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## Shakespeare's Comic Universe

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# Shakespeare's Comic Universe

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## Abstract

In this meditation on Shakespeare's comedies, Lou Markos examines, in particular, parallels between grand biblical narratives, such as the Wedding Supper of the Lamb, and Shakespeare's many marriage resolutions.

## Keywords

Shakespeare, Paideia, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Midsummer*, *Much Ado*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Winter's Tale*, Comic, Comedy, William Shakespeare, Marriage, Weddings

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## Shakespeare's Comic Universe

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**A**s a mortal man living in a fallen world, I have often had to remind myself that, though existence on earth is essentially tragic, that tragedy is inscribed within a universe that is, finally, comic. It all will end, so the Bible taught me, not with a death but a marriage, not with judgment but with the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. It is only because our world has been subjected for a time to futility that tragedy holds the central place; when the end comes and all the veils are ripped away, we shall see that it was love, always love, that has moved and will continue to move history on to its final and happy ending. I know that this is true, yet often I doubt, and when I doubt, I turn invariably to that poet who, alone of all bards, knew the inner workings of both tragedy and comedy.

Of all Shakespeare's comedies, the one I love best is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I never tire of reading it or watching it performed on stage or screen. It has always embodied for me the essence of spring and youth and romance and magic. Indeed, whenever I read it, I seem to do so through a cloud of fairy dust. I would like to believe that Shakespeare felt the same way about his play. After all, though the play purportedly takes place in a wood outside of ancient Athens, the real setting is the countryside of Shakespeare's beloved England. The fairies and hobgoblins who prance across the stage are neither Greek nor Roman; to the contrary, they are full-blooded natives of the British Isles.

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But that is not the only reason why I believe Shakespeare had a particular fondness for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although I specialized in, and still greatly love, British Romantic poetry, I have never fallen prey to the Romantic notion that originality is the be all and end all of art. I was fortified against this false notion by high school teachers who revealed to me that the great plots of Shakespeare's plays are not original to Shakespeare. As is the case with Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, and Milton, Shakespeare reworked existing stories rather than making up new ones out of whole cloth. Of all these great writers, it can truly be said that they are *at the same time* fully derivative and refreshingly, even startlingly, original. But Shakespeare perhaps deserves the highest praise, for many of his finest plays are based on original stories that were the Elizabethan equivalent of Harlequin romances and melodramatic, made-for-TV movies. Thus was it said of the bard that he could take a sow's ear and turn it into a silk purse.

Such is the case for nearly every one of the three dozen plus one plays that he wrote—but not *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Along with *Tempest* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Midsummer* is the only play that is not based on an existing plot. Shakespeare, as far as we know, made up the complex, multi-layered plot himself. Or did he? Most critics believe *Midsummer* was written very close in time to *Romeo and Juliet*, and indeed, there are striking similarities in the plot. Both plays present us with a pair of young lovers (Lysander and Hermia, Romeo and Juliet) who are divided from each other by the tyrannies and prejudices of their elders. *Romeo and Juliet* ends with the tragic death of the star-crossed lovers, and for a while, it seems that Hermia and Lysander will suffer the same fate. But no, all is fixed up by a group of meddling fairies and a sudden change of heart on the part of Theseus, King of Athens. In the final act of the play, not only do Lysander and Hermia get married, but Demetrius and Helena, Theseus and Hippolyta, and, essentially, Oberon and Titania.

I have always felt quite sure that Shakespeare meant for *Midsummer* to be a comic version, if not a parody, of *Romeo and Juliet*, a feeling that is substantiated by Shakespeare's decision to

interpolate into the wedding festivities that end the play a wildly comic retelling of a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that is the ancient Greco-Roman precursor to *Romeo and Juliet*: Pyramus and Thisbe. Death may have the final say in the tragic world of *Romeo and Juliet* and Pyramus and Thisbe, but not in the very English Athens that Shakespeare invites us to visit. There is still magic in the forests of jolly old England, and that magic rescues and redeems.

