
A Cognitive Approach to Shakespearean Notions of Love, Madness, and Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Whereas Plato points out in *Phaedrus* that divine madness, associated with the creative insanity of seers and poets, must be aligned with reason in both love and art, Shakespeare foregrounds the interplay among madness, love, and poetry in his works. In several sonnets, the speakers appear madly in love but are unhindered in their capacity to delineate—in poetry—their frenzied, unrequited love. A similar phenomenon can be observed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Theseus appears rational when he claims that lovers, madmen, and poets are all ridiculous and incomprehensible; all the while, his own passion and sexual ethics compel him to go beyond the boundaries of reason. Theseus cannot justify his love for Hippolyta, who is swayed by his love and violence; at the same time, he chooses to ignore and even suppress the true love between Lysander and Hermia. This inconsistency parallels that of the four couples in the play, who, like the speakers in the sonnets, create their best poetry when they are madly in love. As a poet and playwright, Shakespeare seems to mock himself for conjuring these fantastic visions. Once we recognize the extraordinary wonders resulting from the coequality of love, madness, and poetry in these visions, however, the idea of divine madness is embodied and recreated in the experience of reading/seeing.

KEYWORDS love, madness, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, poetry, Shakespeare, sonnets

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Introduction

The intricate and seemingly paradoxical interplay among love, madness, and poetry is a theme exquisitely rendered in many of Shakespeare's works. A scrutiny of Shakespeare's oeuvre shows how the poet manipulates these notions in presenting his holistic views. In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault analyzes several of Shakespeare's plays, especially tragedies. The history of insanity he traces features both the constructive and destructive influences of madness on civilization. Intriguingly, Foucault puts poetry and love at the origin of madness while leaving the interactions among the three relatively unexplored. Nevertheless, he does offer a groundbreaking typology of madness, which includes four forms of insanity to which scholars still frequently refer. To examine the Shakespearean imbrication of love, madness, and poetry, I will combine a close reading of four sonnets by Shakespeare with a critical investigation of related themes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A closer look into Shakespeare's poetics and how madness, love, and poetry are intertwined therein will, I hope, shed new light on the aspect of "mad love" in Shakespeare's corpus.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus, as the representative of wisdom, reason, and civilization, claims that lovers, madmen, and poets are "of imagination all compact" and that their words are ridiculous and incomprehensible (5.1.4-22). While Theseus's comments about the two young couples' love appear plausible and persuasive in many respects, his passion and sexual ethics lead him to stray beyond the bounds of law and reason. In fact, he cannot justify his love for Hippolyta since he cannot approve the chosen love between Lysander and Hermia; he contradicts himself by insisting on sentencing Hermia to death when she disobeys her father's order and refuses to marry Demetrius. Theseus's words thus become imbued with dramatic irony, bringing into relief the tension at the heart of the effort to link madness with love.

Many critics have commented on this lovers/madmen/poets passage.¹ Most of them believe that Shakespeare is being ironic in making Theseus, a proxy of reason and power in Greek mythology, appear ambivalent about madness. Paul A. Olson, for instance, detects self-mocking, but interprets it as the bard's attempt to elevate his own status. Olson admits that "Theseus's lines have been interpreted in their context as a jocular degradation of the poet to the level of lover and madman," but he argues that Shakespeare does not "sell" his "craft so short":

¹ Duncan Salkeld's discussion of several critics' notes of Theseus's words demonstrates Theseus's problematic position (50-52).

[O]ne must note that Theseus makes some implicit distinctions between the poet and his mad colleagues. It is only lovers and madmen who are said to exhibit fantasies which descend beyond the comprehension of reason. Implicitly, poets, however much they are possessed by a *furor poesis*, may deal in imaginings apprehensible in more rational terms. (76)

Interestingly, when Olson considers that “lovers” and “madmen” are the poet’s “colleagues,” he suggests that Theseus has implicitly made the poet superior to these colleagues.

Olson’s argument is echoed by R. W. Dent, who also believes that Shakespeare’s connection of the three groups is a sign of rationality: “Shakespeare’s eye, in creating *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, did not ‘roll’ in a ‘fine frenzy’” (115). Like Olson, Dent suggests that the poet is being ironic: “In watching the lovers of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we tend to be aware of the imagination’s activity only when it is thus failing in its proper function” (116). Once the audience becomes aware of the poetic devices in the play, the author’s command of the text is proven. Thus, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* becomes the Shakespearean version of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*, as Dent writes: “in offering a defense for its own existence the play simultaneously offers us Shakespeare’s closest approximation to ‘Defense of Dramatic Poesy’” (129). Dent also goes on to distinguish Theseus as the speaker and Shakespeare as the poet:

Theseus links lunatic, lover, and poet indiscriminately. Shakespeare, by contrasting the role of imagination in love with that in dramatic poetry, discriminates. . . . Poetic art, distinct from that of a Quince or Bottom, is in accord with discretion, and its creations are capable of universal appreciation, both as beautiful and as meaningful. In love, the ridiculous results from the dominance of imagination over reason, and the lover is unaware of his being ridiculous. In good art, the ridiculous (if it exists) is the product of imagination’s cooperation with reason. (129)

Dent addresses the implication in Olson’s argument of the playwright’s superiority to his characters. Theseus is not designed to elevate the status of the poet, but his words (contrary to his behavior in the play) serve the playwright’s machinations nonetheless.

