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'The story shall be changed': antique fables and agency in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is full of stories: from Titania's narrative of the votaress' baby, the mechanical's play, the allusions to Ovid and Virgil, and the resolution in which the young couples imagine their entire experience has been a fiction, a shared hallucination, perhaps one of Puck's offensive shadows, evince the power of fabula to shape narrative and translate thought into action. The play's focus on the critical contours of narrative – fabula, text and story – supports an apparent fascination with the cultural relationships between language and imagination as they are represented by the construction and recognition of narrative experience.¹ The 'continuous discussion about meaning' that sustains narrative analysis becomes the central motif through which story is asserted in *Dream*. The fabula, or fable, a term used in narrative theory to denote the ways in which things are presented, maintains the anamorphic perspective in which, according to Hermia, 'everything seems double' (4.1.187).² The 'parted eye' of Hermia's cognition reflects her story as both experienced and imagined, 'indistinguishable', and 'melted as the snow' as Demetrius would have it, so that the 'dream' becomes the dominant motif through which events are both experienced and denied.³ The language in which both Hermia and Demetrius represent their time in the wood supports the ethereal qualities of their stories: interspersed with reflections on their own memories, consciousness and temporal awareness, the young lovers establish themselves as unreliable narrators even as the audience stands by as witness. Such narrative reflexivity which calls into question how the story is presented, even as it attempts to represent it, highlights the play's self-conscious fascination with the relationship between imagination and hypothesis. Yet the idea of story, the 'visible contours of an absent world', as Rawdon Wilson defines it, takes on many forms in *Dream* and extends its formative role well beyond the layered fabric of intertextuality.⁴

Perhaps more than any other play by Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has inspired a critical focus on the play's untold stories, as well as its allusions, and the 'airy nothings' of the lunatic, the lover and the poet have come to symbolise the affective landscape of the play and the ambitions of the creative

¹ Mieke Bal, *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), pp. 8-10.

² Bal, *Introduction to Narrative Theory*, p. 55. The term 'fable' as used by Theseus refers to fictitious, and hence, according to the OED, 'ridiculous' stories. Here the term 'fable' is distinct from 'history' or 'story' in that it specifically refers to mythological or legendary events.

³ Unlike the story, the word dream does not presuppose a logical connection between events or images, and is specifically allied with the illusory or supernatural.

⁴ Rawdon Wilson, *Shakespearean Narrative* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), p. 100. Barbara Mowat observes the multilayered allusions within the play, including Plutarch, Chaucer, Ovid, and Reginald Scot, whose *Discoverie of Witchcraft* provides Shakespeare with a skeptical critique of the role of story in facilitating fantasy, 'A Local Habitation and a Name: Text as Construct', *Style*, 23 (Fall, 1989).

imagination.⁵ Where Peter Holland observed the many shadows of the allusive Theseus in the play, Anthony Nuttall understands the formative role that myth plays in repressing, as well as telling, stories.⁶ For both Holland and Nuttall the play produces a series of multidimensional narratives through the prehistories of the onomastic roles of many of the characters, including Theseus, Egeus and Hippolyta.⁷ Within these terms Nuttall attends to what he calls the 'background horror' of the play's allusions and the deliberate role that exclusion plays in shaping the action of the comedy: what we begin to observe, so Nuttall suggests, is what does not happen rather than what does, and this, in turn, creates 'a half memory' 'at the edge of consciousness'. It is precisely this half memory that Holland perceives as a shadow, 'a man on the stair', who can be noticed as well as ignored. The play seems to challenge its audience to take a position on how we engage with such shadows, and, in doing so, define our relationship, not only to the play world, but to comedy itself. One of the most formative stories for the narrative action, the medieval legend of Tristan and Iseult, where a magic love potion is used to forge a strategic bond but unwittingly drunk to tragic consequences, is rerouted here, like the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, towards comedy, where love can be celebrated as magic, rather than condemned. The half memories, shadows, man on the stair or uncanny allusion become metaphors for the imaginative role that story plays in *Dream*.

