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DACCA UNIVERSITY BULLETINS

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ON

"A Midsummer Night's Dream"

A study in dramatic technique to illustrate the idea of balance in plot-making

BY

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On "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

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It is almost needless to point out, at this date, the supreme importance of the plot in Shakespeare's dramas. It will, I suppose, be admitted without any persuasion that Shakespeare is no less an architect of plot than he is a subtle psychologist, encompassing a bewildering variety of men and minds—from the starry contemplations of Hamlet to 'the eagle-flighted madness of Lear', from the shy violet of an Ophelia to the marble-hearted ogress of a Goneril. But while thus pursuing the elusive human mind, he never forgets that a play without a plot is as ungainly as an organism without harmoniously developed limbs—a jelly-fish of the realm of literature; and this consciousness we trace at the very outset of his career as a playwright. No dramatist, including those of ancient Attica, felt the necessity for a proper plot more strongly than did Shakespeare; and as he felt strongly, he also worked deftly; and thus it is that he outdoes them all, and even in this particular field still remains unsurpassed.

Let us by way of an illustration take his "Midsummer Night's Dream," admittedly one of his earliest plays. Even here we see the hand of the future master-mason who built Macbeth and Lear. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a curious mosaic of several stories blended happily into a single satisfying whole, redolent of the country-side and of that Celtic strain in the English blood to which England owes so much of her imaginative greatness.

There are in the play five different stories which have been worked closely together. Yet they each have their own colour and beauty like threads of gold and silver spun into a fabric, which one can well follow in the web as they go above and below, tracing lines of imperishable

beauty and sweetness, each accentuating and enhancing the beauty of the other, and winning out of the whole a loveliness which belongs to none alone. The five stories are :—

(a) The story of Theseus and his marriage with Hippolyta.
(b) The romantic story of the love of the young Athenians.
(c) The story of the quarrel between Oberon and Titania.
(d) The realistic burlesque of the Athenians.
(e) The interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe.

Of these, the love-story of the young Athenians constitutes the main plot, around which are woven the other four in an amazingly deft manner as we come to realize when we unravel the threads one by one, This love-story is much the same as any other such story with the only difference that we have here not one but two couples. This is all right, considering it is midsummer, and in the languishing heat of the season one must have love or wine to keep one going—and of love the more the merrier, certainly. And Shakespeare, when he wrote this play, was not past the age of love-making, but had enough to do to keep the wolf from his door in the big busy city of London to which he had just come. So it is quite believable that our great poet indulged in this vicarious love-making as a sort of relief to the pent-up passions of his own heart. And the fairies come in as they should. The young poet from Stratford, so used to the sight of morris-rings and the riot of flowers in the cool meadows and fields, how could he refrain from calling up visions of them as he lay awake, perchance, at night in his garret, and felt stuffy with the heat of the rather close city in summer? Visions such as these must have been greatly refreshing to the poet toiling up Parnassus, more as an intellectual adventurer than anything else. To the young artist then, just such a plot was undoubtedly most engaging. Besides, as it has been very properly surmised, the play was written in view of some wedding, and such a plot therefore, becomes eminently suitable. It will also be observed that there are actually three different kinds of wooing. Theseus wooing his bride with the sword, is the primitive soldier-lover; Lysander pursuing the object of his love against odds, is the ideal romantic lover—a pale version of Romeo. Demetrius is the traditional society beau for whom matches are made usually by a match-making mother-in-law, here by a father in the absence of the former. Theseus as a lover is thus remote from our age and sympathy; Demetrius is thoroughly uninteresting and colourless; Lysander is the only one

among the lovers who is typically modern and interesting; and it is he who, in a way, is the hero of the drama; and it is around him and Hermia, the pert little girl, the lineal ancestor of Shakespeare's latter day Beatrice and Rosalind—that the interest of the story revolves.† And it is this story that extends over nearly the whole play. Let us now consider the successive stages of its complication. The story is briefly told. Lysander, a young Athenian, loves Hermia, the daughter of Egeus, a noble man of the court of Theseus—who is, except for his name, nothing different from a monarch or a Lord of the Marches of Tudor England. There is another pair—Demetrius and Helena—the daughter of another Athenian aristocrat, who is in love with Demetrius while his love for her is now on the wane. Demetrius is, however, in the opening scene of the play, in love with Hermia, in which matter he has her father's blessing. Thus Hermia, who has awakened the admiration of two young men, is not altogether a common-place girl, and we perceive this from her speeches in which we catch some distant echo of the clever, rapping wit of Beatrice. Thus we find that Lysander and Hermia, though very slightly individualised in the play, are yet sufficiently distinguished from their corresponding types—Demetrius and Helena.