Stephen Fender’s and Patricia Waugh’s analyses of Theseus’s statement about “the lunatic, the lover, and the poet” correspond to the two critics’ arguments discussed above. Waugh thinks that “[p]oetry is still for Shakespeare that divinised

act where, in ‘fine frenzy,’ chaos is rent to give shape and form to new worlds” (181), while for Fender, Theseus’s words “can be seen as an act of almost divine creativity, the means by which fallen nature can be redeemed, however incompletely and for however short a time” (149); Theseus can be seen as “a figure of either the rational or irrational” (150).² In this sense, Theseus is a contradictory character via whom the playwright can explore the paradox of creative madness.

The character Theseus is thus a pseudo-mouthpiece of the playwright. As Raphael Lyne states, for Theseus, “imaginative thoughts that can be expressed in the terms of rhetoric . . . represent falsehood, but for the audience, they are the characteristics of the world of fairies, and fiction, in which we have a great deal invested” (104). The conveyance of Theseus’s message to the audience is mediated by the playwright’s manipulation, demanding that the audience recognize the art involved.

In order to properly recognize the art of the poet, we must examine how Shakespeare’s contemporaries attempted to define the role of the poet. Following their Greek and Roman predecessors, writers and critics around Shakespeare’s time sought to boost the prestige of poets. In the late-sixteenth-century work *The Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham argues that the poet is like God and that divine imagination allows the poet to create something from nothing (3). Earlier than Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney also tried to raise the status of the poet in his *The Defence of Poesy*: “Only the poet . . . lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature” (216). For the Renaissance poet/critic, the inventive abilities of the poet surpass nature. As a creator, the poet produces a whole new nature; as a prophet, the poet can speak the truth through divine inspiration. With their divine gifts, poets can perceive the eternal truth, imitate nature, and recreate a fictional world that conveys universal truth to educate and entertain the public.

On the other hand, the touchstone of a work’s effectiveness lies in whether it can induce the reader or the audience to recognize and acknowledge the re-creation of the writer. If not, the work remains merely fictional or fantastical, its effectiveness constrained. After all, the audience cannot simply “be consigned to mere fiction” (Salkeld 50). Michael Cohen takes Stephen Booth’s point and insists that “the madness in *Hamlet* is never really a problem about the main character, but rather always about the audience,” recognizing that madness in a play requires the

² For stories of and traditional ideas about Theseus, see Fender 150-51.

audience's "willful adoption of a multiple personality disorder" (101). This recognition is typically evoked by Shakespeare's art.

Jan Kott defines Shakespeare's device as "metadiscourse"; in this sense, the whole process of creation and re-creation may be viewed as a cognitive reading of a literary work. Duncan Salkeld calls this creating activity a "process of ambivalence" (47). Theseus's words, in fact, "are a part of the poetic metadiscourse whose theme is self-referent: the dreams in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the whole play" (Kott 83). This metadiscourse is paradoxical, however: Kott argues that "[i]n this metadiscourse, which is at the same time self-defeating and self-defending, a manifesto of Shakespeare's dramatic art and a defense of his comedy are contained" (84). It is my belief that Shakespeare, using his poetry, develops the connection between love and madness. As will be discussed in the next sections, Shakespeare conducts the metadiscourse to manifest his concept of poetic creation and re-creation, the readers' appreciation of which, as argued above, may well determine the works' effectiveness.

Love, Madness, and Poetry

The intriguing relationship between love, madness, and poetry has been investigated by many writers and philosophers. It is first delineated in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates claims that the four forms of madness (prophetic, mystical, poetic, and erotic) can help the soul ascend to the divine (244a-245a, 265a-c). Among these four kinds of madness, "the madness of love [is] the best kind" (265b); it can "help us achieve the greatest happiness" (245c). Socrates also acknowledges the description of this kind of madness to be "a light-hearted hymn, in the form of a story" (265c). Deliberately or not, Plato uses a "story," or a myth, to express his notion of "love," which is the best kind of madness.

This understanding of madness can also be seen in Desiderius Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*. Through Folly's address, Erasmus presents his view of madness:

For every sort of madness is not necessarily disastrous, in and of itself. Otherwise Horace would not have said "Or am I beguiled by a lovely madness"; nor would Plato have placed the frenzy of poets, prophets, and lovers among the chief goods of life; nor would the prophetess have called the labor of Aeneas mad. (58)

Madness, for Erasmus, is neither irrational nor destructive. Ancient Greeks and Romans apparently believe that madness is lovely, creative, and positive. People

cannot resist the power of madness, as it makes people active, productive, and persistent. In other words, Folly claims that creativity and civilization are motivated by madness.

Theseus's words in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seem to satirize this view of madness. While Theseus tries to negate the joy of "lovers, madmen, and poets," Shakespeare seems to echo Plato's concept of divine love. Either "lovely madness" or being madly in love can help to achieve Plato's sense of divinity. Allen Thiher believes that Shakespeare "offers an understanding of madness unsurpassed since the Greeks" (85). Through poets or lovers who are incited by madness people become more powerful and adorable.

