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Romantic versus Platonic Relationships in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract:

*Shakespeare's plays provide ample fodder for an analysis of almost any topic. His comedies, in particular, focus on love—its essential, essentializing and, indeed, totalizing influence on those under its thrall. The germinal plays of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provide the focus of this analysis, which considers elements of the Platonic and the Romantic—not only their presence but their potential absence, and how those forms of love propel characters toward destinies that they themselves have not only not chosen, but not foreseen.*

One reading of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* might look at the incompatibility of same sex friendships and erotic, heterosexual pairing—a friction between Platonic and erotic love. In this first reading, Platonic love is associated above all with reason, and also the laws of the state, masculine friendship, and daytime imagery. Erotic, romantic love is associated with night imagery, especially the moon and also focuses on the madness inherent in erotic love, its capriciousness, and shows characters as acting without reason and tending toward self-destruction. In this first reading, erotic love destroys Platonic friendships.

Romeo and Mercutio seem the best of friends in their good-natured and witty bantering; however, Romeo's lovesickness is getting the best of the friendship, and Mercutio is tiring of Romeo's "groaning for love" (RJ 2.4.85). After some particularly witty banter about "switch and spurs" and "wild goose chase" (RJ 2.4.80), typically masculine talk, Mercutio proclaims "now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo; now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature: for this driveling love is like a great natural" (RJ 2.4.86-8). In Mercutio's eyes, then, Romeo is only normal—and not a "natural," or fool—when he gives up his histories of love and romance and joins in gentlemanly bantering. Important here is the word "sociable": they are in the city, it is daytime, and to be puling about love is almost unseemly—it is excessive. I think "sociable," here, could be taken to mean something beyond mere amiability and conversational spontaneity, almost something like "a good citizen," or "civic minded."

Romeo, however, does not remain long in this "sociable" mood; he and Juliet promptly marry and Romeo is given over to the romantic imagery we saw so much of in Acts One and Two, saying things such as "if the measure of thy joy / Be heap'd like mine...unfold the imagined happiness" (RJ 2.6.26-30). He has gone back to the "drivelling" language of erotic love that Mercutio criticized him for, and this spells difficulties for their Platonic friendship. Indeed, the friendship is swiftly imperiled in Act Three when Mercutio and Romeo encounter Tybalt and a fight ensues. Romeo's language to Tybalt is interesting here: "I...love thee better than thou canst devise / Till thou shalt know the reason of my love" (RJ 3.1.66-7); he is using the softer, more romantic language that has so bothered Mercutio—the language of the erotic love he feels for Juliet. Tybalt, of course, is wrathful, knows nothing of Romeo's marriage, and becomes further enraged. Tybalt acts purely on masculine honor, taking vengeance for the slight of Romeo's having appeared at the Capulet banquet. Mercutio is killed as Romeo restrains him. It is an inglorious end for Mercutio, who says "Why the devil came you between us?" (RJ 3.1.104). In Mercutio's masculine rule book, as it were, Romeo should have helped him fight; it would have been the manly thing to do. Romeo, however, was at the time wrapped up in worry about his other, erotic love, and his carelessness, brought on by an excess of romantic feeling, perhaps, has doomed his friend. Romeo meant well, of course; he says "I thought all for the best" (RJ 3.1.105), but he is in the city, in the street, in daytime, and the laws of erotic love do not apply—Tybalt was not thinking of Romeo as a family member, and a low blow, dealt after his opponent was restrained, did not seem unfair to him. So ends Romeo's Platonic friendship, sacrificed because he did not want to see Mercutio fighting with a member of his new family in-law, Juliet's beloved cousin. In this reading, then erotic love destroys Platonic friendship in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we meet Helena and Hermia at the very end of their Platonic friendship. That they have been friends, it seems, we can see in Hermia's initial greeting of "God speed fair Helena" (MND 1.1.180), and in Hermia's protestations that she has done nothing to encourage Demetrius' love. Erotic love brings out Helena's jealousy, "Through Athens I am thought as fair as she" (MND 1.1.227), which in turn ignites her anger toward Hermia, and she foolishly informs Demetrius of Hermia's flight, embroiling all in Puck's machinations.