But the role of story, as a reflexive model of change, dominates the play's action not only through the ways in which events are shaped and controlled by the imaginative magic of the fairy world but in the terms through which the characters in the play call on the story as a powerful motif of transformation, in which both the past and the present are still in contention. Story is the dominant design through which this potential for change can be invoked. As Hannah Arendt suggested, in *The Human Condition*, stories become a form of action in relation to both remembrance and work, which, as Paul Ricoeur explains, serve as 'witness to the difference between time as duration and time as passage'.⁸ Where Shakespeare's use of the term history is frequently embedded in temporal relations between the past and the present, his use of the word 'story' is more concerned with the relationship between truth and fiction. On many occasions, however, both meanings collide so that the value of the story is in relation to the past and the power of history is its fiction. Shakespeare's Scrivener in *Richard III* notoriously calls the veracity of written record into question in the middle of this most famous history play, when he produces the trumped up dossier for Hasting's execution: the 'indictment of good Lord Hastings' is 'the palpable

⁵ Joan Rees's *Shakespeare and the Story* is especially invested in locating narrative patterns in Shakespeare's work as an analytical structure through which she can observe the creature process (London: The Athlone Press, 1978).

⁶ Peter Holland, 'Theseus' Shadows in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Shakespeare Survey* (47), 1994, pp. 139-151. A. D. Nuttall, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: Comedy as Apotrope of Myth', *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (2000), pp. 49-59.

⁷ Barbara Mowat, 'A Local Habitation and a name: Shakespeare's Text as Construct', *Style*, 23 No. 3, Fall (1989), pp. 335-351, also writes on the role of Chaucer in the play's portrayal of Theseus, as she addresses some of the many threads that contribute to Shakespeare's characterisation.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Paul Ricoeur, 'Action, Story and History: Re-Reading The Human Condition', *Salmagundi* 60 (1983), 65.

device' of a 'sequel [which] hangs together'. Calling attention to the illogical (and unjust) temporality of events in which Hastings lives 'untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty' while his indictment is prepared, the scrivener reflects on the injustice of a world in which we know but cannot know:

Here's a good world the while! Why who's so gross,
That seeth not this palpable device?
Yet who's so blind, but says he sees it not?
Bad is the world; and all will come to nought,
When such bad dealings must be seen in thought (3.6.10-14).⁹

Producing a theatrical focus on the textual uncanny: the written, legal, record, 'set in a fair hand', but containing false information unsettles the very documents of history that the play appears to dramatize.¹⁰ What matters to the scrivener is not the record itself but the ways in which we can respond to it. Such formal records defy critique and refuse revision; most significantly, when thought is the only recourse for response, action is denied. Story, on the other hand, can be distinguished through its potential, in iteration, for action. Hamlet's play, Lavinia's Ovid, Mamillius's tale all appear at moments to illuminate the unforeseen. There are, of course, a great many different types of stories in Shakespeare's drama: allusions, intertexts, memories, exemplars, images, narratives, chronicles, tapestries, dreams, letters and books, for example, all support descriptive, consecutive events, and, as Barbara Hardy has shown, are as much dependent on the listener or viewer as they are on the teller.¹¹ The power of stories, in all their various manifestations, lies in the imaginative opportunities that they promote for the exorcising and the exercising of change.

It is this vivid potential of story that I want to explore. Here I will focus on the invocation of story as one of infinite possibility in which change is inscribed in the very process of relating narrative precedent, as well as alerting the audience to a shift in action.¹² The story in this way becomes a powerful motif of possibility in this period since it stands on the threshold, like Iago at the door of truth, between two meanings: one, its ordinary meaning of history or factual record and two its developing sense of fictional account or imaginative narrative.¹³ *Othello* is a resonant point of reference here since the stories of

⁹ Janette Dillon writes very well on this scene in *Shakespeare and the Staging of English History* (Oxford, 2013), p. 81.