This feature can be detected in many of Shakespeare's plays. When analyzing the madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Thiher argues for the following function of madness:

Madness is not the metamorphosis of some psychic or physiological substance. It is a question as to whether, within the context of their situation, characters' acts and discourse deviate into the nonrelation of insanity—or, more interestingly, whether insanity can maintain a relation to a context of shared meanings. (83-84)

Hamlet's madness (or feigned madness) contains certain rationality; otherwise, he would not be able to investigate and avenge the death of his father. Similarly, if Lear really had gone mad, he would not have been able to sympathize with the Fool, mad Tom (Edgar in disguise), and Cordelia at the end of the play. As "love-madness does not inevitably signal tragedy" (Saunders 78), Thiher's analysis of these characters' madness also applies to several of Shakespeare's sonnets, and especially to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Madness is a significant topic in literature—especially in medieval and Renaissance literature:

Madness has become a literary topos or motif, so familiar as the emblem of great love that it may be adopted as a self-conscious pose. . . . Madness . . . could figure in positive ways, not exclusively as the mark of sin, but as the sign of great and noble passion or suffering. (Saunders 78)

Since ancient times, reference to madness has been quite common in literary works, where deviation from the norm has been the index of madness. For exam-

ple, Roland Barthes represents madness through the speaker of his *A Lover's Discourse*: "I do not socialize" (121). Barthes's essays echo Shakespeare's treatment of madness. My interpretation of madness in the following sections follows this vein.

Furthermore, love is often closely connected with madness, and the madness is further related to creativity. As Friedrich Nietzsche illustrates, "There is always a certain madness in love. But also there is always a certain method in madness" (68). Corinne Saunders has pointed out this relationship, referring to medieval writing:

Love was commonly depicted as a force like illness, striking unexpectedly from outside and often represented as a wound caused by the God of Love's arrow. . . . The symptoms of the extreme melancholy of love also . . . include heightened creativity: love provokes malady and madness, but also the composition of poetry. (74)

Saunders's comments of course confirm Sidney's notion of poetry and show the relationship between love, madness, and poetry. Because lovers often venture beyond their social boundaries, they are prone to accusations of being mad; but this madness of love, as described in Plato's *Phaedrus*, produces poetry. Shakespeare delicately tackles this complex relationship.

The Sonnets

Passionate lovers are often thought of as being mad. As Barthes puts it, "It frequently occurs to the amorous subject that he is or is going mad" (120). Most, if not all, of Shakespeare's sonnets are about love; however, several sonnets relate the topic of love to madness, especially Sonnets 119, 129, 140, and 147. In these sonnets, love and madness are manifestly foregrounded. Although they may present different types of madness or love, they all probe into the reciprocal relationship between love and madness. Michael Schoenfeldt believes that Shakespeare's sonnets are like mini-plays in their focus: "Like Shakespeare's plays, the Sonnets are fascinated by the apparent irrationality of erotic choice, and by the ways in which such choices tend to ignore or abrade various social norms and ethical expectations" (89). Shakespeare reveals the irrationality of love in the sonnets, whose conflict with his "rational" view of his poetry typifies the paradoxical situation of love.

For example, in Sonnet 116,³ the speaker claims, “If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved” (13-14). While the statement may not be logical, the speaker justifies his love with his poetic rhetoric. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s sonnets seem to suggest that only poetry can contain the madness of love. A stylistic analysis of the following sonnets underscores the Shakespearean notion of the interrelation of love, poetry, and madness. The poetic discourse of these sonnets reveals that the poet, via the speaker, aligns himself with the mad lover.

In Sonnet 119, Shakespeare creates a persona who skillfully displays his irrational love. Two important poetic features can be seen in this sonnet: the manipulation of tenses and the striking effect of the final couplet. In the first eight lines, the speaker uses the present perfect tense. Helen Vendler points out that this use of “the present perfect . . . instead of the possible preterite . . . puts the sonnet into the ‘waking-up’ phase, where one is within a durational moment that contains past action as still included within present contemplation” (504). The employment of the present perfect tense shows that the speaker is clearly aware of his madness. Paradoxically, although he is still mad, the speaker knows how and why he has lost his senses: it is due to his loss in love.

Then, in the final six lines of Sonnet 119, when the tense changes to the simple present, the speaker shows his contentment in his madness. The formal and acoustic similarities between the verb “made” (10) and adjective “mad” suggest that the “madding fever” (8) can produce positive effects. As Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells state, the final couplet is closely connected to the final six lines (56). When the speaker’s “illness” or “madness” in love worsens, he acknowledges through the trajectory of his poetic lines that he has been lost until now, but he reasons that he can recognize the fruitful rewards of his loss. Thus, the tactical use of language in this sonnet helps the mad lover—whose madness has resulted from his unrequited love—gain reason and satisfaction in the end. In the cycle of madness, the speaker returns to his true love, or the virtue of his love.

