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The Folly of Erasmian Scepticism in Shakespeare's
A Midsummer Night's Dream

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Introduction

Throughout his career, Shakespeare borrowed freely from a wide range of sources antiquated and contemporary. Borrowings in his works, both allusive and direct, range in complexity and obscurity, but the echoes of his sources are impossible to deny. At a time when the concept of plagiarism was practically nonexistent and *imitatio*—creatively adapting existing works in order to pay homage to their authors—was considered the mark of a good writer, Shakespeare was not shy about overtly incorporating his influences. From thematic and structural elements in classical works (such as Ovid’s *Pyramus and Thisbe*), to near-verbatim passages from Montaigne and others, Shakespeare prominently features the secondary texts in his own dramatic works. Scholarship has long applied itself to source study, and even though there is little 'smoking gun' evidence of the books that Shakespeare owned and read during his career, identifying sources, it would seem, is a nearly exhausted act.

Robert Miola suggests in *Shakespeare’s Reading* that Shakespeare was much more concerned with imitating “rhetoric, image, structure, rhythm, and idea” (14) than with wholesale copying. There are such passages, and many are easy to discern. Those shaping Shakespeare’s philosophies and ideas more broadly are often more difficult to spot, but they, no less than the direct borrowings, shape the world of his plays. The often-cited moment from Gonzalo in *The Tempest* (II.1) is one such easy find. A direct passage from Florio’s translation of Montaigne, it is the usual example of Shakespeare’s interest in the great sceptic, and has furnished many readers a starting point to discuss scepticism, among them, Frank Kermode (1958) and Northrop Frye (1969) in their introductory essays to the play. Despite the great value of the Montaigne connection, it is far from the only gateway to exploring scepticism in Shakespeare’s other works.

More recently, Graham Bradshaw and Millicent Bell have revisited scepticism in Shakespeare's works collectively to advance our understanding of the philosophical school beyond Montaigne's influence as the "standard assumption by scholars" (Bell 20). Bradshaw concerns himself with the notion of value in across two comedic and two tragic plays. Bell meanwhile finds compelling evidence of scepticism outside *The Tempest*, but her work in large part concerns the tragedies, especially the "great tragedies" from *Hamlet* and *King Lear* en route to *Macbeth*. The tragic mode is particularly suited to the matter, as the plays explore questions well-rooted in scepticism: What constitutes truth? Can it be measured? How are we to discern appearances from reality with our flawed human senses? And perhaps most importantly: are there some aspects of the world, of religion, of love, that simply escape logical understanding? Bell demonstrates that we might look back, pre-Florio's Montaigne, to the 1599 *Julius Caesar* for a critical point of departure, and there is much to commend that reading. Yet even that text, that date, might be adjusted as a starting point. So too might the focus on the tragedies and late plays as the primary locus for scepticism. Shakespeare often blurs generic boundaries, and it should not be surprising if we see scepticism in his comedies—particularly one that precedes both *Caesar* and the great tragedies by several years.

In addition to locating influence for Shakespeare's scepticism outside of the traditionally examined Montaigne, there is likewise some comparative study between Shakespeare's texts and Erasmus. Thelma Greenfield, in her 1968 essay "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Praise of Folly" draws some parallels between the two texts. She observes that

Folly's hand is large in all that brings men pleasure, and in her encomium she lays particular claim to revels, youth, and mirth; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when we recall the youthful revels, May games, Midsummer watches, and dreams

suggested and portrayed in it, clearly occupies territory adjacent or identical to Folly's domain. (236)

While Greenfield's indication of similar thematic elements and modes of folly may now seem self-evident, it nevertheless offers an important point of entry in the comparative discussion between the texts.

In the 1595-96 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare illustrates the battle between intellection and emotion, rationality and love, appearance and reality, through a comic vehicle. While the play does not advance a brand of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism (as Shakespeare will do later in *Lear* and *The Tempest*), it does suggest aspects of another prominent Renaissance sceptic, the great Dutch humanist Erasmus. His thought differs in substance (and style) from Montaigne, but his influence is no less powerful--and in the case of Shakespeare, no less typical of the types of borrowings that Miola outlines.

Erasmus and Montaigne

Born the bastard son of an unknown priest, Erasmus would soon rise to become one of the most influential thinkers and writers of his day. This is due in part to the time period in which he wrote, as well as the way in which he seized upon the aspects of the Church that he and his followers believed needed change. Erasmus's career happened to coincide with the rise of the printing press throughout Europe, granting him a new platform from which he could reach out to like-minded Christians, while "by-passing the control of the Church" (Roper 270), which had formerly regulated texts. Through the use of this new medium, Erasmus was able to spread his *philosophia Christi*, in which he "urged men to turn to the Bible and, in particular, to the New Testament, and there to discover the primitive spirit of Christianity, as it had been before a

jealous priesthood had desiccated it in formal dogma and overlaid it with ‘judaic’ observances” (Roper 271). Erasmus’ *philosophia Christi* gained him considerable popularity among like-minded Christians, and would go on to become one of the defining characteristics of his future writings. As Johan Huizinga observed, in time, “Erasmus’ conception of the Church was no longer purely Catholic. Of that glorious structure, of medieval-Christian civilization with its mystic foundation, its strict hierarchic construction, its splendidly fitting symmetry he saw hardly anything but its load of outward details and ornament” (298-99). Erasmus’ distaste for scholasticism and its rigid logic compelled him to look back towards the classical world, “Antiquity, but illuminated by Christian faith” (Huizinga 299). Though he never abandoned the entirety of devotional practices, he did doubt the place of many of them in developing an authentic religious consciousness.