¹⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction on the Archives*, is one of the best books on the subject of the relationship between history and story in this period. See also David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (London: Macmillan, 1982)

¹¹ Barbara Hardy, *Shakespeare's Story Tellers* (London: Peter Owen, 1997). Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1987), esp. pp. 193-221. John Astington, *Stage and Picture in the English Renaissance: the mirror up to nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) Keir Elam, *Shakespeare's Pictures: Visual Objects in the Drama* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Kerrigan's *Shakespeare's Originality* (Oxford, 2018) also explores the relationships between 'origin's and 'sources' and the contexts in which one text produces the conditions for the development of another.

¹² Wilson, *Shakespearean Narrative*, p. 9.

¹³ A. D. Nuttall, Comedy as Apotrope of Myth, *Shakespeare Survey* (53), pp. 49-59. Subha Mukerji, 'Trying, Knowing and Believing: Epistemic Plots and the Poetics of Doubt', in *Fictions of*

Othello's life that so bewitched Desdemona, to which she inclined her ear ravenous for more tales, are to Iago, nothing more than 'fantastical lies'.¹⁴ In a play so preoccupied by the circumstantial relationships between truth and fiction, between perception and event, the story becomes, for Othello, at least, 'the cause, the cause' of his destruction.¹⁵

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, the story emerges as a prehistory against which the play's characters must exert or absolve their identities. When Hermia and Lysander are discussing the impossible situation they are in, condemned by her father to marry someone she doesn't love or else die, and just before they decide to escape into 'the wood, a league without the town', Hermia reflects on the pre-histories of love:

Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth; (1.1.132-4)

Locating her sorrow in the context of stories, Hermia appears to comfort herself in the authenticity of her emotion because example elicits empathy. The distinction between tale and history is not clear cut, since both terms refer to accounts or sequences of events believed to be based on fact. What seems more important to Hermia is that she is referring to the modes of transmission, hearing or reading, through which such stories have been translocated. Appealing to her sensory reception of story, Hermia's character is animated by the hypothetical authority of legible love affairs. This is the interconnected discourse of story and remembrance through which the past is kept active in its appropriation by the present. Hermia, like the lovers in her narrative recall, inhabit a shared experience that is both familiar and different, or in Arendt's terms, suggestive of the distinction between time as duration and time as passage. What follows is a pithy exchange between her and Lysander where they both remember and rehearse the kinds of obstacles lovers have to face in order to render their love 'true': impediments such as status, age, friends, death, sickness or parents have made love 'momentary as a sound, / Swift as a shadow, short as any dream, / Brief as the lightning in the collied night' (1.1.143-5). This mutual recognition of the 'customary cross' that lovers must bear affirms that their love is 'true', since 'It stands as an edict in destiny'. Calling on the language of trials, customs and destinies, Hermia establishes the significance and stature of their love through its relation to both narrative and circumstance. In this way, as George Puttenham explains, story takes on the function of 'example', 'which is but the representable of old memories, and like successes happened in times past'.¹⁶ Puttenham emphasises example as the apotheosis of persuasion, which,

Knowledge: Fact, Evidence, Doubts eds. Yota Batsaki, Subha Mukerji and Jan-Melissa Schramm (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 84-109.

¹⁴ Laurie Maguire, *Othello: Language and Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), esp. pp. 19-76.

¹⁵ 5.2.1. See also 'It is the cause... an Analysis', John Money, *Shakespeare Survey* 6 (1953), pp. 94-105. Wilson notes that 'Iago narrativizes Desdemona's adultery out of many formally disconnected pieces, including questions, exclamations, broken repetitions (and other indirect echoes of Othello's own private discourse)', *Shakespearean Narrative*, p. 99.

¹⁶ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy*, (1899), p. 55.

as Lorna Hutson has recently suggested, is amplified by narrative circumstance. Circumstances are, she suggests, 'topical aids to the composition of persuasive arguments'.¹⁷ In this way Hermia produces recalled love stories as evidence of hypothetical realities to which her own story may adhere.