Sonnet 129 resembles Sonnet 119 in many ways (Vendler 550). Sonnet 129 also depicts the relation between madness and love through fine arrangements of poetic diction, but it deepens the emotion and intensifies the coextension of love and madness. The process of becoming madly in love is described in detail in this sonnet. As will be shown below, Shakespeare achieves various poetic effects in the poem’s sound and rhythm, as well as its lack of subject.

As in Sonnet 119, the speaker in Sonnet 129, though tormented, is satisfied

³ In this article, all the quoted sonnets are from Shakespeare’s *The Sonnets*.

with unreasonable love. Vendler argues that the aim of this sonnet is “to solve the problem of representing the various mental phases aesthetically deployed here: judgmental disgust, affective memory, and the ironic totalizing of both” (554). Although the maddening love that turns to lust causes many problems, the poem presents an approving attitude toward this development: “All this the world well knows yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell” (13-14). For the speaker, people savor the pleasure of love even though they know that they will be hurt because of their madness.

The sonnet appears to be incessant in its syntax. The first period of the sonnet appears just before the final couplet. The run-on lines make the poem seem “perversely vigorous” (Booth 150); even the couplet’s complete sentence does not indicate the ending of the process of loving and suffering. In Sonnet 129, the repetition of several sounds (such as *s*) and words (such as “Is” [2, 3] and “Past reason” [6, 7]) strengthens this unstoppable motion. Stephen Booth is right to point out that “headlong action” is “largely accountable to the fact that the poem does not come to a satisfyingly complete rhythmic stop until it is over” (149). The syntax also shows that the sonnet can hardly reach closure. Reading the sonnet compels the reader not only to sympathize with the speaker, but also to become involved in the process and to identify the difficulty of extricating oneself from the situation. As Booth writes, “The hectic forward motion of the sound and the syntax carries the reader across a wilderness of intellectual contortions” (150). This motion echoes the tedious “hunting” presented in lines 6 to 7; hence, Edmondson and Wells argue that “Sonnet 129 can seem exhausting as the words and sounds hunt themselves through one twelve-line-long sentence and a couplet” (61). The speaker, in short, has been chasing his love in madness.

Similarly to Sonnet 119, the word “mad” is emphasized in Sonnet 129. Although the word “Mad” in line 9 is printed as “Made” in some versions of the sonnet, Edmondson and Wells believe that it “is most naturally understood as a spelling of ‘mad’” (11). This further emphasizes the connection between madness and invention: the description of love in this sonnet extends for twelve lines because of the speaker’s madness.

The lack of subject is also conspicuous and significant; this characteristic helps establish the relationship between the reader and the text. Brian Boyd discusses this phenomenon as an intimate form of contact:

[T]he sonnet remains technically impersonal, with neither the Poet in first person, nor the Mistress in second or third person, yet the rushing syntax and the intensity and frankness of the subject make it appear psychologically and

experientially immediate for writer and reader. (75-76)

Ex-position
December
2018

Unlike Sonnet 119, which specifies the speaker's own satisfaction, this sonnet makes it clear that the experience of maddening love is commonly recognized, accepted, and practiced. Without any specified subject, the reader can fill the vacancy and place him/herself in the position of the lover via the discourse. Due to the objective perspective, the reader is drawn into the text world and is inclined to confirm the experience.

Sonnet 129, in this sense, heightens the impact of maddening love. When the speaker reasonably confirms the inevitability and legitimacy of that love, the reader is invited to join the process of experiencing maddening love on compassionate grounds. The inner conflict of the lover is best represented by Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in the next section I will examine how she attempts to justify her miserable love.

Differing from Sonnets 119 and 129, the madness in Sonnet 140 has not yet occurred. The speaker threatens his mistress with his madness and the mad words that may result from his unrequited love for her. The speaker suggests to the mistress a common pathological communication between two lovers: a prudent lie seems to be the speaker's solution for maddened love. While in this sonnet the madness is compared to an illness, the problem is presented in the subjunctive mood. The language of the sonnet plays on the potentiality of becoming mad due to the loss of love.

The modality of this sonnet shows the speaker's ambivalence toward love. The sonnet begins with an imperative verb and proceeds in the subjunctive mood from line 3 to the end. The shift as well as the conditionals illustrates the speaker's hypothesis about the potential situation. The only exception is line 11: "Now this ill-wresting world is grown so bad," a sentence that instead reveals the speaker's actual plight in the present. Apart from this line, the speaker uses a series of provisional conditions to persuade the addressee to profess that she loves him. Because the speaker is lost in love, the consequences he proleptically imagines come to assume the guise of real threats in his eyes.

The "world" (13) of Sonnet 129 has become an "ill-wresting world" (11) by Sonnet 140. Vendler argues that "[t]he 'prudential' diction of the octave gives way in Q3 [the third quatrain] to a pathological picture of the world in which both speaker and audience are conceded to be mad" (592). A mad world can be avoided, the speaker claims, if the mistress would lie to him and pretend that she loves him. As with the speaker in Sonnet 129—who knows that love, especially unrequited love, will drive one to madness—the speaker here tries to maintain his sanity, not

by awakening the mistress's love, but by persuading the mistress to cast an illusion over their relationship. The misery of the speaker is, again, like that of Helena when she suffers Demetrius's scorn for her love, but although aware of it, Helena decides to stay in her madness.