Not surprisingly, the object of his ridicule in many of his works, *Praise of Folly* among them, is the narrow-minded. Huizinga noted that Erasmus’ mind “was neither philosophic nor historic,” but rather “philological in the fullest sense of the word” (301). Though he would produce scathing comments on Latin- and Greek-spewing ‘intellectuals,’ he was thoroughly at home with those languages, and he frequently inserted a line or two in the original tongue in his own writings. Yet his ability with classical languages stands not only as a testament to his able mind, but to his service in clarifying what he believed to be essential tenets of Christianity. As A.H.T. Levi sees it, *Praise of Folly* “makes clear that Erasmus viewed his own contribution to the restoration of evangelical religion in terms of technical and critical expertise. He saw perfectly well that unlettered piety on the medieval model, unless it was interior and evangelical, led easily to superstition” (xlvii). Intellectual work was not something to hide behind or to be

used to dominate others; it was to develop an understanding of human limitations in the face of a greater divinely ordered universe.

To say that Erasmus' work was well-known and widely-read throughout the Renaissance is not an overstatement. His most famous and influential work, *The Praise of Folly*, was written in Latin in 1509 and published two years later. The text had far-reaching influence, and by Erasmus' death in 1536, had been translated into French, Czechoslovakian, and German, in addition to thirty-six Latin editions (Levi xii). It was not until 1549, however, that Thomas Chaloner produced the translation that gave English speakers access to the text. Chaloner's translation remained the primary English edition of *The Praise of Folly* throughout the English Renaissance, and with three separate editions of the book printed, it was both widely available and widely read. Erasmus' prominence as one of the most learned and talented writers of the Renaissance as well as the wide availability of *The Praise of Folly* indicate that the text probably circulated widely among Renaissance philosophers, humanists, artists, and—most important to our discussion—that it was read and absorbed by Shakespeare.

The acknowledgement and acceptance of human limitation forms the basis of Erasmus' scepticism as presented in *The Praise of Folly*. Erasmus' scepticism, like Montaigne's, begins with the inherent ignorance of the human mind. He writes that, "In as much as in all humaine thynges, there is no great darknesse and diuersnesse, as nothyng maie be clerely knowne out, nor discovered: lyke as truly was affirmed by my Academicall philosophers, the least arrogant amonges all theyr Sectes" (63). Here, Erasmus cites the Academic principle that nothing at all can be known for certain, but he does so in order to advance a sort of negative capability; there is a vast amount of things that we cannot understand by rationality or knowledge, and for these things we must either turn to faith or acknowledge a fundamental ignorance. Those whom

Erasmus describes as his “fools” have come to peaceful terms with this ignorance, and they are not limited by a purely rational perception of the world. The learned academics, on the other hand, are truly foolish for attempting to comprehend more than the limited rational faculty allows. Rather than perceiving ignorance and irrationality as negative, Erasmus instead locates in them the source of happiness, love, emotion, and even faith. None of these impulses can be quantified by rationality nor logic, and for Erasmus, it is useless for the philosophers, clergy, or rhetoricians to attempt to do so. Hence, for Erasmus it is much easier, as Richard Popkin would have it, to adopt scepticism than to attempt these unanswerable questions.

In the same way that the complexities of humanity generally cannot be understood by our limited rational faculty, so too do the intricacies of the Church escape our understanding. Erasmus shows clearly his contempt for the clergy of his day who claim to be above such ignorance, and he writes, “now a daies not Baptisme, nor the gospell, nor Paule, ne Peter, nor Hierome, ne Augustine, not yet Thomas of Alquyne, who is euin Aristotles heyre and one hand, are able to make a man Christian, vnlesse these father bachelars of diuinitee, do vouchesaue to subscribe vnto the same” (83-4). Erasmus, in his characteristic way, defines an important aspect of his scepticism here. While it would be inaccurate to equate Erasmian scepticism with antirationality (Erasmus was, after all, one of the most talented Latinists and most influential thinkers of his day), Erasmus’s contempt for the clergy of his day is derived from the way in which they valued knowledge and intellectualism over their own faith. For Erasmus, what was important was what Richard Popkin describes as a “Christian spirit,” while maintaining that the “superstructure of the essential belief, is too complex for man to judge. Hence it is easier to rest in a skeptical attitude, and accept the age-old wisdom of the Church on these matters, than to try to understand and judge for one’s self” (Popkin 6). The skeptical attitude Popkin describes here

is a crucial aspect of Erasmus' personal brand of scepticism; he is far more concerned with presenting his own philosophic ideas than with presenting a sceptical argument designed to knock down the ideas of opponents.

Montaigne's youth could hardly be more different. Born into a prominent Catholic family and directed by his father to pursue the type of humanistic studies Erasmus supported, Montaigne actually spoke Latin as his first language for many years (Screech x). Even when he ceased the practice, he continued to read and write in Latin with precision and grace. Like Erasmus in his concern for a life of "freedom, cleanness, purity, simplicity, and rest" (Huizinga 301), Montaigne hoped for a life of intellectual leisure. His economic status, unlike Erasmus', permitted him great freedom and afforded him the chance to build a formidable library. Though like Erasmus in remaining formally affiliated with the Catholic Church (in an era that continued the calls for reformation and separation as loudly as in Erasmus' lifetime), Montaigne did not satirize or criticize the institutional Church. As Screech writes in his introduction to Montaigne's *Essays*, "He could ask deep questions, and revel in his doubt. Where he was wrong the Church could correct him if she would. He accepted her right to censure and to censor" (xvii). Though not a weak or merely Catholic practitioner, Montaigne is gentler in handling opponents and adversaries than Erasmus was. His love for antiquity furnished him with experience in the ancient Stoics, the Pyrrhonists, and the Epicureans, and it served as a natural foundation for his interest in scepticism.