The complication of the love story arises early in the drama, when Egeus enters on the scene at line 20, Act I. Sc. I, full of vexation and with complaints against Hermia. Egeus, the father, it must be here remembered, is armed with the *patria potestas*—a right claimed by the father in nearly all ancient societies. Thus his voice is potent in determining the marriage of his daughter, and Egeus' objection against Hermia's marriage with Lysander, the man of her choice, comes between the lovers and their dreamt-of happiness. But, nothing daunted, the lovers contemplate flight beyond the City of Athens to a sort ot classical "Gretna Green" where they can yet be happy. The Athenian law would be powerless against them there—Athens being merely a City-State. No sooner thought than done, and love speeds them on their project—though the other pair soon follow them to the same spot—Demetrius to cut off

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† Sir A. T. Quiller Couch is, however, of opinion that the Theseus Hippolyta story is the main story. But it is the love-story that undoubtedly possesses the greatest human interest.

the retreat of the lovers, if possible ; and Helena in sheer infatuation for Demetrius. Thus takes place what we may call a lovers' exodus.

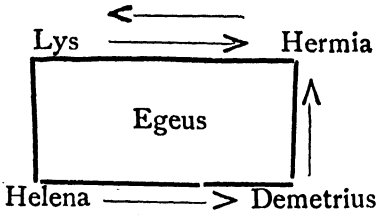


Fig. 1.

But Egeus as a complicating force becomes inoperative as the lovers reach the forest beyond the city precincts. No more thrills can be had out of the situation. So Shakespeare has to fall back upon some other force.

Now this forest, remote from human habitation, where primroses grow in profusion, a usual lover's haunt not unknown to either Hermia or Lysander (vide Act. I Sc. I. ll. 215-216), and yet not profaned by too frequent human association, is it not the very place to be chosen by the Fairies for "dancing their ringlets to the whistling wind"? So it is that our author in his need falls back on Puck, whose pranks are familiar to all and, whose serviceability is well-known.

Puck or Robin Goodfellow is a conspicuous figure in English and German mythology; and the character given by Shakespeare is that of a "freakish sprite, now mischievous, now kindly, a little vulgar and less dainty, but never malevolent." He is a sort of *factotum* of Oberon, the Fairy king. He is Oberon's ambassador and valet all in one.

These fairies love beauty, they bless marriages, they give fruitfulness and prosperity ; and they are for laughter, music and mirth. To the forest they come in Oberon's train from "the farthest steep of India" to Theseus' wedding with Hippolyta, "to give their bed joy and prosperity." Naturally enough, therefore, they are in the forest on the eve of that marriage, since this is the best camping ground for them within easy reach of the City. Thus it is that they fall in with the lovers here.

But Oberon has lately had some differences with his queen Titania over a "little changeling boy" whom he wants as his henchman. This little affair leads to the complications of the fairy story ; and Oberon, to punish Titania for her perverseness and to trick her into

giving him the boy, sends Puck out in quest of a certain herb, whose juice

"On sleeping eyelids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees."

Just at this point he, himself invisible, sees Demetrius and Helena wrangling, and at once resolves that

"Ere he (Demetrius) leave this grove

Thou shalt fly him and he shall seek thy love."

And the flower that is to be used on Titania, is also found suitable in this other case.

Thus, while Oberon goes off to catch Titania asleep on a bank of flowers where she was wont to rest, Puck is deputed to attend to Demetrius. Unhappily, he comes upon Lysander and Hermia, whom Oberon had not seen, and takes them for Demetrius and Helena.

"This is he my Master said
Despised the Athenian maid,
And here the maiden sleeping sound
On the dank and dewy ground".

This is the root of the mistake. Oberon's instructions were as inadequate as Puck's logic is faulty. He argues too much. Besides it must be remembered that though the fairies have superior powers they are not endowed with superior reason. Thus it is that Puck—a hobgoblin, not a fairy of the higher order—at once concludes from the fact that "She does not lie near this lacklove, this kill-courtesy" in spite of their "sleeping sound," that they two must be the pair his master told him of. The mistake is natural and it would not do to blame Puck : and the mischief arising from the misapplication of the love juice is something which falls in with Puck's humour. Yet it is Puck who is acting ; and it is his own logic—an expression of his own personality—that is responsible for the situation that now arises. Into the scene where Lysander sleeps Demetrius enters, followed by Helena ; and "Apollo flies when Daphne holds the chase", Helena abandons the pursuit under threats. Exhausted by the chase, worn out by her own emotions, sunk in despair and the dark night, Helena discovers Lysander on the ground, and out of fear awakens him from sleep. At

once the charm begins to work. The accidental meeting between them, it should be observed, in perfectly natural is the circumstances.