Like Sonnet 119, the couplet in Sonnet 140 closely follows from the last six lines (Edmondson and Wells 56). The penultimate line provides the reasoning of the speaker's suggested solution and concludes the possible madness in the preceding lines: "That I may not be so, nor thou belied, / Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide" (13-14). Sonnet 140 thus contains the logic of a semi-madman who attempts to employ language to attain his love. The paradoxical relationship between "madness" and logical thought is typically resolved by the speaker's language.

Finally, in Sonnet 147, the speaker clearly associates his love with madness, and he admits that he is a madman. Again, the speaker uses several poetic devices to characterize his love and madness. In this sonnet, the use of the present perfect is reminiscent of Sonnet 119, the use of repetition echoes Sonnet 129, and the comparison of madness to an illness and the lurking threats are similar to those in Sonnet 140.

The speaker's feeling of being lost in love has existed since sometime in the past. Vendler analyzes this predicament:

The contrast between past-extending-into-present and the present of "now" gives the poem its sense of temporal extension marking character disintegration. The "clarity" of the couplet suddenly enters a moment of utter lucidity even while he is offering an instance of his own past madness. (619)

Like the speaker in Sonnet 119, the speaker in Sonnet 147 acknowledges his own paradoxical situation: his love leads him to madness, and his madness lends him words. Like the speaker, the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* go through this kind of experience: their love deprives them of their sanity, but endows them with poetic language. While the speaker's words are "from the truth vainly expressed" (12), he is compelled to adhere to his love.

In Sonnet 147, the repetitions of "reason" (5, 9), "past" (9, 9), and "thought" (11, 13) show the lasting effects of "reasonable madness." They help to create a picture of the endless suffering of the speaker, but the speaker enjoys his illness: as the last line shows, the mistress is not actually "fair" (13). Only through the speaker's words can the beloved, who is "black" and "dark" (14), become beautiful and loveable. In a similar way, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's fairness

can be recognized by Lysander only when he loves her; when Lysander changes his mind because of the love potion, he starts to call her “Ethiope” (3.2.260) and “tawny Tartar” (3.2.268).

The comparison of the speaker’s madness to an illness is the most prominent topic in this sonnet. In this sense, reason has become the “physician” (5) who tries to save the patient from his deadly desire but “has abandoned his disobedient patient, who has refused the prescribed medicine” (Vendler 618). Schoenfeldt makes a similar observation of reason as the doctor: “Reason is the physician, but is frustrated, because the speaker is a patient who refuses to follow the prescriptions. The speaker confesses to a profoundly conflicted sensibility that verges on insanity” (106). Like Sonnet 140, the comparison here suggests that in order to survive, the speaker might need to obtain the truth of the mistress. He will not do so, however, as he has gone mad in the process of falling in love with her. Thus, as in the preceding sonnets, the speaker is trapped in his own darkness/madness. He knows how to get rid of it, but he has willingly chosen to remain trapped; he is content with the dangerous and sickly quagmire, as if there were no release for him.

All four of these sonnets depict love and madness, but they address their subtle relationship with different approaches. While they are similar in certain aspects, they do create different dimensions of love. Similarly to Schoenfeldt (see above), Edmondson and Wells write that Shakespeare’s sonnets are like little dramas in which the theme of love is represented in theatrical techniques:

The Sonnets make use of theatrical metaphor in order to explore the re-creation of the lover’s image which is constantly being re-dressed and re-presented in terms of perception, spectacle, performance, disguise, and self-conscious, as well as dramatic, utterance. (83)

The sonnets can be read together as a consistent discourse of love, but they can also be read separately to display different plots of love stories. The four sonnets discussed above can be seen as four different love stories of respective mad speakers. Likewise, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the subject of the next section, the relationship between love and madness is developed by various characters. However, the interrelationship is further extended and resolved.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

A Midsummer Night’s Dream dramatizes the intricate relationship between love, madness, and poetry. As a comedy with a happy ending, *A Midsummer Night’s*

Dream is markedly different from Shakespeare's tragedies. Its plot development leads the madness in the action to a curious denouement and to more ambiguous effects. While Foucault is correct to point out that "[d]isplaced in the economy of narrative and dramatic structures, it [madness] authorizes the manifestation of truth and the return of reason" (28-29), when he argues that "[i]n Shakespeare, madness is allied to death and murder" (27), he is referring in particular to the madness in the tragedies; he is more concerned with the distinction between reason and unreason or the reasonable and the mysterious. In fact, Shakespeare deliberately blurs the opposition between sanity and insanity, especially in his comedies, where madness is treated similarly to the way the same subject is maneuvered in the sonnets. The madness in Shakespeare's comedies does not lead to "laceration" or "death" (Foucault 28); rather, Shakespearean madness is oriented toward realization and maturity.

Nevertheless, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare explores three of the four forms of madness posited by Foucault: "madness by romantic identification" (25), "the madness of vain presumption" (26), and the madness "of desperate passion" (27).⁴ Foucault's definition of these forms of madness is useful for analysis of the correlation between love, madness, and poetry. First, Foucault relates madness to imagination (26). This relation is echoed by Theseus in his criticism of imagination:

The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, for earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.