Now, to the cynic who has little patience for comedy, the ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will seem foolishly and even vulgarly contrived. But to those who know better in their hearts, it will not seem so. The plot of Shakespeare's most wonderful and magical comedy does not end happily because it is contrived or poorly plotted or melodramatic, but because it moves in accordance with a world and an ethos that is structured in a specific sort of way. Without discounting the tragic nature of our world, *Midsummer* boldly proclaims that death and despair and dissolution will, in the end, be defeated.

At the very outset of the play, Theseus announces his upcoming marriage to Hippolyta, an Amazon maiden whom he has defeated in battle. In preparation for his nuptials, he instructs one of his aids to

Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments,  
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,  
Turn melancholy forth to funerals;  
The pale companion is not for our pomp.  
Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,  
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;  
But I shall wed thee in another key,  
With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling. (*MND*  
1.1.15-22)

Theseus, as ruler of the world of the play, proclaims before the play even begins that it will be a comedy, that it will have a happy ending no matter what mistakes the characters make in the interim. The pale companion (death) is not to be invited to their

ceremony, and the sorrow and melancholy that attend such events as the death of Romeo and Juliet (or Pyramus and Thisbe) are to be confined to the world of the cemetery. Even his harsh treatment of Hippolyta, which precedes the action of the play and is thus outside its scope and ethic, is to be transposed into joy and romance.

Thankfully for us and our world, the ruler (and author) of this raised stage on which we act out our lives made a similar proclamation at the very outset of the human drama: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day" (*King James Version*, Genesis 1.31). Then, presto, the lights dim and the curtain opens. Soon after, there is a fall, and we flee to the cities as the lovers in the play flee to the forest, but still, through it all, the magic of that first speech, the subtle charm of those primal words ("very good") stays with us in our plight and guides us to the happy end that must be.

That is the message I learned from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* without knowing I was learning it. I was laughing far too hard to know that I was being strengthened within by a profoundly biblical vision. Perhaps more surprisingly, that blessed play, filled to the brim with buffoonish characters, fortified my humanistic faith in the intrinsic dignity of man. As Theseus and Hippolyta watch the dim-witted rustics (Shakespeare aptly calls them "clowns") perform their travesty of Pyramus and Thisbe, Hippolyta, exasperated by their antics, exclaims, "This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard" (*MND* 5.1.209). "The best in this kind are but shadows," the king replies, "and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (*MND*, 5.1.210-211). "It must be your imagination then, and not theirs," (*MND* 5.1.212). Hippolyta snaps back. But Theseus will not give in to his wife's dismissive attitude: "If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men. Here come two noble beasts in, a man and a lion" (*MND* 5.1.213-214).

Shakespeare not only guides us toward these two messages (that the ending will be good; that all men, even the most foolish,

possess innate value), but shows us how they are united. Despite our folly and rage and depravity, there is something noble within us that can be redeemed. The nihilism and existentialism that crop up in the tragedies will be overcome in the end. There is purpose, even when we lack eyes to see it and ears to hear it. Grace reaches out its hand, and if we will only come to our senses—as the four lovers do at the end of the play and as the prodigal son does at the end of the parable (Luke 15.17)—we will find that consummation for which we have yearned all our lives. In the tragic world of *Hamlet*, that consummation can only be death (in his “To be or not be” soliloquy, Hamlet refers to death as the “consummation devoutly to be wished” [*Ham.* 3.1.70-71]). In *Midsummer*, and most of the other comedies, it means marriage: the two into one, the complementary union of opposites, the love that believeth and hopeth and endureth all things, the promise of new life.

#

**M***idsummer* represents, in many ways, the culmination of Shakespeare’s early comedies. He would take up again, with even greater force and insight, the comic nature of our universe in one of the plays from his middle years: *Much Ado About Nothing*. In this hilarious, madcap, yet weightier comedy, we encounter a fuller sense of innocence lost and regained. *Midsummer* dances throughout on the edge of Eden, *Much Ado* detours into the Land of Nod before making a joyous return to the Garden.