Often referred to as "the father of modern scepticism," Montaigne was undoubtedly the most important and influential sceptical philosopher of the Renaissance. His particular brand of scepticism is characterized by the way in which it applied Pyrrhonian philosophy, found in the rediscovered texts of Sextus Empiricus, to the concerns of his contemporary society.

Montaigne's scepticism is intimately linked to his Catholic beliefs, and many of his works responded to reformation arguments against the Church. While the Reformers believed that one must accept religious truth with absolute certainty, Montaigne argued the polar opposite. For Montaigne, scepticism and Catholicism are not at odds at all, but instead bolster one another. In his *Apologie for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne asserts a total religious fideism; religion, he argues, should be based entirely upon the faith granted to us by God. Reason is subservient to faith, but it can be used secondarily to bolster faith if done so reverently. The customs and ceremonies in which the Catholic Church deemed the source of religious truth were for Montaigne too weak to contain Divine Knowledge, as they were derived from and performed by men. This final point is crucial to understanding Montaigne's scepticism: it underscores that man is fallible and imperfect, and because of this, we must turn questions of faith and religious knowledge over to faith.

In addition to Montaigne's treatment of faith in his writings, he also focuses heavily on human rationality—and how society and the supposed intelligence of man do not always produce a more virtuous individual than can be found in nature. In his *Apologie*, Montaigne argues against human intellectual superiority by comparing men to beasts at length. Popkin points out that Montaigne's *Apologie* contends “our alleged achievements of reason have helped us to find not a better world than the animals have, but a worse one. Our learning does not prevent us from being ruled by bodily functions and passions. Our so-called wisdom is a snare and a presumption that accomplishes nothing for us” (Popkin 45). Montaigne also examines the virtues of nature in his essay “Of the Cannibals.” Herein, Montaigne contends that “in some of the uncultivated fruits of those countries there is a delicacy of flavor that is excellent even to our taste, and rivals even our own” (142). Civilization, rather than fostering the growth of the better man, instead

smothers the higher virtues found in nature. When nature does shine through, however, it reveals that the best of the civilized world is but a pale imitation of the purity of nature. Montaigne argues his point using a fictional account of an encounter with native “cannibals” or “savages” and claims that these natural men are much closer to God in the sense that they are not burdened by the material or social concerns of the modern world.

Montaigne’s particular brand of Pyrrhonian scepticism, regarding the locus of virtue and truth, and the way in which this philosophy inspired and is featured in Shakespeare’s plays has been studied at length. It has long been taken for granted that Shakespeare had read John Florio’s 1603 translation of Montaigne’s “Of the Cannibals” due to Gonzalo’s speech in *The Tempest*, which borrows wholesale a section from Montaigne’s text. In addition to the lifted rhetoric, the play also explores similar themes as Montaigne does, with Shakespeare’s own interpretation of scepticism woven throughout. Because of the close relationship between *The Tempest* and Montaigne’s essay, there is large body of scholarship that examines Montaigne’s philosophy and the ways in which Shakespeare uses it in his play.

Both Erasmus and Montaigne benefitted from the increasing availability of classical texts in original languages, and both considered them deeply. It is perhaps no overstatement to claim that without Erasmus’ sustained philological program and the wide-reaching influence of his writings, Montaigne might not have received the humanist foundation that shaped his thought. Both men are very much of their times: Erasmus in the early days of humanist linguistic and philological work to combat the centuries of scholasticism, Montaigne in days of struggle between Protestant and Catholic French families of power. This is not to suggest that Montaigne openly or directly based his thinking on Erasmus, or that Erasmus must stand as the cause for Montaigne’s sceptical humanist mind. Rather, we should see both as valuable and influential

thinkers—and both as important sources for Shakespeare’s works. If we find much to recall Montaigne in Shakespeare’s later plays, perhaps we might look to Erasmus for influence in earlier works. The scepticism of *Hamlet* or *Lear* or *Tempest* is clear enough, and we can expand the genre consideration easily to include *Twelfth Night*. Similarly, we might explore the earlier *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a text that predates the great tragedies and later experimental plays and establishes a platform for the scepticism in those later works.

Erasmus’ Influence on Shakespeare

Comparative study of Erasmus and Shakespeare is not a new trend, and scholarship readily provides some parallels between the two. In *The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* (1977), Kenneth Muir illustrates Erasmus’ sustained influence on Shakespeare throughout his career. He pairs Erasmus’ *Colloquies* with *The Comedy of Errors*, and also argues that the tone of *Hamlet* was “considerably influenced by Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*” (169). Significantly, however, Muir leaves Erasmus entirely out of his discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In his classic text *Shakespeare’s Small Latin and Lesse Greeke*, T.W. Baldwin meanwhile places Erasmus upon Shakespeare’s theoretical bookshelf (2.176). Baldwin claims that Erasmus (in addition to classical authors such as Aesop, Cicero, and others) were commonly taught in Renaissance schools, and that it is likely that Shakespeare encountered Erasmus’ *Copia* as least in passing as a schoolboy. He writes that, “there were editions of *Copia* in England in 1569 and 1573; and up to that time mentions of it in statutes are fairly frequent . . . all shades of opinion found it valuable. Shakespeare is not likely to have missed its benefits” (2.181). While Baldwin does not specifically name *The Praise of Folly* here, he nevertheless illustrates Shakespeare’s familiarity with Erasmus and it is not difficult to imagine that an artist as well-read as Shakespeare should encounter the Dutch humanist’s best-known work in school or otherwise.