⁴ The third form of madness, "the madness of just punishment" (Foucault 26), is absent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As Foucault's example shows, Lady Macbeth has this "delirium" (27).

Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear! (5.1.8-22)

For Theseus, madness makes people create something strange. According to Foucault's analysis, the "chimera" in Foucault's definition (26) is a product of imagination. Next, Bottom appears to show "vain presumption"; when his friends witness his transformation and are terrified, Bottom's response shows his presumptuousness as he assumes that he is brave (3.1.85-87). Later, after Titania praises Bottom for his singing and tells him that she loves him, he seems to be proud of his own wits (3.1.104-06). According to Foucault, the second type of madness results "by means of a delusive attachment that enables him [the madman] to grant himself all the qualities, all the virtues or powers he lacks" (26). While Bottom actually lacks courage and wisdom, he admires himself after Puck has transformed his head into that of an ass. Lastly, according to Foucault's analysis of the last type of madness, passionate love is intertwined with madness:

Love disappointed in its excess, and especially love deceived by the fatality of death, has no other recourse but madness. As long as there was an object, mad love was more love than madness; left to itself, it pursues itself in the void of delirium. (27)⁵

This kind of madness is clearly shown by the four couples in the play (see below). While Foucault's analysis of madness reveals several features of the madness in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he appears to have overlooked the play, focusing instead on tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

Even when most of the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are freed of their illusions and have returned to reality at the end of the play, at least two situations remain against reason. First, because the juice of "love-in-idleness" on Demetrius's eyes has not been removed, he remains trapped in his deluded love for Helena. If he should wake up from his imposed dream in due course, the relationships among the four young people would likely again go awry. Second, although Titania's frantic love for the ass-headed Bottom has been cured, Oberon has not told her about his mischief. What would happen to the couple if Oberon were to tell her the truth about her falling in love with an ass?

It seems that the only persistent love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that of

⁵ While Foucault writes about how Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Lear in *King Lear* die because of their madness, the violence of the madness of the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not incur serious punishment.

Helena and of Hermia. Dent points out that Helena and Hermia have made odd choices, but they stick to them: “Love’s choices remain inexplicable, and the eventual pairings are determined only by the constancy of Helena and Hermia in their initial inexplicable choices” (116). Both female characters experience the loved-unloved-loved pattern; fortunately, because of the irrationality of their two young lovers, the outcome ultimately turns out to be happiness for all of them.

Reason, despite Theseus’s claims, is absent in the play, while love prevails throughout it. It is true that “in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the origin of love never lies in reason” (Dent 117). To further explore this lack of sense in the play, Dent notes that the lover is the best creator of everything: “As the play delightfully demonstrates, and lightly satirises, the imagination in love often operates in defiance of ‘discretion,’ especially in creating beauty observable by no one but the creator” (129). Simply because of their madness, the love reaches a clearer, better stage.

Curiously, “reason” is embodied by the changeling boy in the play. While David Marshall argues that the changeling “comes to represent all of the characters in the play who are traded or fought over as property” (112), I propose that the absent changeling symbolizes the missing “reason” of every character. When Marshall considers that “changelings are everywhere in the play because they fill its pages and dialogues: they are its figures of speech” (113), he fails to note that the changeling boy is actually absent in the play. Marshall also claims that “[i]t makes sense . . . that in *The Arte of English Poesie*, published in 1589, Puttenham invents a rhetorical category called ‘Figures of Exchange’ and names one of those figures ‘the Changeling.’ . . . The changeling figures figures” (113). Marshall’s original argument appears to be precarious in two ways. First, the play is not full of figures of speech, although it does contain a great deal of figures. From time to time, the characters—especially the workmen—speak in plain language. Second, because Puttenham designated only one of the figures “the Changeling,” the various figures in the play cannot all be “changelings.” It is perceptive of Marshall to try to highlight the symbolic meaning of the changeling, however, and this symbolization is useful when we consider that the changeling represents “reason” or “sense.” What is lacking in the play is sense. In the play, the major characters lose their senses and become mad because of the problem of love. Even the Athenian law is “irrational,” as it “decrees death or perpetual imprisonment in a convent for any young woman who marries without her father’s consent” (Frye 121). In other words, the play is fraught with madness, and reason is lacking throughout the play.

Although Marshall attempts to construe the characters as “changelings” (112-13), it may be more apt to see them as “mad.” The madness of every character—

including Theseus, who, as the ruler of Athens, allegedly symbolizes “rationality”—can be seen in his or her behavior and words. Theseus appears unreasonable not only due to his ironic speech about lovers, madmen, and poets but also because of his questionable love for Hippolyta. Of course, as Salkeld writes, “The dismissal of imagination in favour of ‘cool reason’ discredits his own discourse as a lover” (52). In his quarrel with Titania, Oberon accuses Theseus of having had several love affairs (2.1.77-81). Because Titania does not deny this, Theseus is most likely a disloyal lover. When he wants to marry Hippolyta, Theseus justifies his love for Hippolyta by listing his violent act: “I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries” (1.1.17-18). Such reasoning is ridiculous because love is incompatible with swords and injuries. When Egeus arrives to ask Theseus to compel Hermia to marry Demetrius, Theseus is reluctant to spoil the true love between Hermia and Lysander, as their relationship is what he is trying to emulate with his new beloved. By the end of the play, because Theseus is pleased to see the results of the four young lovers’ relationships, he goes against his former order and “overbears” Egeus’s request (4.1.172); because of his own love, Theseus sacrifices both his personal notion of justice and the Athenian law.