The authority that the play world seeks in its own status as fiction resides in the precarious position between art and nature that story inhabits. The relationship between art and life was, of course, one which preoccupied every renaissance writer, not just Shakespeare. Phillip Sidney had famously attempted to move this conversation on from the anxieties of the anti-theatricalists who perceived narrative art, and drama, especially, as too persuasive in its affective capacities. Sidney's audibly pleasing claim that 'neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgements, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry', suggests that poetry – as the persuasive language of imagination – animates debate, event and action. The pedagogic relationship between fact and fiction, written deep into the history of plot, chronicle and narrative, produces the most compelling arguments for the importance of art and the sustainability of stories. Despite Sidney's dismissal of history as dry and limited he recognises that all forms of writing take their cues from the environments in which they emerge. Using a potent metaphor, he explains:

There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were of what Nature will have set forth.¹⁸

In this way, stories are written, read, told, performed and remembered as an uncanny version of the manifest world. Arthur Golding suggests something similar when he prefaces his translation of Ovid with the hint that 'Now when thou readst of God or man, in stone, in beast, or tree / It is a myrroure for thy self thyne owne estate too see./ For under feyned names of Goddes it was the Poets guyse./The vice and faultes of all estates too taunt in covert wyse.'¹⁹ The pleasure and significance of stories is that they bind communities together through shared associations, moral empathy and a coherent structure. What makes narrative especially appealing in this context is that it appears to bridge the gap, just as Sidney suggested, between the phenomenal and imaginary worlds. Stories are both sympathetic and disruptive: they offer structures of relief but also of potential change. Within these terms the relationship between fact and fiction becomes infinitely more accessible and defensible. The history of all our lives is both the collective structures of shared memories and the individual impulses of perception. Hermia inserts herself into this history in which she is both the conventional figure of true love and the unique agent of its consequences. What dominates this exchange between the lovers is the idea that story – whether fact or fiction – is the driving impulse for the resolution of their destinies and the

¹⁷ Lorna Hutson, *Circumstantial Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁸ Sidney, *Selected Writings*, p. 106.

¹⁹ Arthur Golding's *translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, ed. W. H Rouse (London: De La More Press, 1904)[reprint of the first edition 1567], preface to the reader, l. 81.

value system against which their feelings can be measured. Ironically, of course, Lysander writes himself into history with the observation that ‘The course of true love never did run smooth’ pre-empting the trials of his own experiences but also the deviations from that paradigm. The ‘crossed’ lovers, the ‘edicts’ of ‘destiny’ and the ‘jaws of darkness’ that threaten to ‘devour’ the dream of love references the other great stories of this play, *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, and, of course, *Romeo and Juliet*. The compositional relationships between the two plays has long been the subject of speculation and editors of the play have tended to accept that *Romeo and Juliet* is the later work because it represents a slightly more sophisticated, and therefore experienced, dramatist at work.²⁰ It is perfectly possible that Shakespeare wrote both plays within a very short time of each other and that he may have written *Romeo and Juliet* first, so that *Dream* references the success of his own work. What is clear, however, is that Shakespeare is fascinated by ‘love’s stories written in love’s richest book’, as Lady Capulet would describe Paris, and the place those stories have in the dialogue between the experienced and the imaginary.

Structurally, we can quickly observe the importance of Shakespeare’s fictional worlds in *Dream*. Having established that the lovers will escape into the wood, we encounter the mechanicals, who will also retire into the wood to rehearse their play, where we then meet the fairy world for the first time. Following the winding paths of romance, we move deeper into the wood and away from the ‘sharp Athenian law’. Our first encounter with Puck celebrates him as a teller of stories – not only within the narrative of the play, filling us in, for example, on the argument between Titania and Oberon, but also as the ‘knaveish sprite’ who tells his own history.²¹ Recalling his impish pastimes in toying with the mortal world, Puck remembers a moment when

The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale
Sometime for threefoot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum. Down topples she,
And ‘Tailor’ cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole choir hold their hips and laugh,
And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there (2.1.51-7)

Puck’s story – his history, a narrative sequence of events – hangs on another story, that of the sagacious aunt telling a serious tale to her ‘choir’, during which time she mistakes Puck for a stool, sits on him, and then collapses to the ground bringing intense amusement to the assembled company. The real pleasure of this

²⁰ Despite the now dated context of his essay, Samuel Hemingway positions the plays very close to each other with *Dream* the slightly later play, suggesting that ‘*Dream* is the natural reaction of Shakespeare’s mind from *Romeo and Juliet*’, ‘The Relation of a Midsummer Night’s Dream to *Romeo and Juliet*’, *Modern Language Notes*, Volume 26, no. 3 (March 1911), p. 79.