Like Erasmus, Shakespeare seems to have been taken by the idea of exploring scepticism beyond religious debate in terms of the limits of rational understanding and logic, and throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we see a battle between human love and rationality. In the opening scene, we see Hermia argue her love against the legislation of her father's law-given right to choose her husband, and throughout the remainder of the play, the young lovers' plot gives us ample other examples. We see Egeus argue Demetrius' merits despite Hermia's disinterest and his tendency to philandering. We witness Helena's frustration at Demetrius' inability to see her beauty and charm. And we watch the chaos caused by Puck's flower as it switches the affections of the lovers. In each of these situations, conflict arises because the characters attempt to explain or understand love through rationality, an act that both Shakespeare and Erasmus recognize to be futile.

Shakespeare's debt to Erasmus extends beyond a similar outlook on scepticism, and there is a wealth of other similarities between the texts that underscore the likelihood of *The Praise of Folly's* influence on Shakespeare's play. While Shakespeare generally restricted his borrowings from source material to concepts or themes as Miola suggests, there are moments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that feature diction nearly transcribed from Chaloner's translation of Erasmus. In addition to this direct line of reference, we can also draw parallels between the actual characters in the two texts. Early in Erasmus' text, Folly lists her followers; she includes Selfloue, Adulacion, Obliuion, Lythernes, Voluptuousnes, Madnes, Delicacie, Belichere, and Soundslepe. This cast of characters can be applied to the characters or settings in Shakespeare's play, and it supplies us with a highly useful analogue between scepticism and folly that will inform Shakespeare's later, arguably more sceptical, tragedies. The mere presentation of parallels does not constitute proof; nevertheless it is impossible to overlook the similarities that,

when viewed together, all indicate Shakespeare's debt to Erasmus when composing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's Borrowed Diction

The presence of parallel or similar diction between a Shakespearian text and an alleged influence can often serve as a starting point for a source study. It is nearly impossible to encounter an essay on *The Tempest*, for example, and not find at least a passing nod to the words of Montaigne (via Florio) from the mouth of Gonzalo. Bell examines Shakespeare's first recorded usage of words found in (or as she argues, borrowed from) Montaigne in an attempt to argue Shakespeare's interest in the sceptic predates *The Tempest*. She proposes that, "relation to Montaigne may be greatest where there are fewest direct traces of specific transfer" (21). She then, like Miola, illustrates the common themes between *Othello* and Montaigne's writings instead of citing clear borrowings such as the presence of borrowed phrasing and words found in *Lear*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet*. Similar to the parallels between *The Tempest* and Florio's translation of Montaigne, echoes of Chaloner's English *Praise of Folly* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are impossible to overlook.

Perhaps the most striking occurrence of parallel diction between the texts occurs late in the play. After she discovers the young lovers in the woods, Hippolyta remarks how strange their account of the night seems. Theseus replies

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains
Such shaping fantasies that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet

Are of imagination all compact (V.i.4-8).¹

Not only is this a mirror of Erasmus' words, which read, "Nor Plato likewise woulde haue put the rauyng of poetes, prophetes, and louers, amonge the principall weals, and benefits of this life" (51),² but both instances also feature a common theme. Theseus, guided by his own love for his bride-to-be, has the insight to see that the young lovers cannot articulate their experiences in the woods because they cannot be explained by reason. Folly, who would agree with this sentiment, points out that the nature of love and the madness associated with it is not recognized or valued by philosophers because it cannot be quantified by rationality.

Another point of similarity between the two texts can be found during the performance by the Rude Mechanicals, who have added a ridiculous prologue to their production of *Pyramus and Thisby*. Upon viewing Quince stumble through the prologue, Lysander comments, "It is not enough to speak, but to speak true" (V.i.120-1). This same sentiment is echoed throughout *The Praise of Folly*, in which Erasmus continuously criticizes the logicians and clergy of his day who use their knowledge and language to demean others. Fools, on the other hand, have, "a meruailous propretee, in that they onely are plainsayers, and southspeakers. And what is more laudable (at least outwardely ye commende it) than plainesse of speech?" (49). In contrast to Erasmus' philosophers and logicians who aim to confuse with their language, the Rude Mechanicals are overly-literal with their interpretation of the play, but nevertheless seek to be honest with the audience about the performance they are about to witness.

¹William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream. The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2e. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans et.al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 256-80. Print. All references to Shakespeare hereafter are to act, scene, and line in this edition.

² Desiderius, Erasmus, *The Praise of Folie*. Trans. Thomas Chaloner. 1594. Ed. Clarence H. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. Print. All references to Erasmus hereafter are to this edition of Chaloner's translation.

In addition to the borrowings from his near-contemporaries, Shakespeare pays tribute to the classical poet Ovid throughout *MND* through the use of the Pyramus and Thisbe myth. Perhaps just as significant, however, is the way in which Shakespeare also draws inspiration from the Midas myth in the *Metamorphoses*—a myth that Erasmus mentions in his text. Early in *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus implores the reader to lend the goddess of folly his ear, and he writes, “bestowe on me your eares a while. I meane not those eares that ye carie with you to sermons, but those ye geue to plaiers, to iesters, and to fooles. Yea, those (hardly) wherewith my friende Midas whilom herkened to the rurall god Pan, in preferryng his rusticall songe, before Apollos farre fyner Melodie” (8). Erasmus here refers to the myth in which Apollo curses Midas with donkey ears for preferring Pan’s flute to Apollo’s lyre. He asks his audience not to regard him as they would a priest or theologian, but instead to consider the text he is about to present in the same way they would regard a play, a work of art, or a jester’s act. This is not to say, however, that he means to suggest that the reader should not take the philosophies presented in the text seriously, and throughout the duration of *Folly* he goes on to argue that it is to those fools with asses’ ears we should look to model ourselves on instead of the learned priests or academics. It is not surprising, then, that Shakespeare should give the ass’s ears to Nick Bottom, the very embodiment of Erasmus’ noble fool in *MND*, and who reminds us that “man is but an ass” (IV.i.206) if we rely solely on rational understanding.

