of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
11. How is the lovers' speech different in the grand quarrel scene to what it was earlier in the play?
12. What is the basic plot of Romantic Comedy? Why does it end in feasting or dancing?
13. How did Shakespeare alter the Romantic Comedy formula in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
14. Which of Shakespeare's plays is a tragic version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?