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Respect and Concord:
A Study of A Midsummer Night's Dream

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I

A Midsummer Night's Dream has often been considered in relation to *Romeo and Juliet* which was written at about the same period. D. A. Traversi regards *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "a comic counterpoise" to *Romeo and Juliet*.¹⁾ In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lysander and Hermia, deeply in love with each other, are very similar to Romeo and Juliet in that they are driven into a tight corner by strong parental opposition. Little accidents and interferences, such as occurred in *Romeo and Juliet*, might well have taken place in this play, too. However, there is something peaceful and restful about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although the play has seeds of insecurity and moments of tension. It would seem that Shakespeare took this effect into account when he wrote this play at roughly the same period that he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. Even if this play was written in order to celebrate the marriage of a certain nobleman, Shakespeare seems only to have taken advantage of that opportunity in order to write a play opposite to *Romeo and Juliet*. He shows his dramatic skill in plot-making and characterization to describe a love affair that ends happily and to keep the reader or the audience free from a sense of insecurity. He gives this play stability by the framework of order and harmony, and he makes the spirit of order and harmony or the desire for them run through this play. I will consider how this play is given the framework of order and harmony and how the spirit of order and harmony or the desire for them pervades this play.

II

In contrast with *Romeo and Juliet* which begins with the scene of a quarrel between the two families to give us a feeling of tension and insecurity, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opens with the quiet talk between

Theseus and Hippolyta who are waiting for their wedding. Although their peace is immediately broken by the appearance of Egeus who confronts them with a problem, Shakespeare seems to avoid a violent opening scene by beginning this play with the secure and orderly scene even if it is very brief. In the beginning of this play, he emphasizes a stable framework of order and harmony, the former symbolized by the all-controlling position of Theseus and Hippolyta and the latter represented by the theme of their marriage. This framework is referred to by Stanley Wells.²⁾

This play has another framework, a supplementary one, in addition to the main framework made by Theseus and Hippolyta. This is the framework made by Oberon the king of the fairies. Though Oberon gives rise to a trouble between Titania and himself, he in his capacity as the "King of Shadows" (III.ii.347)³⁾ contributes to order and harmony. In the woods, Oberon leads the four young people to a peaceful conclusion. At the end of this play, together with Titania with whom he is now reconciled, he congratulates the couples on their marriage and wishes for their everlasting love and the prosperity of their offspring. Thus Oberon helps things to end up happily in his framework of order and harmony.

As I have seen, this play has the framework by Theseus and Hippolyta and the supplementary framework by Oberon, which make for stability, order and harmony in this play. We can also see manifestations of mental qualities which stay inside the framework. One of these mental qualities is patience or the ability to wait, and another is considerateness. I think that these two mental qualities can be summed up by the words, the spirit of respect, for both of them derive from the spirit of "respect" which means "regard" or "consideration".⁴⁾ People who can regard or esteem others are able to be patient or considerate. I will consider this play from the standpoint of patience and considerateness.

III

As I have mentioned at the start, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* becomes a comedy and *Romeo and Juliet* becomes a tragedy, though both of them treat the same kind of love. I think that the chief element that causes this difference is patience. In *Romeo and Juliet*, there is not much patience of

waiting. Not only the hero and heroine are hasty but also even those around them act in such a way as to help their hastiness. In contrast, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the element of patience is recognizable throughout. All those more or less involved in the problem concerning love that occurs at the beginning of this play, Theseus and Hippolyta, the four young lovers, Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia and Helena, and Hermia's father Egeus, show the mental quality of patience; whether consciously or unconsciously; all of them can wait.

Now I will consider how the quality of patience is shown by them. What Theseus and Hippolyta say at the outset of the play is concerned with patience. As is natural in a man who is about to get married, Theseus shows impatience, complaining of the slow passage of time. In order to soothe him, Hippolyta says:

Four days will quickly steep themselves in night;
Four nights will quickly dream away the time. (I.i.7-8)