²¹ See also Laura Levine, ‘Balanchine and Titania: Love and the Elision of History in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (2012), pp. 110-120, for an exploration of the presentation of the history of the Indian child.

moment, according to Puck's retelling of events, is the disruption of the serious tale by the amusing accident. Producing a model of story telling based on recall, improvisation, and narrative reflexivity, Puck demonstrates that transformation is inscribed in the processes of transmission. The aunt's story is interrupted and changed: and sadness is replaced by the merriest of moments. This, for Shakespeare, is the greatest power that the story can present: the ability to change, re-route, interrupt, transform the moment, the event, and even the ending. What makes this possible is not the exclusively fictional nature of the story – this is yet to be its defining motif – but precisely the opposite: that the story holds within its power the real and the imaginary; the factual and the possible; the predictable and the accidental.

Sidney's great justification of poetry was, of course, that it could make things 'anew': unlike the limiting structures of reality, poetry's transformative power lies in the fact that it is not driven by 'what is, hath been, or shall be' but by the 'divine consideration of may be and should be'.²² Where poetry, 'lifted up by the vigour of his own[the poet's] invention' can lay claim to the imagination as its governing impulse, the story is rooted in record, dependent upon a sequence of events believed to have been true. It is the spectre of truth, the pre-history of fact, or the presence of a past that makes story such a powerful medium for the exploration of change and the pursuit of feeling. If, as Lorna Hutson suggests, circumstances are the events through which stories gather their narratives, then the story as it is told within the play, and the stories that are referenced by the play, become enmeshed in a powerful dynamic between assertion and disruption with one always having the potential to overrule the legitimacy of the other. This dynamic is perhaps at its most obvious in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because of the play's structural and spatial interest in the relationship between fantasy and reality, and the authority of the imagination. The main action of the play takes place within the framing structure of the Athenian adults and the marriage between Hippolyta and Theseus. Within this narrative, however, critics have frequently observed the shadows of myth, which haunts the cheerful presentation of the play's opening marriage ceremony. Antony Nuttall, Peter Holland and Richard Wilson, among others, have recognised that the allusions to Theseus and Hippolyta record the story of a Greek myth in which scores of Amazonian women are massacred, their queen taken prisoner and forced into marriage; their son, Hippolytus is then killed having rejected the incestuous advances of his step-mother. In Nuttall and Holland's respective readings of the play, the presence of these myths serves to highlight the stories that Shakespeare represses; the stories he excludes which remain as powerful markers of what has not been told, what Nuttall calls 'back-ground terror'. Wilson, on the other hand, perceives that the play proceeds through a positive rejection of possible stories: 'Seneca's Hercules, Euripides Bacchae ... are all evaded during the action'.²³ For Nuttall, especially, calling the character Theseus but changing his story provides one of the many layers of darkness that the play produces.²⁴ In this way, myth

²² Sidney, *Selected Writings*, p. 109.

²³ Richard Wilson, 'The Kindly Ones: The Death of the Author in Shakespearian Athens', Richard Dutton, ed., *A Midsummer Night's Dream, 'New Casebooks'*, (London, 1996), p.213.

²⁴ Laura Aydelotte pursues a similar argument through the character of Oberon, and his prehistory in Berner's translation of *Huon de Bordeaux*, as well as Greene's 1594 play, *The*

serves a potentially apotropaic function, averting evil or the potential consequences of evil by being the story *not* told. If Shakespeare is banishing those stories by not telling them then the story itself becomes a fundamental place of re-invention. What becomes especially potent in this narrative of change, however, is the story's residual function as reality: you can only change the story, the plays suggest, if you accept it as having once been true.