In the play, an ardent and guileless pair of lovers is nearly destroyed by a villain who taints the mind of the groom-to-be. The villain, Don John, fools the lover (Claudio) into thinking his beloved (the fair Hero) has been unchaste. In response, Claudio publicly rebukes Hero as an “approved wanton” (*Ado* 4.1.38) and refuses to marry her. As this play too takes place in a comic world, the truth comes out in time, the villain is captured, and the lovers are reunited, but with a twist. Prompted by the Friar, Hero pretends to have died of grief, and her death is proclaimed throughout Messina. Soon after, Claudio discovers that he has

accused Hero falsely and, begging a penance of her father, is told that he must first weep at Hero's "tomb" and proclaim her innocence and then marry Hero's cousin without seeing her face.

At the wedding, after Claudio pledges his love to the veiled bride, Hero removes the veil and reveals that it is she (not her fictional niece) whom Claudio has married. She then speaks:

And when I lived, I was your other wife;  
 And when you loved, you were my other husband. . . .  
 One Hero died defiled; but I do live,  
 And surely as I live, I am a maid. (*Ado* 5.4.66-71)

Here, expressed in words of simple profundity, lies the very essence of the biblical journey from innocence to corruption to restored purity, from life to death to rebirth—the story of a world defiled by sin but redeemed by love and of creatures who broke their initial covenant with their spouse, but who, after tears shed and penance done, were reunited in a second, greater wedding. Again, the end *must* be happy; in fact, so insistent is the joy of the marriage celebration that, when news is brought that Don John has been captured, the happy guests decide to postpone his punishment until the following day. Nothing, nothing must spoil their bliss.

The same holds true for what is perhaps Shakespeare's most mature and complex comedy, *As You Like It*. I have always been entranced by the way *As You Like It* mingles the darker themes of *Much Ado* with the forest imagery of *Midsummer*. This time around, the characters who flee to the woods do so, not because they are seeking love, but because they have been exiled and dispossessed. Like the human race itself, they have lost their inheritance and are forced to wander in the outskirts of civilization. But the place of their wandering is not, as it is in *King Lear*, a wilderness, but a pastoral world that holds out the promise of restored innocence.

My early love for pastoral has only grown as I have aged and matured. Just as the word Eden connotes both paradise and the

loss of paradise, so pastoral poetry presents us with a renewed Golden Age that fades away even as we try to hold on to it. Most of the great pastoral poets (Theocritus, Virgil, Horace, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Blake, Tennyson) have been city-dwellers, not farmers. They knew, as did their sophisticated urban audience, that we could not simply reclaim the innocence of the Garden, that corruption and decay existed as well amongst the shepherds and pipes of the idyllic countryside. Et in arcadia ego: "I (death) am also in Arcadia" (an area of Greece where the original pastorals of Theocritus were set). Though the pastoral landscape offers us both a recollection of our lost original state and a glimpse of something greater to come, it cannot deliver a sustainable present reality. Indeed, the pastoral gains its unique poignancy from the fact that it cannot finally be held on to. It will fade and wither if we try to grasp it too firmly. Still, it has the power to rest the body and clear the mind, renewing that vision, for the lack of which people perish.

As *Much Ado* ends with the dramatic and aesthetic resurrection of Hero, so the closing scene of *As You Like It* enacts its own miraculous return. The spunky heroine, Rosalind, has spent much of the play disguised as a boy (Ganymede). Only at the end does Rosalind shed her masculine garb and reveal her true identity to her exiled father and lover and to the woman who has fallen in love with her male persona. This revelation sets all to rights and paves the way for a celebration of multiple marriages that rivals *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In tandem with the nuptials, the exiles are reunited with their oppressors, both of whom are converted, in part, by the peace of the pastoral countryside. Even the cynic, Jacques, departs the stage to live a solitary life. As for the wedding celebration itself, the god of marriage, Hymen, appears on the stage to solemnize the movement from division to unity, exile to return.

The point of *Much Ado* and *As You Like It* is not to delude us into thinking that all endings are happy endings, but to teach us that reunion, reconciliation, and restoration are the final goal and purpose of mankind: that the Fall pushed us off track but did not thereby efface the possibility of redemption. Grace—and the

multitudinous “coincidences” that mark Shakespeare’s comedies are all, ultimately, embodiments of grace—will win out in the end.