With Puck's meddling, the environment for Platonic friendship becomes even worse, as insults are exchanged on all sides. Helena declaims against "Injurious Hermia, most ungrateful maid" (MND 3.2.195); Hermia calls Helena "You juggler, you canker blossom" (MND 3.2.282), and worse. The insults here exchanged, of which I've given only a small sample, bode ill for the friendship of Hermia and Helena. While they do speak to each other later on in the play, and do indeed finish one another's ten-syllable lines, they speak only twice, and about things external to themselves (MND 4.1.190-195). After this they do not speak, they are paired with their lovers, and we can assume, I think, that the Platonic friendship is at an end, or at best gravely weakened. Erotic love, again, wins out.

It is interesting to look at the language in Act One of MND, especially as it deals with erotic love. Egeus says that Lysander has "bewitched the bosom of my child...thou hast by moonlight at her window sung" (MND 1.1.26-30)—images of erotic love at work, which inflame Egeus' anger. Hermia echoes this idea of bewitchment: "I know not by what power I am made bold" (MND 1.1.59); as does Demetrius: "Lysander, yield / Thy crazed title to my certain right" (MND 1.1.92). Hermia is possessed by something larger, beyond herself; Lysander is like a madman in his love. Demetrius, however, asserts his "right"—he is a reasonable city dweller still, and leaves the city only under protest. Egeus, who finishes as the biggest loser of the play, asks Theseus to execute the law as remedy: "I beg the ancient privilege of Athens" (MND 1.1.41), to either bend his daughter to his will or put her to death. Two world views are in conflict, here: the erotic, and the rational or Platonic.

Platonic friendship seems to be winning, for a while, in the separation of Titania and Oberon. They are sundered because of a "little changeling boy" whom Oberon wants as his own but Titania refuses to yield up. Titania says "His mother was a votress of my order... But she, being mortal, of that boy did die" (MND 123-36). Out of respect for her deceased, female friend, Titania has fled from her husband, fled from erotic love. The play, however, does not keep her very long in this state: Oberon makes a fool of her with the love juice, causing her to fall in love with the ass-headed Bottom. While she is so duped, Oberon takes the changeling boy and Titania does not protest. In the end, she is restored, through the medium of the love juice yet again, to her erotic love for Oberon. Platonic love and friendship lose again to erotic love.

Theseus, as the epitome of reason, presents an interesting case. While he is having some trouble passing the time before his wedding, he is eminently reasonable—the executor of Athens' laws. Before Hermia has a chance to defend herself, he admonishes her that "To you your father should be as a god" (MND: 1.2.48), clearly holding up the standard of the patriarchy. His engagement to Hippolyta seems at best one of Platonic friendship; at worst, of course, it could be said to be one of kidnapping, perhaps, and certainly not erotic. He states accurately that the beginnings of their relationship were hardly romantic: "I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (MND: 1.1.16-7); theirs is almost a contract, befitting the leader of a state and his conquered enemy. He uses the interesting image of "a stepdame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's revenue" (MND 1.1.4-5) to describe his waiting for the night of his marriage to Hippolyta—and we should notice the reference not to romance but to lost revenue. In his Athens the law, the patriarchy, reason, and things masculine will have predominance.

Lysander, interestingly, uses this same image to great effect: "I have a widow aunt, a dowager" (MND 1.1.157-8). The aunt's house is outside of Athens, and, more importantly, beyond the reach of "the sharp Athenian law" (MND 1.1.163). He proposes that they go there at night and marry. Shakespeare here turns Theseus, and all the imagery associated with him, on his head. The dowager, who to Theseus is reprehensible, wasting a young man's money and refusing to die, is to Lysander a loving mother figure, and the protector of erotic love. They will go there at night, away from the sharp daylight of reason and rationality. They will be in the forest "remote seven leagues," away from the strictures of society. This is the erotic world: moonlit, natural, irrational, and filled with feminine imagery.

In the end, then, reason and the state are not enough to save Lysander and Hermia, Helena and Demetrius, or Oberon and Titania from their difficulties. Even Theseus, rational to a fault, who claims that "I never may believe / These antique fables nor these fairy toys" (MND 5.1.2-3), is in the end somewhat transformed by the atmosphere of erotic love. He refuses Bottom's epilogue, saying that the play needs no explanation, in effect that the strength of erotic love is apparent to him. He also gives in a bit on the magic of night and romance, saying "Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time" (MND 5.1.356). In this first reading of the plays, erotic love wins out over Platonic friendship, destroying it.