Moving the action into the wood, the province of the fairies, the rehearsal ground for the mechanical's play, and an escape from Athens, *Dream* appears to acknowledge the centrality of fiction in the potential resolutions of the play's narrative. The story within the story becomes the central locus of action through which the play then references further stories – Pyramus and Thisbe, Dido and Aeneas, Cupid's history, and the thwarted lovers who are attempting to escape their destinies. The transitional space of the wood, as it becomes so powerfully associated with Ovid, the play-within-the play and 'fairy favours' presents a structural space for the exploration of fiction within the framing narrative of theatrical time. Within this context Shakespeare develops a technique of 'narrative hints', or reflexivity, through which allusion, and specifically Ovidian allusion, 'suggest different possible outcomes to the events and actions that we have seen'.²⁵ The story, as it is networked by allusion, becomes a radical site of possibility where the potential for change becomes the leit motif through which the plot progresses. Like Puck, the fairy world are presented to us through stories or recalled events that contextualise and characterise their behaviour: we learn of Oberon's jealousies, Titania's friendship with a votaress, where they met and the history of the 'little changeling boy'. Theseus, too, we learn has a history, largely defined by his ravishing of women, including Aegles, Ariadne, Antiope and Perigenia. Presenting this past through a set of shared memories, the king and queen of the fairies offer a mythological world of mermaids, cupids, and potions where everything adheres to a symbiotic relationship between cause and effect. As Wilson explains, 'Narrative explores alternatives. One kind of alternative is a causally linked past. In this sense, narrative clearly performs hypothesis-making work: in narrative imaginative accounts are unfolded to explain the present shape of things'.²⁶ We gather, for example, that the flower, love-in-idleness, or the wild pansy, prized within the play for its hypnotic effects, accrued such power because cupid's arrow fell to the ground, accidentally piercing the white flower and giving it its now purple streaks. Such stories, as the play presents them, deliver a pleasing correlation between fantasy and reality, the imaginative and phenomenal worlds that can observe the streaked pansy and understand 'the present shape of things'. This happy synthesis between fiction and reality, imagination and experience, is rehearsed in different registers throughout the play: the lovers, the mechanicals and the fairies all depend on and inspire a dynamic between experience and imagination that authorises their presence within the play.

Scottish Historie of James the Fourth, in her article, 'A Local Habitation and a Name: The Origins of Shakespeare's Oberon', *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (2012), pp. 1-11.

²⁵ Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 123. See also John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Originality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), who refers to 'an extrapolation of possible outcomes' in relation to *Much Ado about Nothing*, p. viii.

²⁶ Wilson, *Shakespearean Narrative*, p.32.

Yet the idea of the story is at its most powerful in the play as an agent of change – as a marker of ‘different possible outcomes’ and ‘the truth’, as Keats would later have it, ‘of the imagination’. The story must adapt to survive and that process of evolution is marked by its continual reinvention through allusion and action.²⁷ When Demetrius, desperate to get away from the devoted Helena, attempts to escape the wood and flee, she declares:

Run when you will. The story shall be changed:
Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase;
The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind
Makes speed to catch the tiger – bootless speed,
When cowardice pursues, and valour flies (2.1.230-4)

Helena takes possession of this moment by changing the story; not only the mythological story of Daphne’s flight from Apollo, but the power dynamics apparently decreed by the history of romantic love, which define women as weak and cowardly. By reversing the story, here construed as precedent, Helena suggests that she can also change how it ends, that the future is not determined by precedent, but by deviation.²⁸ Central to this paradigm is the dramatic potential of bringing forth a narrative of expectation in order to render it unfulfilled; only by raising expectations and then rerouting them does the play find its most sustaining register of pleasure. Beyond the allusion to Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne, however, lies a landscape of sexual inequality and assault where women are hunted and possessed because they are unable to defend themselves against the desires and strengths of the amorous gods. The terms through which Helena imagines changing the story are also the terms through which she would acquire agency within the play. In Ovid’s story pursuit is predicated on the beloved as both prey and enemy:

Stay Nymph : the Lambes so flee y Wolves, the Stags y Lions so :
With flittring fethers sielie Doves so from the Gossehauke flie,
And every creature from his foe. Love is the cause that I
Do followe thee.²⁹

‘Love’ is made visible to us through the power that one species has over another, and fulfilment, within these terms, is tantamount to death. Daphne’s flight from the rapacious sun god centres on his unremitting desire for her and her unrelenting fear of him:

²⁷ Zipes discusses the fairy tale as a meme, which must adapt in order to survive, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 48.