While Shakespeare had access to the story of Midas through Ovid, the similarities between the way in which the ass’s ears are used in the play and in *Folly* are perhaps too great to ascribe to mere coincidence. Thelma Greenfield points out that “in their comic handling of human irrationality, both *Praise of Folly* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* make impressive use of the ass emblem and its conventional associations of foolishness long existent in art and

proverb” (239). In the same way that Erasmus calls for his audience to listen to him with the ears of fools, Bottom enters “*with an ass’s head*” (III.i.103 s.d.) into the farcical scene in which Titania falls in love with him. The subsequent action, though ridiculous, results in Bottom achieving insight pertaining to imagination and love deeper than any of the other characters in the play. Upon donning the ass’s head, he notes that “reason / and love keep little company together now-a-days” (III.i.143-4) in response to Titania’s attraction towards him, and yet (like Shakespeare) he does not seek to completely separate the two. Bottom further elaborates, “The more the pity that some honest neighbors / will not make them friends” (III.i.145-6). Here, Bottom argues the need for a balance—not a binary—between love and rationality, and with this realization, Shakespeare sets up for us the insight that Bottom will present through the description of his dream later in the play (IV.ii.200-18).

The decision to voice such powerful dialogue through the simple character of Nick Bottom affirms Shakespeare and Erasmus’ shared belief that greatness can be found—and perhaps must be found—outside of the purely rational. If we follow Erasmus and eschew our rationality, it leads us to find the value and truth to the words of “plaiers,” “iesters,” and “fooles” (8). By seizing upon this same image, Shakespeare underscores the importance of the message of the play as well as Bottom’s words, and it is perhaps for this reason that he voices such complex ideas through such a simple character. Despite the obvious irony of the scene, Titania’s exclamation, “Thou art wise as thou art beautiful” (III.i.148) shows in no uncertain terms Shakespeare’s shared belief in the power of fools’ words.

Analogue of Characters In the Two Texts

Non content with merely borrowing sentences, Shakespeare also pursues an examination of folly in a similar manner as Erasmus. Early in his text, Erasmus lists and describes each of Folly's attendants. They include Selfloue, Adulacion, Obliuion, Lythernes, Voluptuousnes, Madnes, Delicacie, Belichere, and Soundslepe (13). All of these attendants serve as a personification of a particular aspect of folly, and they can also be used to describe aspects of *MND*. Erasmus' cast of characters provides us with a highly useful analogue for interpreting the characters and setting in Shakespeare's text; in fact, they nearly pair off. It is through this more than coincidental pair-off that we see more than similar characters but parallel ways of thinking between the two texts.

To begin, Folly's attendant Obliuion (Forgetfulness) can be ascribed to the forest—arguably a character itself in Shakespeare's play. Erasmus' description of Forgetfulness details the way in which she removes the wits of man and thus alleviates the anxieties caused by the senses. He writes that Forgetfulness sees to it that “good dotards, shall in the meane whyle rest vacant and discharged of all suche cares and anxieties, wherwith wisemen of fressher sprites are wrongen continually” (18). In the same way that Obliuion removes from men the torment of their senses, the forest in *MND* is the seat of forgetfulness in the play. The Young Lovers plot is driven by the ease with which the couples switch their affections and forget their partners due to the magic of the woods. Titania and Oberron's conflict over the changeling boy is also resolved due to the magic of Puck's flower, which causes Titania to obsess over Bottom at the expense of all else.

In the play's forest scenes, time becomes distorted, and Shakespeare leaves us only with the knowledge that the scenes take place during some hour of the night. While the play begins

with a promised time frame of four days until Hermia must make her decision, we receive few indications of timing after the lovers enter the woods. In the same manner that the young lovers are freed from the constraint of Theseus' deadline, Erasmus describes his goddess of forgetfulness as an agent who removes us from the pressures of time and our short lives. He writes, "if men had the grace to forebare quite from medlying with wisdom, leadyng foorth all theyr lyfe in my seruice, now (I wene) there should be no olde age at all, but rather they should enioie a moste happie, and continuall youthe" (19). The young lovers of the play, of course, are not granted eternal youth, but they are released from the shackles of time while in the woods. The fairies, however, do appear to retain their youth, and as the agents of forgetfulness in the woods, they embody the qualities of Oblivion, Erasmus' goddess of forgetfulness.

Voluptuousnes, Folly's attendant responsible for pleasure, is another important member of Erasmus' pantheon—so important that Erasmus contends that it is essential for life. Folly questions, "as touchyng this life here, maie it woorthily be called a life (I praie you) if ye take pleasure and delight awaie?" (16). In Shakespeare's text, we see a reflection of this in the opening act when Hermia argues for her right to wed Lysander, the man she loves. When faced with marrying Demetrius or death, Hermia chooses death over a forced marriage with someone she does not love. Conversely, Erasmus describes the *absence* of pleasure in terms reminiscent of Egeus. He writes, "the further he is retired from me, the lesse and lesse he liueth, vntill at last, tedious olde age dooe crepe vpon hym, not onely vrksome to others, but hatefull also to him selfe" (17). Egeus, the only truly negative character in the play, causes misery to his daughter and her lover until the folly of the woods intervenes to unite the lovers and cast him aside. In the end, the love that the two couples share, as well as the joy of the newly-wed Theseus overcomes

the absence of pleasure in Egeus, and after the opening act, he returns only for a few short lines when the young lovers are found.