Although it is not particularly clear that Hippolyta also loses her mind, her commitment to Theseus—who wins her with his love and violence—is dubious. She does try to correct Theseus’s criticism of imagination, however:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy’s images
Are grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable. (5.1.23-27)

Hippolyta’s sensible response praises imagination, not rationality; hence, Hippolyta seems to be able to see through the inconstancy. While she as a character may be considered fairly rational, she is not allowed to speak very often: her lines comprise only two percent of the major parts of the play (Bate and Rasmussen 368). Her “rationality” is apparently suppressed.

Hermia’s father, Egeus, is not at all reasonable, as he demands that his daughter marry someone whom she does not love. Egeus can recognize the madness between the lovers (1.1.29-39), but he fails to recognize his own madness. It is actually Egeus’s insensible stubbornness that causes him to impose the severe punishment on his own daughter. Hermia’s “female recalcitrance” becomes a kind of madness for Egeus: “by refusing the law of the father and of Athens, Hermia places

herself outside and against ‘nature,’ a stance which Egeus regards as madness” (Salkeld 47). Hermia is deemed to be mad because she does not conform to Athenian social norms. It is even more ridiculous, however, for Egeus to request the death penalty for Hermia.

Significantly, the play’s four couples create their best poetry when they are madly in love. Like the speakers in the sonnets discussed above, these lovers reveal their insanity in a poetic manner when they talk about love. When Hermia learns that she must obey her father, she is brave enough to fight for her love (1.1.61-63). She knows that she has flouted convention in loving Lysander, but she still insists on making her own choice. She would rather die than marry a man whom she does not love, even though her father has ordained the marriage.

Interestingly, Hermia’s lover, Lysander, demonstrates his “sanity” when he professes that he has stopped loving Hermia. At the beginning of the play, Lysander’s statement that “[t]he course of true love never did run smooth” (1.1.136) foretells the fate of their love. Ironically, soon after Lysander tells Hermia that “[f]or lying so, Hermia, I do not lie” (2.2.52), he is bewitched and begins to tell lies. As Olson observes, Lysander “has arrived at the unsound condition where he can adduce scholastic arguments for his sanity” (89). Lysander woos Helena even more vehemently when he thinks that he has fallen in love with her:

The will of man is by his reason swayed,
And reason says you are the worthier maid.
Things growing are not ripe until their season,
So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason.
And touching now the point of human skill,
Reason becomes marshal to my will
And leads me to your eyes, where I o’erlook
Love’s stories written in love’s richest book. (2.2.115-22)

In this confusing situation, Lysander admits that his former love for Hermia was unreasonable but that his present love for Helena is justified. Although his statement is unbelievable to the other characters, it is also incredible to the audience members, who have witnessed the “true love” between him and Hermia in the preceding scenes. Nevertheless, his address is both poetic and logical, even though the love is implausible. Composed in rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter, these lines contain several metaphors. “Reason” in line 118 provides an extrametrical syllable, and the trochaic “reason” in line 120 substitutes the regular iambic meter. These metrical variations call attention to the key word “reason,” which is

repeated four times in these eight lines. In addition, the metaphors of the ripeness of his love and of the dominance of his reason are interwoven in his argument. The conclusion contains yet another metaphor: Helena's eyes are compared to a book of abundant and precious love stories. Lysander poeticizes the significance of seeing/reading to make his love graceful and admirable. If we could ignore Lysander's past passion for Hermia and the influence of the love potion, the whole address could be rather persuasive. Love and reason are strangely mixed in these poetic lines which seem to suggest that the self-aware Lysander is rational only insofar as he is enchanted and that his love turns "real" only when he is duped.

As mentioned before, Helena is the character who best represents the distraught lover in a sonnet.⁶ Most of the lines that Helena speaks are madly beautiful. In the following example, she is aware of her own insensible love:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.
Nor hath love's mind of any judgment taste,
Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.
And therefore is love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is often beguiled. (1.1.235-42)

She fully understands that her love for Demetrius is hopeless, but she carries on her madness nonetheless. In order to pursue Demetrius, she betrays her good friend Hermia and reveals Hermia's plan to elope with Lysander (1.1.249-54). Her decision is nonsensical: since Demetrius is bent on finding Hermia and winning her over, it is unlikely that he will abruptly start loving Helena. With her maddening love, however, Helena will do anything for Demetrius's sake. In the woodland, she even compares herself to Demetrius's dog: she can "fawn on" him even if he should "beat" her (2.1.206-14). No matter how emphatically Demetrius declares that he does not and cannot love her, she is determined to follow him anyway (2.1.242-48). Helena, seemingly a more loveable woman than Hermia, wins the two young men's love only when they are both ensorcelled. Madness indeed engenders love. Ironically, her Demetrius loves her only because he is still spell-bound.