#

Soon after completing *Much Ado* and *As You Like It*, Shakespeare entered into his great tragic period and composed, in less than a decade, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Yet, Shakespeare did not end there. Toward the latter part of his life, as he entered his full maturity, he turned away from tragedy toward romance. His final plays are an odd mixture of tragedy and comedy, plays that seem to follow in their plots the seasonal cycles of the year. The best known of these is *The Tempest*, but the one I have always considered to be the most profound, the most haunting is *The Winter's Tale*.

In the play, Leontes, King of Sicilia, suddenly, and with no provocation, decides that his chaste and faithful wife, Hermione, has been having an affair with his old friend and companion, Polixenes (the King of Bohemia). Despite protestations of innocence from Hermione and the entire court, and despite an oracle absolving her of all guilt, Leontes clings to his baseless jealousy, even ordering that Hermione's new-born daughter (whom he now believes is the offspring of Polixenes) be taken out of the court and burned. Swift judgment strikes from above, and both Leontes' young son (Mamillius) and his wife fall into a swoon and die. Meanwhile, Antigonus, the Sicilian Lord instructed to kill Leontes' daughter, Perdita ("lost girl"), pities the babe and takes her to the shores of Bohemia, where she is found and raised by a simple shepherd.

Sixteen long years pass, years of remorse and penance for the rash Leontes who discovers his folly too late. Perdita, however, grows into a lovely maid and soon catches the eye of Polixenes' son, Florizel. Their love flourishes in the idyllic pastoral world of the Bohemian countryside, but when Polixenes learns that his son desires to wed beneath his royal blood, he forbids the marriage.

The lovers flee to Sicilia, followed by Polixenes. In the end, Perdita's true identity is revealed, the lovers wed, and the old friendship of Leontes and Polixenes is restored. But the play does not end here.

Paulina, wife of Antigonus and attendant to Hermione, who has spent the last sixteen years insuring that Leontes learn and feel the full weight of his crimes, reveals that an Italian sculptor has just completed a statue of Hermione. The statue is shown, and all marvel at how real it is, how like the true Hermione. Then, magically, the statue moves, and Paulina reveals to all present (including the audience!) the startling news that Hermione is not dead but alive. All then rejoice, though pain is felt by Paulina, who learns now what she has long feared, that her husband, Antigonus, was killed by a bear but moments after he landed with Perdita on the shores of Bohemia. Yet, even here, sorrow is transmuted into joy, as Leontes grants her a new husband, the Sicilian Lord Camillo, who himself has been wounded much by the mad jealousy of Leontes.

What Shakespeare offers us in this play is nothing less, and indeed somewhat more, than an allegory of the long biblical journey from Eden to the New Jerusalem, an affirmation that though summer has been lost and winter will be long, spring *shall* return. It is already late autumn when the play opens, but we are given a glimpse of the innocent summer out of which the characters have grown. In an early speech, Polixenes describes his childhood friendship with Leontes:

We were as twinn'd lambs, that did frisk i' the sun,  
And bleat the one at th' other; what we changed  
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not  
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed  
That any did; had we pursued that life,  
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared  
With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven  
Boldly, "not guilty"; the imposition cleared  
Hereditary ours. (*WT* 1.2.83-91)

As children, Polixenes and Leontes inhabited a pre-fallen world of Edenic innocence and joy, but they have moved now far from that Garden, and when, but moments after this speech, Leontes falls, unaccountably, into his strange fit of jealous rage, that innocence flees altogether and all their joys become corrupted.

The attentive reader cannot help but notice the striking similarities between the plots of *The Winter's Tale* and of that other great study of jealousy, *Othello*. But there is one major difference. There is no Iago in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes' jealousy is both baseless and without reason; it falls upon him without the aid of a deceiver. Iago, Edmund, and Cassius are disturbing and wretched characters, but at least their presence helps make sense of the tragedies of *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Julius Caesar*. In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' rash decision to have his daughter killed cannot be traced back to any logical source. But then, the same is true of Adam's rash decision to eat the forbidden fruit.