Puck is the catalyst for much of the chaos and misrule in the play, and his counterpart in Erasmus' text is appropriately named Madnes. David Young points out that "for the Elizabethans, as for us, insanity meant the severing of one's ties to reality. Imagination, no longer serving to link reason and the senses, runs free and wild" (136). Upon entering into the domain of the fairies, the Young Lovers unknowingly place themselves at the mercy of Puck, and it is he who finally severs the love-addled Athenians from reality. Much of the madness in the play is ignited by the fickleness of love and affection, and this fickleness is in turn caused by Puck's misuse of the magic flower. Upon witnessing the results of the error, Puck eventually amends his actions, noting "Jack shall have Jill / Naught shall go ill / The man shall have his mare again and all shall be well" (III.ii.460-3). The ridiculousness of the affair is underscored by the ease with which the young lovers switch their affections when Puck intervenes with the flower. In the end, it is ultimately the magic of the flower—representing the madness of love—that brings together the correct couples. Erasmus' explanation of the happiness of marriage is that it is derived from Folly, and she claims, "if ye owe your liues to wedlocke, and wedlocke, ye owe to my damoisell Madnes, now ye maie soone gesse what ye owe, and shoulde referre to me" (15). While we do not see the Young Lovers marry in the play, it is Puck who, using the magic flower, ensures that by the end of the play Demetrius and Helena as well as Lysander and Hermia pair off. Shakespeare even directly refers to the young lovers as fools when Puck, witnessing Helena pining after Demetrius, proclaims "Lord what fools these mortals be!" (III.ii.117).

In addition to Puck, Oberon also takes the form of an agent of madness in the play. While Puck is busy with the Athenian lovers, Oberon uses the magic of the flower on Titania. Once under the spell, she pursues her love for Bottom at the expense of all else, including her personal dignity, and Erasmus describes this maddening effect of love in his text. He writes that the madness of lovers is “about all others most blissfull: because that a vehement louer liueth not now in hym selfe, but rather in that that he loueth, so that the further and further a louers hert is distraught from him selfe, to dwell with his beloued, the more and more he reioyseth” (126). The flower has this precise effect on Titania as well as Bottom. Upon seeing Bottom, Titania exclaims “Mine ear is much enamored of thy note; / So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape; / And thy fair virtue’s force (perforce) doth move me / On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee” (III.i.137-41). Once she is under the spell, gone is her desire to keep the changeling boy from Oberon. The madness of her love for Bottom calms the discord caused the quarrel over the boy, and the once-proud fairy queen is reduced to fondling Bottom’s donkey ears.

Among the attendants, Erasmus spends the most time developing Selflove. For Erasmus, self-love does not mean vanity or narcissism, but an acceptance of, and appreciation for, one’s identity. Predictably, the pair-off most worthy of our examination features the character who most often steals the show, Nick Bottom, who in his simplicity—and even stupidity—strikes a chord within us all. Erasmus writes that without self-love, “ye shal see the Oratour cold in his mattier, the musicien mislyked with all his discant, the plaier hissed out of the place” (29). It is precisely this self-satisfaction and self-love that spurs Bottom and the other Rude Mechanicals on through their performance, despite the complete foolishness of it. Shakespeare, ever-fond of exploring drama through metaphor, discusses through Theseus the act of performing a drama. In response to Hippolyta’s remark about the ridiculousness of the *Pyramus and Thisbe*

performance, Theseus states that “The best [actors] in this kind are but shadows; / and the worst are no worse if our imagination amend them.” (V.i.211-2). The Duke here urges his wife not to judge the performance too harshly because he recognizes the work and effort the craftsmen put into the play, and he recognizes and finds enjoyment in the irrationality and folly of the performers.

Even on the point of the Rude Mechanicals’ performance, Erasmus’ text makes direct reference to artists, and he further expounds upon the special form of self-love found in those who practice the arts. He writes, describing Bottom with near perfection:

commonly the woorst thynges are best fantesied, because (as afore I saied) the most parte of men are subiecte vnto Folie. And therefore, if so be that a man the vncunnynger he is, he deeper yet standeth in his own conceite, and is of moste men the more accepted, now I see not to what entent he shoulde rather coueite the true and perfite knowlage of the thyng that he professeth. (61)

The aspect of self-love Erasmus presents here seems to have a negative edge. He seems to ask: why should any artist work to improve his craft if the majority of men are entertained by unskilled artists? In the case of Bottom, however, we have a character who is far too simple-hearted and simple-minded to think this way. While Bottom may not be a model of the ideal man, he is more endearing and admirable than the hyper-rational characters because of his limitations. The bumbling artisan is probably the least-talented actor out of the Rude Mechanicals, but he is certainly the most enthusiastic. These two qualities combine in order to produce an awful performance, but nevertheless a charming and entertaining spectacle. Theseus expresses this notion when, despite Philostrate’s warning, he states his desire to see the performance. He explains that “never any thing can be amiss / When simpleness and duty tender

it” (V.i.83-4). The Rude Mechanicals’ honesty and sincerity in producing the play as a wedding gift for Theseus prompt the duke to see the play and appreciate their effort.

Characteristics of Scepticism in MND and Folly

In the action and characterization of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we see a brand of scepticism emerge that aligns quite well with Erasmus’ philosophy. The similar outlook on scepticism lies in the way in which both texts explore the tension between intellection and imagination, art, and love. For Erasmus, important human tendencies like love are governed by folly. Shakespeare, however, does not place love and rationality *completely* at odds. Rather, he illustrates that a balance between the two is necessary.