What she says in these lines is no uncommon thing, but these are the words of a person who can wait patiently without fighting against the passage of time. Though, as is natural, Theseus is somewhat impatient with his marriage, he is composed and gentle as the Duke of Athens. When Egeus asks him to judge the case of his disobedient daughter Hermia according to the law of Athens, after hearing what she has to say, Theseus says to her, "Take time to pause, and by the next moon, / The sealing-day betwixt my love and me" (I.i.83-4). Theseus gives Hermia time to meditate calmly and shows her the importance of patience and waiting. If he had been very impatient, he could have passed an immediate judgment. He told her to let him know of her choice on his wedding day four days later. In the opening scene of the play, Theseus says, "Turn melancholy forth to funerals; / The pale companion is not for our pomp" (I.i.14-5), and yet now he decides to make her inform him of her decision on the very day of his wedding, though the day may turn out to be a tragic day for Hermia. This shows leisureliness on the part of Theseus. He seems to hope in an easygoing way that time will settle this difficult problem propitiously. The idea that if one waits something good will turn up is prevalent throughout the play,

and this optimistic idea seems to be an important factor in turning the story towards a happy ending.

In Act V, too, Theseus clearly states the importance of waiting. In the well-known scene where the part of the moon is played in the theatrical performance by the workmen, Hippolyta says, finding the absurdity impossible to bear, "I am weary of this moon. Would he would change!" (V.i.238). Then Theseus admonishes her, saying:

It appears by his small light of discretion that he is in the wane; but yet in courtesy, in all reason, we must stay the time.

(V.i.239-40)

It is impolite of a spectator to stop the actor playing the part of the moon halfway through, and from the nature of things one should wait patiently for the moon to wane, even if this is not the actual moon. Waiting makes social relationships smooth, and it means swimming with the flow of time. Waiting is a great help in preventing a tragedy. I have seen how Theseus and Hippolyta show patience. As can be seen from the opening scene of this play and from the example cited just above, when either of them shows signs of losing patience, each reminds the other, which shows how much they value patience. This is very characteristic of Theseus and Hippolyta, who have made the framework of order and harmony.

Egeus is the character who gives this play a potential tragic beginning. The impression of his being short-tempered and reckless is given to us by the fact that he insists on making his own daughter decide whether she will obey him or choose death, even if, according to the Athenian law, she deserves capital punishment for disobedience to parental will. This quick temper of his reminds us of Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, who drives the young lovers into a predicament and gives a further impetus to the tragic end of them. Egeus might very well have made *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a tragedy.

However, he is very obedient to Theseus. Though in the scene where Egeus makes his plea about his daughter Hermia, Theseus postpones the day of his judgment in spite of Egeus's entreaty for an immediate decision, Egeus does not raise an objection to Theseus's wavering and leisurely

attitude but meekly obeys his lord. According to Stanley Wells, the atmosphere of Theseus's court is free and the young noble people and the workmen do not seem to be overawed by Theseus.⁵⁾ Nevertheless, Egeus seems to be too obedient to Theseus. Egeus may have been particularly awed by the authority of Theseus, but his docility seems to show that he has patience. By obeying Theseus, he controls his temper; he waits patiently for the decision, leaving everything to Theseus. Shakespeare does not make Theseus and Egeus appear till the scene of the dawn in the woods in the latter half of Act IV. Scene i. I think that it can be said that by not writing about Egeus, by keeping him silent, Shakespeare describes Egeus's patience. In the scene of the dawn in the woods, also, Egeus is obliged to yield to Theseus's authority, as Theseus says to him, "I will overbear your will" (IV.i.176). And he does not appear any more in the play. Egeus does not appear very often in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he plays an important part in the play. We must pay due attention to his patience.

Now I will see how the four young lovers show patience. Helena displays the quality of patience most conspicuously. Though she loses Demetrius's love, she still loves him as much as before. Knowing very well that she will be rejected by him, she goes to the woods, running after him and she tries to follow him wherever he goes. Helena is patient in her love, but she does not just sit without doing anything. She is active and energetic. Such energetic action might do more harm than good and make herself and those around her unhappy. This does not happen, however. That is because she is rational; she is sometimes even argumentative. As can be seen from her long speech on love (I.i.226-45), she makes a rational judgment about the situation she is in. She says to Demetrius, "You draw not iron, for my heart / Is true as steel" (II.i.196-7). Helena certainly emphasizes her uncommon fidelity to Demetrius,⁶⁾ but here she seems to show her pride as well; she wants to say that she is no ordinary iron but a piece of steel far superior to it. She shows such confidence and pride, while she seems to demean herself when she compares herself to a spaniel. This may seem curious, but she gives me the impression of a proud and broad-minded person telling a joke. She is not a woman who is mawkish in

her unrequited love; but a rational woman who can be patient and can see herself coolly.