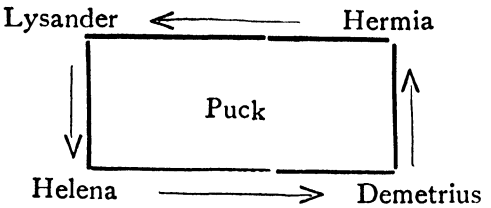


Fig. 2.

This is the second stage of the complication. The plot moves on once again and new possibilities open up and new effects are realised. Lysander now pursues Helena, and Demetrius, as before, runs after Hermia; while Helena presses on after Demetrius in spite of repeated rebuffs. Thus ensues a catch-me-if-you-can sort of game. The situation is undoubtedly ridiculous, but one that is not fraught with any great comic possibilities.

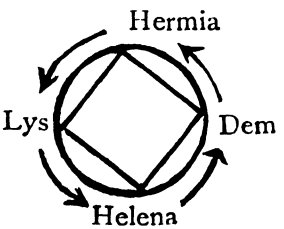


Fig. 2 (a).

The vicious circle can only go on going round; but the audience is likely to tire of it soon enough. Hence further complication becomes necessary to realise to the utmost the comic possibilities of these given factors. The necessity for a rearrangement of forces is thus evident; and Oberon now steps in. But his procedure again betrays not so much of reason as of good will. In his anxiety to force a solution, he complicates the matter still more. The mischief done already is sought to be undone, not by taking off the effects of the love-juice, but by prematurely awakening love in Demetrius for Helena, of whom Lysander is now infatuated owing to the application of the love-juice. The situation

now engendered is the reverse of the initial situation, with just a small though very significant difference.

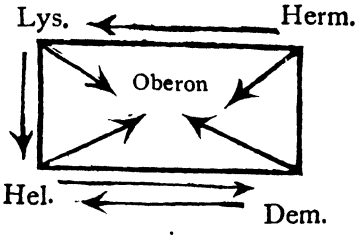


Fig. 3.

As at the beginning, one woman is now sought by two men, only with greater infatuation than before. Helena, who is now the recipient of such abounding attentions, takes it all for mockery of her forsaken condition and turns upon Hermia as a partner in this intrigue.

"Lo, she is one of this confederacy !
Now I perceive they have conjoined all three
To fashion this false sport in spite of me."

Hermia only partially realises this sudden change. She half believes in what Helena says, and attempts to persuade Lysander to abandon this cruel and ungallant sport.

"Sweet, do not scorn her so".

Demetrius also takes Lysander's compliments to Helena for scorn, and hurries to her defence. The two lovers now meet at cross-purposes. Hermia, still bewildered, attempts to stop Lysander from his pursuit, but is rudely shaken off. Thoroughly awakened, she now turns upon Helena as the latter had before turned upon her : and these squabbles between the girls are added to the crossings of the lovers. The comic possibilities are thus now exhausted. All the fun that could be won out of the given factors—two men and two girls—is now realised. The action itself has reached the *ultima thule* of comedy and threatens to pass beyond it. The two men chase each other with drawn swords ; and the fiercer of the two girls, Hermia, threatens to bring into operation her feline armaments.

"You mistress, all this toil is long of you.
Nay, go not back."

And Helena, knowing that discretion is the better part of valour, clears off the scene. The climax of the quadrangular contest of perverse affection is now realised. Oberon stands aghast at the consequences of Puck's mistakes and his own remedies, which though accidental, are still expressive of his character. Puck is commissioned once again to unravel the complication. The lovers are drawn apart by the trickery of Puck. And as they all fall asleep, the *status quo* is established through Puck as the agent of Oberon—who is therefore to be regarded as the true resolving factor, and not Puck.* This time Oberon has grown wiser, so his instructions are very definite and detailed (Act III. 2. ll 254 et seq)