Theseus has been interpreted variously throughout Shakespearian criticism, but regardless of whether he is viewed as an imaginative noble or an overly rational sceptic, his character perfectly illustrates the sceptical view of rationality that Erasmus and Shakespeare both share. One common point of departure among critics is Theseus’ “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet” speech (V.i.7). David Young reminds us in *Something of Great Constancy* that “reason and imagination were often set in opposition by Renaissance thinkers, but, like dreaming and waking, shadows and substance, they were not considered equals” (126). Reason and the rational faculty were considered to be paramount during the Renaissance, and Theseus may be interpreted as representative of pure rationality.

Young comments that Theseus does “not know the value of imagination” (141), and R. W. Dent in his “Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” even goes as far as to claim that Theseus “at no time implies any respect” for art or imagination in the play (100). These types of readings are dependent upon the perceived tone of the duke’s observation of lovers’ “seething

brains” and “shaping fantasies” (V.i.4-5). For an Elizabethan audience that valued reason and logic, these descriptors would have undoubtedly have been understood to imply the foolishness of the lovers. This purely rational Theseus, however, represents precisely the audience that Erasmus criticizes, for while the duke takes upon himself the “semblant of wysedome” (10) he cannot hope to attain true wisdom through rationality alone. He aligns himself with the type of men whom Erasmus declares “in deed are archdoltes, and woulde be taken yet for sages and philosophers” (10). While this reading of Theseus is a valid interpretation, it is perhaps too narrow a view of the duke, and there are numerous points in the text that resist such a reading.

An alternate reading of Theseus presents him a character that traditionally *should* be very incarnation of rationality, but who ends with the realization that there is much that cannot be understood through logical thinking alone. The events of the play invert the Elizabethan hierarchy whereby rationality supersedes imagination, and through this Shakespeare argues the importance and power of imagination and art. Dorothea Kehler points out in her “Bibliographic Survey of the Criticism” the various trends in the interpretation of Theseus’ character ranging from Young’s hyper-rational Duke to a deep thinker who fully appreciates the arts. Kehler shows us that Critics in favor of an autobiographical reading, such as William Magnin, tend to regard Theseus not as an embodiment of rationality or art, but as a representation of the playwright himself (8). While it may be too prescriptive to identify Theseus as a direct translation of Shakespeare, we can see Shakespeare’s scepticism at work in the duke’s development throughout the text.

At the outset of the play, we can already see the effect that Theseus’ love for his bride to be has upon the supposedly rational duke, and the clash of intellection and emotion ultimately culminates in his speech during the Rude Mechanicals’ performance. The play opens with a

dialogue between Theseus and Hippolyta in which the duke laments how slowly the days leading up to his marriage seem to be passing, and he urges time onward (I.i.3-7). Of course, the passage of time has not been altered, but his perception of it has changed due to his excitement. Much like Erasmus' *Madnes* (15), who is responsible for the folly of love, Theseus' mind is clouded from the beginning of the play due to his love for his bride-to-be. Here, Shakespeare undermines Theseus' position as the voice of rationality in Athens, and through Hippolyta's calm, rational reminder that "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night" (I.i.7) inverts the Renaissance expectation of women's position as the irrational and emotional sex. This opening exchange serves to illustrate Theseus' irrational state throughout the play, but Shakespeare neither criticizes nor scorns the duke for this.

Later in the play, Helena points out that, "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind" (I.i.234)—the mind here referring to the imagination in contrast to the empirical sensory data gained through sight—and by the end of the play, it seems we have a duke who has fully realized this. While watching the Mechanicals' dreadful performance, Theseus encourages his wife and the other nobles not to judge the performance too harshly, but to allow their "imagination" to "amend" the artisans (V.i.11). He then explains that "if we imagine no worse for them than they / of themselves, they may pass for excellent men" (V.i.215-16). As Dent argues in his criticism of the play, a central theme is that "the eyes 'see' what the lover's imagination dictates" (89). Theseus, transformed through his love for his bride, sees not the mistakes of the shoddy production, but the value in the attempt at expression through art.

Hippolyta meanwhile remains in the logical attitude in which she was presented at the outset of the play, and due to this, she cannot overlook the mistakes of the actors in order to appreciate the art. Perhaps believing herself to be better than the low class Mechanicals, her

dialogue reminds us of the intellectuals whom Erasmus criticizes. These intellectuals eagerly wait for “one of them to stumble at some woorde, and an other being more aduised than he to take hym with the maner, (Oh Hercues) what Tragedies, what Disputacions, what Inuectiues are tossed and retossed between then” (72). Shakespeare, like Erasmus challenges the binary between reason and imagination and he argues that the latter should not always be considered inferior to the former. Through his art, Shakespeare has, as Young states, “broken down an orthodox Renaissance dichotomy to force a reexamination of human knowledge and experience” (141). Through *Theseus and Hippolyta*, Shakespeare shows us that, though irrational, the ways in which love and imagination transform our ability to apprehend art are no less powerful than intellection and rationality.

In addition to the interactions between *Theseus and Hippolyta*, Shakespeare presents perhaps his most overt argument for the power and importance of dreams and imagination through the “dream” of Nick Bottom. Upon waking in act V, he contemplates his time spent with Titania, which he regards as a dream. He muses, “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about [t’] expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell me what” (IV.i.204-8). Here, Bottom grasps for language to express the emotions evoked within him from the love and kindness Titania showed him in his “dream.” Of course, the simple Bottom cannot put his experience into words, but through this scene Shakespeare argues that this is not due to Bottom’s mental capacity, but to the ability of emotion to transcend reason and logical representation. Dent points out that *MND* illustrates that “the imagination in love often operates in defiance of ‘discretion,’ especially in creating beauty observable by no one but the creator” (102), and Bottom is an embodiment of this idea. We cannot know whether or not Bottom believes the

events of his dream to be true, but here the reality of his experience is not as important as the powerful emotions it caused within him. Through Bottom's dream sequence, Shakespeare shows us that dreams, art, and the imagination may not be "true" or "real," but they nevertheless constitute their own powerful reality through the ways in which they connect to his audience.