Hermia and Lysander, though placed in the same kind of predicament as Romeo and Juliet, manage to come through it. This is because, unlike Romeo and Juliet, they can endure and wait.⁷⁾ Hermia is clearly conscious of the importance of patience when she says, "Let us teach our trial patience" (I.i.152). They may indeed have been rash in running away to the woods, but in the woods, they show themselves to be patient. When they find that they have lost their way, they do not walk about impatiently, but try to wait in sleep till dawn. The same characteristic and ability can be seen in Demetrius. When he is trying to woo Hermia, who is flustered at finding Lysander gone, he is rather amazed at her extreme agitation and stops following her and tries to go to sleep and wait.

Sleep, too, plays an important part in this play. Towards dawn in the woods, the four young lovers all fall asleep exhausted after their wandering. They are saved from a possible tragedy by their sleep. Seeing them all asleep on the ground, Puck begins to say his spell with the words, "On the ground / Sleep sound" (III.ii.448-9), and ends with

Jack shall have Jill,

Naught shall go ill:

The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

(III.ii.461-3)

These words of Puck's seem to suggest the importance of natural sleep in this play. The necessity of sleeping as well as waiting can be thought to be suggested in Hippolyta's words (I.i.7-8), too. Sleep is connected with waiting. Sound sleep comes to a person who has calmness and leisureliness. And such a person can be patient and wait. It can be said that it is because of patience, the ability to wait and the good effect of sleep that this play with potentialities of tragedy comes to a happy conclusion.

IV

I will now consider this play from the standpoint of considerateness. Here I would like to consider how the characters show considerateness mainly in the scene of the play within the play. R. W. Dent makes the

following comment:

While a successful production depends on the imaginative cooperation of playwright, producers and audience, Bottom's group has placed the entire burden on the audience. Theseus's group quite naturally makes no effort to 'amend them'.⁸⁾

As can be seen from his words "successful production", Dent seems to consider the play by the workmen from the standpoint of a play by professional actors, and he seems to forget that the workmen who are complete amateurs in theatrical matters are producing a play and acting in it. I think that we should not consider whether the play by the workmen is successful or not as a play; we should consider how the workmen produce the play and act in it and how Theseus and others who see the play react. Dent also says that there is no "imaginative cooperation" between the workmen and the spectators, but I think that there is cooperation. Both the workmen and the spectators are considerate in their behavior, and in this sense there is cooperation between the players and the audience. This element of considerateness is as important as the element of patience and the ability to wait; these elements are manifestations of the spirit of order and harmony that is seen throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The scene of the play within the play may give us the impression of being slack, but in this scene there is an element very important for the whole play.

First I will consider how considerateness is shown by the workmen. Though they are ignorant and scatterbrained, they think seriously about the play in their own way, and they cudgel their brains about how to please the spectators. Their seriousness comes from their considerateness towards Theseus and others who will see the play. Bottom, thinking about 'the ladies' who will see the play, says that the scene of Pyramus killing himself with the sword is improper, and he makes the suggestion:

I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed; and for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver: this will put them out of fear. (III.i.13-7)

This may come from his ignorance, but we are more impressed with his considerateness. He and the other workmen are afraid that if they do not tell the spectators about the fictitiousness of the events in the play, the latter will be frightened. They rack their brains, too, about how to deal with the lions, the moon and the wall in the play. They try very hard not to terrify the audience, and they try to do their best to make everything clear to the audience. Though Dent says that they are making little of the imagination of the audience,⁹⁾ I can not agree. As I have mentioned above, Dent forgets the fact that they are amateurs in theatrical matters. The workmen are sincere in their efforts to please the spectators, and we cannot help recognizing their simple-minded but genuine considerateness in their enthusiastic attitude.

In the actual presentation of the play, the workmen as players make various comments on what they are doing for the sake of the audience. When Theseus says, "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again" (V.i.179) on hearing Bottom's words "Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me!" (V.i.178), Bottom takes up Theseus's words and gives a serious explanation:

No, in truth sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisbe's cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see it will fall pat as I told you. Yonder she comes.

(V.i.180-2)

The comments that the workmen make in addition to the ordinary lines are in themselves very ridiculous, and this impromptu comment by Bottom is even more ridiculous. Bottom is very serious, however; he is very anxious not to worry Theseus.