²⁸ *Titus Andronicus* records a different attitude to story, when he thinks on the woods in which Lavinia was raped and, remembering Ovid, declares: ‘O, had we never, never hunted there! -- / Patterned by that the poet here describes, / By nature made for murders and for rapes’ (4.1.55-7)

²⁹ Golding’s *Translation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, Book 1, ll. 611-14

So farde Apollo and the Mayde : hope made Apollo swift,
And feare did make the Mayden fleete devising how to shift.
Howbeit he that did pursue of both the swifter went,
As furthred by the feathred wings that Cupid had him lent :
So that he would not let hir rest, but preased at hir heele
So neere that through hir scattred haire shee might his breathing feele.
But when she sawe hir breath was gone and strength began to fayle,
The colour faded in hir cheekes, and ginning for to quayle.³⁰

Helena's fantasy of changing the story goes deeper than getting her man; it speaks to the play's wider interest in the sexual politics of power. Ovid's description of the terrified Daphne appears to amplify her erotic appeal as Apollo closes in on her, breathing through her 'scattred haire', she weakens before us, losing both breath and colour. The sublimation of the self that 'love' promotes is written deep into the language of the hunt so lucidly rehearsed by Helena.³¹ The fantasy that the hind could catch the tiger or the dove the griffin retains the inequality of desire that regulates power as love. Helena's alternative story is not one of equality but one of ascendancy: changing the story, in this case, would also rewrite history. Helena's great moment here is that she uses a brief history of female oppression to suggest its potential for change: despite the incongruity of the images, the play bears it out; the hind catches the tiger and the imagination, despite Theseus's denigration, renders hypothesis meaningful. Against the 'back-ground terror' of male assault, the fantasy of change lurks in the stories of the female imagination.

Changing the story becomes the dominant motif through which the play can fully develop its narrative reflexivity, not only from tragedy to comedy, but in the heuristic potential of the story as explanation and opportunity. Having found their green plot on which to rehearse, the mechanicals approach the translocation of words to story as reflective dramaturgs. As they consider the narrative and performance of *The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, the mechanicals focus on the challenges of telling their story. The first thing they do, of course, is change it: as Starveling says 'we must leave the killing out'. Recognising that there 'are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please', the amateur actors devise various ways in which to interfere in the audience's experience of the story as well as their representation of it. Focusing on the affective problems of realism and naturalism, the characters lay bare the gendered sensibilities of story telling. Considering the potential emotional consequences of their story, the character-actors focus on how best to redress the negative effects of the persuasive imagination. Inserting formal narrative techniques in the shape of explanatory prologues, the play references its own status as story in search, like Pirandello's six characters, of realisation: it is, we might say, an unrealised story, dramatically

³⁰ Golding's *Translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Book 1, ll. 659-666

³¹ For an engaging account of the complexity and development of this language of pursuit see Catherine Bates, *Masculinity and the Hunt, Wyatt to Spenser* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

speaking.³² Through the terms of performance the mechanicals' change the story to expose the processes through which imagination is translated into words and the means by which characters edit the relationship between cause and effect. Editing the potential effects of realism, the amateur actors interfere with the proper function of imagination as persuasion and mitigate the impact of example. Discussing Snug's performance as the Lion, Bottom declares:

Nay you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck and he himself must speak through, saying thus, or the same defect: "ladies, or fair ladies - I would wish you', or 'I would request you', or 'I would entreat you - not to fear, not to tremble' (3.1.32-7)