Bottom is able to recognize the significance of his dream despite not being able to fully comprehend it, and ability to believe without rationality aligns him with the wise fools Erasmus praises in his text. One of the ways Erasmus distinguishes his fools from the "wise" men he critiques is that "*the one is ledde by reason, the other by sensualitee*" (39). Paradoxically, Bottom certainly lacks reason, but as we can see when he suggests his ridiculous prologue (III.i.15), he also lacks the imagination needed to comprehend (and participate in) art. His experience with Titania, in which he realizes that "love and reason keep little company together (III.i.143-4) forces him to realign his thinking in a way that begins to lead him to an appreciation of art and love. Throughout the whole of the play, we see characters with far more intelligence than Bottom wrestle with the opposition of love and rationality, so it is little surprise that Bottom is unsuccessful when he tries to rationalize his dream through language. He therefore is left with what some might see as the other side of the binary—imagination—as a means of comprehending his time with Titania.

While Shakespeare's scepticism and view of love and the imagination are consonant with Erasmus' argument throughout the *The Praise of Folly*, he does not argue that we should allow ourselves to be entirely governed by our emotions. With the characters of *MND*, Shakespeare presents us with numerous occasions to witness the negative edge of folly, in which characters are entirely smitten by their beloved. Helena's spaniel speech, in which she beseeches Demetrius, "Use me but as your spaniel; spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me; only give

me leave, / Unworthy as I am, to follow you” (II.i.205-7) is one such case, and we see Helena under the spell of both the forest and her love for Demetrius. Gone is the noble woman known throughout Athens, and instead Shakespeare gives us a woman in the complete disarray of excessive unrequited love. Her behavior, which Dent describes as “dotage” and “amorous excess approaching madness: the monumental pursuit of unrequited love . . . or the ridiculous bestowal of affection upon an obviously unworthy subject” (88) seems quite foolish. Why shouldn’t she abandon Demetrius, who clearly does not reciprocate her feelings, and consort with one of the men of Athens who regard her as fair as Hermia? Of course, Helena is overcome by her love for Demetrius, and because of this she does not have the ability to see the silliness of her actions from a rational perspective.

By presenting Helena in this debased mental state, Shakespeare shows us the negative edge to the folly of love. On the one hand, we must submit ourselves to folly in order to gain any sort of comprehension of love and emotion. On the other, complete submission to folly leads us to dotage. Erasmus likewise addresses the potentially negative aspects of the folly of love in his text. He writes that the love between spouses is “propped vp” and “nourished” by “flarerie, now with daliance, now with sport, with forbearng, with errour, with dissemblyng (all my garde I warrant you) (28). This presents a somewhat cynical and fickle view of love, which can only be sustained by the deception and flattery between the partners. Through the events of the play, Shakespeare almost constantly barrages the audience with the importance of love and the imagination, yet through Helena’s spaniel speech he also argues that the Renaissance view of logic and love as unequal oppositions is misleading. If we were wholly rational beings, we would become the logical Hippolyta—unenthused at her recent marriage to Theseus. If we

surrender ourselves entirely to love, however, we lose our self-worth and become the fawning spaniel that is Helena.

Conclusion

Because we have virtually no first-hand knowledge of Shakespeare's personal records, it is nearly impossible to know with absolute certainty the texts and contexts he considered when writing and drafting his works. We do occasionally have 'smoking gun' evidence (such as Florio's Montaigne in *The Tempest*), but no such evidence exists in the case of Erasmus. Nevertheless the sets of parallels that exist between *The Praise of Folly* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are too strong and numerous to be attributed to mere coincidence. These parallels—in addition to Erasmus' fame and the wide availability of Chaloner's English translation—indicate that before the availability of Montaigne, Shakespeare had in Erasmus a model from which he could begin to formulate his scepticism.

From Erasmus, we receive an examination of humanity in terms of our inclination to folly. Rather than viewing this as a negative trait, however, Erasmus instead holds folly up for admiration, and he attributes love, art, marriage, and happiness to folly. For Erasmus, the "fool" who accepts his fundamental human ignorance instead of trying to comprehend everything rationally is in fact wise. Meanwhile, the learned logicians and philosophers bound down by a purely rational outlook are the truly foolish, as they seek to apprehend more than logic allows. The clergy is not spared from Erasmus' attack, and he spends a great deal of time criticizing the current state of the Church.

In Shakespeare's play, we see not a religious debate, but an assertion that the human heart is far better understood on its own terms. Shakespeare, like Erasmus, does not advocate

complete anti-rationality, but his play instead illustrates that a balance between the two is necessary. Throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the young lovers plot illustrates the irrationality—or folly, as Erasmus would say—of love, and the tragic threat of Egeus underscores the consequences of attempting to control love with logic. At this point in his career, Shakespeare's scepticism (as seen in his works) is not characterized by Montaigne's complete doubt of our capacity for knowledge. Instead, we see a scepticism shaped by Erasmus' philosophy of folly. For Shakespeare, love—the act of giving oneself wholly to another with no insurance that it will be returned—is the ultimate form of folly. And though it can (perhaps literally in a Shakespearian world) make an ass of us all, love has the power to elevate the spirit in ways that cannot be explained by the limited rationality of man. Erasmus would surely approve.

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