Though this sinful and fallen world in which we live and suffer and die is by no means illusory, it is an anomaly, a flaw in the greater weave of the universe. Things should not be as they are, yet they are: a result of our stubborn and perverse refusal to remain in a pastoral world of innocence. We hurt ourselves more than any avenging God could hurt us; we create our own misery, and we do so without cause or reason or logic. Adam and Eve, and we, their fallen heirs, are but so many types of the rash Leontes, so eager to kill our own joy, so ready to blot out an entire garden of delights and see only the dram of poison that lies in a spider no bigger than our thumb. And, sadly, when we do so, we not only wound ourselves, but bring death and destruction and decay to everything around us. When Hermione falls into her swoon of death, Paulina cries out, cryptically but accurately, "look down / And see what death is doing." (*WT* 3.2.153-154). It is not just death that Leontes has ushered in, but the slow and painful *process* of death, the endless rot that sits forever on the bud.

Thankfully, they (and we) live in a comic universe. Even as darkness and death fall on Sicilia, a small ray of hope shines through. The oracle that Leontes so foolishly rejects ends with these riddling words: "the King shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (*WT* 3.2.133-134). It is not much, but it is something, a promise in embryo that the chance for renewal is possible, a seed of hope that spring will come. It is, I would suggest, Shakespeare's version of that first seed of hope, that primal riddle contained in God's curse on the serpent: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (*King James Version*, Gen. 3.15).

In Genesis, this seed is submerged for a while, putting down roots in the covenants made with Noah and Abraham and Moses, and sending forth its first tentative shoots in the Messianic prophecies of David and Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then, with the first coming of Christ, the season turns fully to spring and the plant breaks forth with joy. The turning point has been reached and the promise of an eternal summer, still far off but sure now to come, gleams ahead. A similar turning point occurs in the play, marked by a brief but lovely sentence. Shortly after the Bohemian shepherd happens on the abandoned Perdita, he is informed by his son of a terrible event he has just witnessed: the devouring of a man named Antigonus by a bear. In response, the shepherd picks up the babe and says to his son: "thou met'st with things dying, I with things new born" (*WT* 3.3.79). Just so, the angels in the tomb halt the grieving women with these words: "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen" (*King James Version*, Luke 28.5-6).

Then, as noted above, sixteen years fly by, and the play begins again on a lighter note of innocence and renewal. As in the Bible, there is at the end of the play a "great tribulation" that almost destroys the characters again (spurred on this time by the tyranny of Polixenes), but by now the initial (tragic) half of the romance has been left behind and the magic of the second (comic) half takes over. And magic is just the right word. In the final mystic scene when Hermione's statue comes to life, Shakespeare goes

beyond the final scene of *Much Ado About Nothing*, with its revelation to Claudio that Hero is alive. No, this time Shakespeare plays a trick that is almost without precedent in the theater; he almost literally resurrects Hermione from the dead. Neither the characters nor the audience (only Paulina) knows that Hermione still lives, and when that statue moves and breathes, we are as shocked and as exultant as Leontes himself.

It is not enough in this world of ours, that though comic when viewed from beginning to end is more often tragic in the middle, to hide Hero for a few days and then bring her back. There must be a death and long years of waiting; there must be time for the seed to take root. That is why there are two actual deaths in the play (Antigonus and Mamillius) and why the reunited Leontes and Hermione are far older and wiser than the reunited Hero and Claudio. In the closing lines of the play, Leontes turns to Paulina and says:

Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand and answer to his part  
Performed in this wide gap of time since first  
We were dissevered. (WT 5.3.183-186)

I have always believed, along with the Socrates of the *Apology*, that part of the joy of heaven will be found in comparing our earthly stories of pain and grief with those of our fellow redeemed. We shall share our winter tales of woe and rejoice together that we have made it here to the eternal summer of paradise. Lifted up to a timeless world beyond all cycles, we shall at last understand the mystery of the seasons and of the birth that springs from death.

I find these days that I shed more tears at *The Winter's Tale* than at *Othello*. For my enjoyment of the former play is mingled with my firm faith that good will win out in the end and that the seed which dies will sprout again. And that faith is itself bound up with Jesus' most mystical and literary saying: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (*King*

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*James Version*, John 12.24). If this saying is true, then we live in a world that is neither existentialist nor nihilist but runs in accordance with the laws and conventions of Shakespeare's comedies and romances. Yes, there *will* be pain in this world, as there will be death, but those very things, in the hands of that Great Comic Playwright who composed the universe, are but so many seeds that shall flower into joy.

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