I think, however, that another reading of erotic love and Platonic friendship can be taken from the two plays. Certainly the friendship of Romeo and Mercutio is a masculine one, with Mercutio especially valorizing the things in Romeo which are “sociable,” chivalric, and witty. It is evident, however, that Mercutio does love Romeo, and that Romeo loves Mercutio. Likewise Tybalt’s anger, while seemingly stemming from a sense of slighted honor, is excessive and passionate beyond the bounds of reason. The entire conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues is, while an affair of and in the “civilized” city, one of passionate intensity which threatens the civic order. All of which shows that the Platonic world is also full of unbridled passions. And this leads me to larger questions for these two plays: Why do the characters do the things they do? Why is the end of *Romeo and Juliet* sad, while *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* turns out happily?

Erotic love is certainly capricious and changeable. At the beginning of RJ, Romeo is in love with Rosaline, and can think of no one but her. Seeing Juliet, he does an immediate about-face, and is even more passionately in love with Juliet, scorning Rosaline. Demetrius has dropped Helena before MND begins, and pursues Hermia. Then, under the influence of the love juice, which never leaves him, Demetrius loves Helena again. Lysander, who starts the play in love with Hermia, is quickly moved by the love juice to love Helena, and ironically invokes reason as the cause for the abrupt switch: “The will of man is by his reason swayed, / And reason says you are the worthier maid” (MND 2.2.115-6). To make the point of erotic love’s capriciousness even clearer, Shakespeare has Titania fall in love with Bottom, who has the head of an ass.

Platonic love, however, or friendship, is also strong and passionate. Titania is raising her friend’s child, no small show of devotion. Helena is outraged by the change in affections of her two suitors, and curses them—even Demetrius, with whom she is in love. Romeo retreats from his romanticism long enough to kill Tybalt and avenge his friend.

I do not think that the two—Platonic friendship and erotic love—are truly in opposition in these plays. Rather, I think that Shakespeare is showing us that the world is an unlucky, unhappy place, and that no amount of reason, or passion, will lead characters to a happy ending. Some might argue that a play such as *Romeo and Juliet* argues for moderation, on the order of Friar Laurence’s aphorisms. But doesn’t the play show much more strongly that Romeo and Juliet were simply unlucky? Romeo could well have blocked Tybalt’s parting thrust; the Friar’s letter could have gotten through; the Friar could have arrived earlier, or Romeo later, and so witnessed Juliet’s awakening at the tomb. Romeo himself speaks of “sour misfortune’s book” (RJ 5.3.100); Friar Laurence talks of “Unhappy fortune” (RJ 5.3.20), and throughout we have images of the moon, Shakespeare’s overarching symbol of “lunacy” or the randomness of good luck in an imperfect world.

By contrast, everything turns out fine in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Why? The only possible reason is the love juice—a symbol of grace, good luck, fortune’s favor. Hermia might have ended up in a convent, or dead, had Egeus been allowed to invoke the law of Athens. Titania might well have continued her disobedience in the face of Oberon’s intransigence. Lysander would be left alone, as would Demetrius and Helena, had Hermia been imprisoned in a convent, or killed. Greenblatt says that it is the love juice that enables the “absurdly easy resolution of an apparently hopeless dilemma” (809), and I agree with him on that; however, Greenblatt goes on to say that “it is as if the heterosexual couplings can only be formed by painfully sundering the intimate same-sex bonds that preceded them” (810), and here I have to disagree. People are unlucky and everything falls apart, in these plays. Romeo loses his friend, and he also loses Juliet, and so the play is a tragedy. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* comes painfully close to tragedy—indeed, the play within a play enacts the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, emphasizing for us the fragility of happiness, but the characters are saved in the end by the hand of the playwright, acting through the medium of the love juice. And so MND is a comedy. That erotic love is preserved is lucky enough. The friendships are not necessarily a casualty of a contest, but rather the love juice is not put to work on them, they are not saved. Everything falls apart, and then the erotic relationships are saved as if by magic, and the ending, while happy, reminds us that our lives are happy only when we have something—grace, perhaps—which we are not entitled to, and do not earn, but which is essential to happiness.

References

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