The workmen always show considerateness towards the audience both in their rehearsal and in the actual presentation. Some people may think that the workmen are laboring under a misconception, but even if they show considerateness where they should not, it will be wonderful if people accept this misplaced considerateness and respond to it with their own considerateness. Such mutual considerateness will be in keeping with the spirit of order and harmony in this play. The truth is that Theseus and others show their considerateness to make this happy state a reality.

Theseus chooses the theatrical performance by the workmen as an entertainment for his marriage, believing that “never anything can be amiss / When simpleness and duty tender it” (V.i.82-3). He wants to appreciate the workmen’s sincere wish to please the audience, however poor they may be in their acting. This already shows his considerateness. What he says to Hippolyta who is rather reluctant to see the play will make his considerateness clearer.

The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.
 Our sport shall be to take what they mistake;
 And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
 Takes it in might, not merit. (V.i.89-92)

Theseus intends to see the workmen’s performance in a generous spirit. He will value the performance not for its quality but for the good intention of the workmen. The words “noble respect” show his considerateness. R. A. Foakes says in his explanatory note that they mean “magnanimous or generous consideration”.¹⁰⁾ At the performance, Theseus and others tease the workmen, but there is no ill will in them. Theseus’s considerateness sets the general tone. The spectators do not spoil the performance with their teasing remarks; on the contrary, their words spur the workmen to further effort. As can be seen from the example of Demetrius who stops himself with the words “But silence” (V.i.246) when he knows that he is going too far, the spectators know moderation, too.

Here I must consider the scene where Theseus gives his opinion to Hippolyta who is rather disgusted with the workmen’s performance. He says that “the worst are no / worse, if imagination amend them” (V.i. 205-6). It seems to me that here, too, Theseus shows his considerateness. The kind of imagination that he means in this context is considerate imagination. This kind of imagination is possible only in those who are broad-minded and warm-hearted. At the beginning of the fifth act of this play, too, Theseus uses the word “imagination”, but it is somewhat different from the kind of imagination just considered. For the former contains an irrational element, the latter a rational element. In this “irrational imagination”, Theseus’s treatment of the poet draws our attention.

He puts "the poet" on the same level with "the lunatic" and "the lover". This shows the character of Theseus as a ruler. Besides, it seems to suggest the modesty of Shakespeare as a poet, and this modesty of his seems to come from his confidence and broad-mindedness. His broad-mindedness is not unconnected with the theme of considerateness. For considerateness comes from the broadness of mind. Shakespeare shows the broad-mindedness, too, by letting Puck speak rather disparagingly of this play. In allowing us to get glimpses of his broad-mindedness, he enhances the quality of considerateness shown by the spectators and the workmen.

V

I have seen how *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is given the framework of order and harmony and how the spirit of respect, the spirit of order and harmony runs through the play. In the scene of the woods, too, which has often been regarded as the scene of confusion, I think that we can see the predominance of the state of stability or the element of order rather than the element of confusion. We can see stability in the unchanging love of Hermia for Lysander and Helena for Demetrius. After their brief fling, the men come back to their respective women, and in this they are supported by the women's stability. As I have already mentioned, each of them shows the quality of patience and often falls asleep. The quarrel between Oberon and Titania is not of the sort which will break Oberon's framework of order and harmony. Puck the mischievous fairy does not disobey Oberon, working as his faithful servant in his framework. In the words and behavior of Titania and Bottom, I would like to note the prominence of the feeling of order based on courtesy, though not unmingled with the feeling of comicalness, rather than eroticism or the feeling of disorderly confusion which Jan Kott emphasizes. It seems to me that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole, emphasis is laid on the calm state of order and harmony. The state of order and harmony in this play is not achieved only at the end; it is seen throughout the play. It does not come through the state of discord either; general concord is seen throughout the play.

NOTES

- 1) D.A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, Vol. 1. (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 139.
- 2) Stanley Wells, "Introduction" to *The New Penguin Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967 / 84), p. 20.
- 3) R.A. Foakes (ed.), *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 99. All the following quotations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from this edition.
- 4) *OED.*, "Respect", sb. 13.
- 5) Wells, "Introduction", p. 18.
- 6) Stanley Wells, "Commentary" on *The New Penguin Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967 / 84), pp. 136-7.
- 7) Cf. Koshi Nakanori, *Shakespeare Kigeki* (Tokyo: Kinokuniyashoten, 1982), p. 25.
- 8) R.W. Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" in *Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Casebook Series, ed. Antony Price (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1983), p. 138.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 10) R.A. Foakes, "Notes" on *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 120.