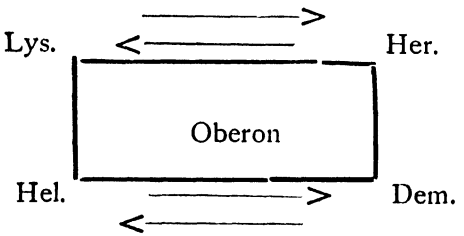


Fig. 4

Thus a return to the normal is effected. The entanglement is now reduced to order ; and apparently nothing is left to desire, as "Jack may now have his Jill." But the scene of action is still in the forest. Here in the depth of the forest, away from the clutches of the law and Egeus, the lovers may be united. But, return to the city, they cannot. Hermia had been asked by the Duke, we remember, to submit to her father's will or in the alternative to suffer death or perpetual maidenhood. In the circumstances, the whole complication cannot be regarded as solved. Egeus as a complicating force may again be operative as soon as the lovers attempt to return to normal life. A shadow still hangs over the principal pair. So they are allowed to sleep and forget the cruel fate that threatens them. They must awake into full happiness when they awake again into the light of day ; so that the tragic sufferings of the night may have no more reality to them later on than a true mid-summer fantasy. Thus they are left asleep.

* The repeated initiation of a new complicating force at each stage of the action for its development, is, probably, an indication of the early date of the play, when the author had not yet developed dramatic foresight. Note how different is the case with *The Merchant of Venice*, where one initial complication operates to bring about the climax.

On the eventful morning that follows, before the lark has begun its song, Queen Hippolyta,on the threshold of matrimony, goes out a-maying and to enjoy, probably for the last time, a hunt, which was certainly her great passion as a maiden. Where else could she think of going unless to the forest so close by ? To the forest she goes with Theseus and his followers. Here Egeus, who is in the train of the Duke, comes upon the young people and wonders "of their being together." But Theseus, who knows more of the human heart and is not too old to have some measure of sympathy with love's young dream, sees through the game and explains the whole thing away—

> " No doubt they rose up early to observe
> The rite of May ; and, hearing our intent,
> Came here in grace of our solemnity".

That this is mere bluff, we have no doubt. For, coming to the forest in the morning, they could not have gone to sleep. Theseus knows it as much as we do. This sympathetic understanding of the lovers is the reason for his verdict in favour of Hermia.

The truants are now roused by loud notes on the huntsmen's horns ; and they awake, though amazed, into a new world of love and amity, where the perversity of an aged father who flings his imperious will athwart the current of young love's generous impulses, is out of place. Lysander and Demetrius each narrates his own story which is not now altogether unknown to Theseus, and in spite of Egeus' remonstrances, he declares

> " Egeus, I will overbear your will :
> For in the temple, by and by with us,
> These couples shall eternally be knit"

Thus the entanglement is resolved finally ; and the lovers can now go back to the city and be united. Egeus is now powerless, as the Duke, who is above the law, rules that the *patria potestas* shall not operate against the lovers.

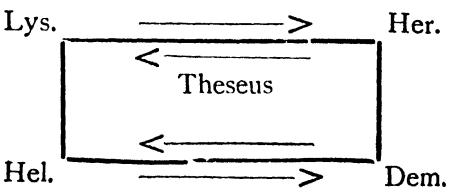


Fig. 5

Act V rounds off all the different stories of the plot. It is in this that they all finally merge or culminate. There is now a triple wedding, including that of Theseus and Hippolyta. The preparations of the Athenian artisans here culminate in the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which at one time was seriously jeopardised, as we had seen, by the translation of Bottom—Sir Oracle of the company. The fairy king and his queen are now reconciled through the very act which threatened the performance. The love-juice may be regarded as the keystone of complication which brings about a triple climax, reached through a three-fold entanglement closely woven : viz. that of the lovers' story, of the fairy story and of the story of the artisans. Thus we recognise the principle of economy in the plot.

Further, we note a sense of balance in the plot when we observe that the initial complication and the final resolution are both effected by human agency, and the secondary complication and the primary resolution by supernatural agency. The mischief done by a mere man is righted by the king of men ; and the entanglement caused by the "lubber fiend" is unravelled by the king of fairies. We also note that while early in the play Hermia is the axis of complication, in the later stage the centre of gravity of the plot changes from Hermia to Helena, around whom it then moves.