The comedy works here on several levels – firstly, of course, we laugh because the mechanicals fail to understand or observe theatre as a temporary and collective illusion, and secondly, that they perceive the representative power of Snug as a lion to be so convincing that he needs to identify himself as an actor, show his face through the costume and directly address the audience's imagined fears, thereby thoroughly distancing himself from the presentation of the wild animal. We know that Shakespeare is fascinated by the mechanics of theatre and the potential that such meta-theatrics affords, but the real pleasure of this scene lies in the visible processes by which the actors interfere in the precedent of the play to tell a different story. Much like the province of the fairy tale and Helena's remit in changing her story, the adaptation of this fabula becomes a place of power for the actors, precisely because it allows them to construct something other than themselves, and to which they belong. Re-telling the story in this way supports the play's search for authority in the imaginative intersections between teller and listener. Highlighting the role of the story teller as one of mediator, improviser, and translator the focus on the imagination presents a surrogate space for the exploration of alternatives. In Doreen Maitre's formulation, the imagination functions as "the ability to bring to mind that which is absent from current perception" and by doing so better comprehend reality through the "superimposition on it of a possible non-actual world".³³ The vibrant reflexivity of the play's double vision on the actual and non-actual worlds of story ceaselessly seek to define the role of the story teller and the agency of narrative.

The profound opportunities for change that the story promotes runs deep throughout the play – the young couples' attempts to alter their destinies, the transformative powers of the love juice and the interventions of the fairies; Bottom's acquisition of an ass's head, and Demetrius's change of heart. When Snout exclaims, 'O Bottom thou art changed', we see the hypothetical agency of the imaginative process actualise within the context of the play world. Bottom's unwitting mutation into an ass, not only promotes transformation as the objective of art but recalls Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, a set of interlocking stories focusing on trials and suffering, alteration and endurance. Unlike Shakespeare's play-worlds, however, where mutability is a recurring process, Apuleius's

³² In Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Son states: 'I am a "unrealized" character, dramatically speaking', (1921).

³³ Doreen Maitre, *Literature and Possible Worlds* (London: Middlesex Polytechnic Press, 1983), p. 13. Wilson, *Shakespearean Narrative*, p. 100.

transformations, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, tend to occur only once. Despite the mythical appetite for change, it is almost always a fixed process, whereas for Shakespeare, the story offers a dynamic and mobile opportunity for change, supported by the imagination, as something that can happen repeatedly.

Bottom's dream allows him to turn and turn again, just as his intervention in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe allows him to be actor, audience, story teller, and character in quick succession. There is no fixed point of fulfilment in the play – no apotheosis through which revelation or comprehension can ever be fully realised and therefore fixed but a series of possible stories through which transformation, like change, is always possible and infinitely contingent. The play's deep impulse to change is in part reflective of comedy and the genre that was to become associated most powerfully with rituals of transformation. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, Shakespeare seems especially concerned with the role of the story as apparatus for change because it provides a narrative structure against which the characters and the plot can trial our expectations. To know which story we are in allows us the possibility of changing that story, even, as Helena suggests, when it is against all precedent.

As the play draws to its close, the mechanicals present their version of Pyramus and Thisbe to a sceptical audience of grand Athenians. As we watch the amateur production and listen to its in-house audience critique the crude representation, tortured performances and unsophisticated attempts at oratory, we are gloriously reminded of the spectre of the story that might have been. Here the lovers leave the stage in triumph and in ceremony, each person apparently happy in love. The play began imagining a different narrative where lovers were separated, divided or dead and yet this story was changed, brilliantly and magically averted in the wood, a league without the town: but the first, untold, story remains a potent reminder of an alternative narrative: in the end, of course, the mechanicals didn't 'leave the killing out' and their lamentable comedy ends as a tragedy, which, according to Theseus, needs 'no excuse' and 'no epilogue', 'for when the players are all dead there need none be blamed' (5.2.341-2). But, of course, the players are not all dead and up pops Bottom for one more explanation. The story, it seems, is always reinventing itself as a heuristic model of opportunity. The great wonder of this play, its magic, allusion and illusion is a powerful paean to the art of story telling and the ways in which the greatest art is in knowing when to change the story, or be changed by it.