The Theseus-Hippolyta story, with which the play opens and also closes, is the framework into which the rest is fitted. It is what has been called the *enveloping story*—the purpose of which is well defined by Prof. Moulton. "The picture of life presented in a play will have more reality if it be connected with a life wider than its own."* Shakespeare frequently has recourse to this device, as also do many of the well-known novelists—Scott in *Woodstock*, George Eliot in *Silas Marner*, Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* and many others. In this play also the story of Theseus and Hippolyta serves the same purpose and more. Not only does the whole dramatic pattern fit into this frame-work, but it may be regarded as the *primum mobile* of the whole system. It will not, I hope, be overnice to suppose that Egeus' anxiety to marry off his daughter at that moment, was not altogether unrelated to the marriage of Theseus. It was the marriage season ; and the Duke's wedding probably particularly sanctified it and perhaps, afforded facilities which Egeus could not otherwise have commanded. Again, the time allowed to Hermia to consider this matter

* *Shakespeare as a dramatic artist—p.* 361.

and give her opinion finally on "the sealing day betwixt my love and me", as Theseus says, is not altogether without significance. But there is just one more point which is more obvious. Egeus, as we have already seen, is the root of the complication of the main action. He belongs to Theseus' court and is therefore a character in the enveloping action. We also note that Egeus' objection apart from Theseus' support, is not of much value; and the momentary agreement between the Duke and the father of Hermia in opposing her union with the young man of her choice is what sets the ball rolling. It may be added that the brewing quarrel between Oberon and Titania is also brought to an issue in view of Theseus' marriage, the necessity of attending which causes Oberon to want "the changeling boy" all the more now than at any other time.

A. Theseus-Hippolyta story ; Enveloping action.
B. Love story of the Athenians ; Main action.
C. Fairy story : Romantic intrigue action ; Humorous ; Linking A. D. B.
D. Story of the Athenian artisans : Humorous realistic intrigue.
E. Interlude : Central link action.

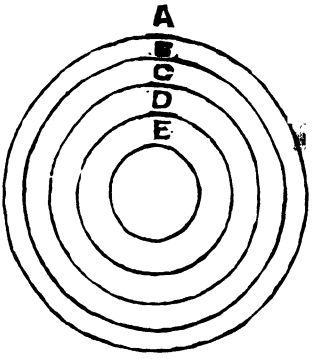


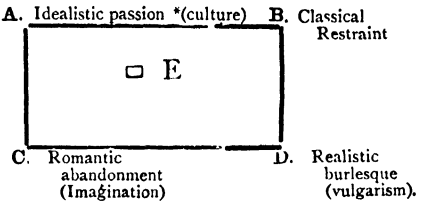
Fig. 6.

Once it has set the interior systems moving, this enveloping action is held in abeyance. So it does not appear again, as also in *Love's Labour's Lost*,‡ till the other actions have worked themselves out through complication and resolution, and then it only reappears in the last act to effect a final completion of all the actions including itself; and the curtain is rung down upon the Epilogue of Puck. Thus we see that the story is raised to its highest power as the harmony of many stories. " As a mathematical quantity is raised to a higher power by being multiplied into itself and multiplied again and yet again, so by successive complications of complications, Shakespearean comedy intensifies the interest of the story to the highest point which artistic receptiveness can endure."‡

‡ Moulton—*Shakespeare as a dramatic artist.*—p. 297.

But this is not all.. There is also another element. There is a blending of diverse tones as a fundamental part of the design. In painting, the final effect of a picture depends to a very large extent not only on the proper execution of the details, but also upon a fit and proper grouping of figures and distribution of colours. Absence of harmony or blending, or too much of one colour in one place, if not adequately balanced by the use of its complementary colour in another, is likely, to produce a disagreeable effect on the observer. In comedy also the absence of tone-balance or harmony is likely to detract from the satisfaction and completeness of the final effect.‡

A. The love-story of the Athenians.
B. Theseus-Hippolyta story.
C. Fairy story.
D. The story of the Artisans
E. The interlude (Classical, romantic, fantastic, realistic)



Shakespeare is very particular about this. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the intricate humour of the idealistic love story is counterpoised by the broadest farce of the clowns; and the incongruous mating of Titania and Bottom is a set-off to the romantic passion of the young Athenians ; between these come the neutral tints of the sober and sane attachment of Theseus and Hippolyta. This even-tenoured, restrained and sober story is a counterpoise to the wild abandonment, the irresponsible love-making of the fairies—to Titania's passion for Theseus and Oberon's attachment to the queen-huntress Hippolyta. These opposing, contrasting tones are finally harmonised in the interlude—the theme of which is also love—but it is a story that is classical in its origin (borrowed from Ovid), romantic in passion—akin to the passionate love tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, fantastic in treatment, and is sought to be represented in a manner that is grotesquely realistic—a manner that reminds one of Titania kissing the long ears of Bottom.*

‡ Moulton—*Shakespeare as a dramatic thinker.*

* I am indebted to Prof. R. G. Moulton for two of the diagrams and for the line of study indicated in his two books on Shakespeare.

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