⁶ After those of Bottom and Theseus, Helena's lines comprise the highest percentage of lines in the play (Bate and Rasmussen 367).

Originally, Demetrius loved Hermia. When Demetrius cannot find Hermia in the woods, he finds himself “wood within this wood” (2.1.196). Saunders believes that Shakespeare plays on the notion of “woodnesse” or “madness” here (78). Likewise, Salkeld thinks that the forest “functions as a locus of madness and change in the play” (48). After Demetrius enters the wood, he becomes aware in his own madness of his love for Hermia; however, his temporary realization does not prevent him from pursuing her. Because he has not yet fully acknowledged his mania for Hermia, he lacks Lysander’s poetic articulation; hence, he fails to win Hermia’s love even when he finds her in the wood. Only when his eyes are applied with the love juice does he abruptly fall in love with Helena and, in his madness, his words suddenly turn lyrical:

O Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!
To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?
Crystal is muddy. O, how ripe in show
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
That pure congealed white, high Taurus’ snow,
Fanned with the eastern wind, turns to a crow
When thou hold’st up thy hand. O, let me kiss
This princess of pure white, this seal of bliss! (3.2.137-44)

It is clear that Demetrius becomes truly romantic when he finds his “true” love; as Lyne writes, “This, and the ‘seal,’ . . . show that even Demetrius, who for most of the play is blunt and unimaginative, can thrive in the rhetorical heuristics of love” (107). Love drives him mad, but love also provides him with the ability to compose poetry.

For the fairy couple Titania and Oberon, as they are fighting for the changeling, reason is obviously deficient in their relationship. In the husband’s opinion, Titania is surely mad to disobey him. Oberon even makes Titania fall in love with the ass-headed Bottom to achieve his revenge. Titania is quite out of her mind when she expresses her love to Bottom:

I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again:
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. (3.1.99-103)

Under the spell of the love juice, Titania cannot help but be bewitched by Bottom's voice and appearance. As the graceful fairy queen is enamored of the bristly ass, even Bottom can see that there is "little reason for that" (3.1.104).

It is unimaginable that a husband would scheme himself into cuckoldom. In order to get the changeling boy, Oberon sacrifices his wife's love and is then pleased with his disgrace as a husband (2.1.180-86). As the fairy king, Oberon apparently loses his senses when he resolves to frame his own wife, whom he actually loves and cherishes.

Not only are the nobles and the fairies mad, but the workmen also lack sense. It is ludicrous that they would want to perform a "most lamentable comedy" (1.2.8) for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta and that they can earn "sixpence a day" afterward (4.2.12). They become even more frenzied when they enter the woods and witness the transformation of Bottom. Robin describes the workmen, frightened by Bottom's ass head, as dispersing in "distracted fear" (3.2.31). Although their "poetic" creation is a disaster, the play—which they call "[a] tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe; very tragical mirth" (5.1.58-59)—leads to the audience's hearty and curious responses. As Dent states, "While a successful production depends on the imaginative cooperation of playwright, producers and audience, Bottom's group has placed the entire burden on the audience" (127). The performance leads the noble couples to produce several witty, sarcastic comments; it also impels Theseus to reconsider the advantage of imagination: "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (5.1.206-07). The workmen's madness in producing a love tragedy not only successfully entertains the nobles, but also highlights the major theme of the entire play.

Bottom, who has the most lines in the play (Bate and Rasmussen 368), represents the notion of "madness" in many ways. He is "made a spectacle of madness and change" (Salkeld 49). Bottom is indeed a counterpart to the pseudo-reason represented by Theseus. His statement that "reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (3.1.105) reveals the main theme of the play. As Northrop Frye comments, Bottom's analysis of his vision that it "shall be called 'Bottom's Dream,' because it has no bottom" (4.2.204-05) is "absurd," but "like many absurdities in Shakespeare, it makes a lot of sense" (132). Frye is justified in concluding that Bottom "has been closer to the center of this wonderful and mysterious play than any other of its characters, and it no longer matters that Puck thinks him a fool or that Titania loathes his asinine face" (132). In other words, Bottom is the character who supposedly has the least sense, but he shows the most sense in the play.

Overall, each of the characters demonstrates madness to different degrees. The lack of reason in the play becomes the central issue. Most of the unreasonable events occur because of love, but they also help to produce poetry and stories. The real sense, in turn, must be recognized by the audience. Without this recognition, Bottom, for example, would remain an asinine character in the play.

In addition to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare deals with the topics of love and madness in many of his other works, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. The integration of love and madness and the conflict between them in these works suggest that they are necessarily intertwined. Despite madness appearing to be a negative influence on love, it brings forth positive effects that require the audience to investigate further. As Fender discusses with regard to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the boundaries between reason and madness are blurred, and we are enlightened to witness the power of love:

Much of the play's ironic pressure consists in the audience's awareness, at any one moment, of a character's contrariety: unless we remember the fairies' potential evil even when they are acting graciously, unless we are aware of the limits of Theseus's reason, unless we remember the potential insights of blind love even when love seems most irrational and dangerous, we miss much of the point of the play. (155)

The limitation of reason and the interaction of love and madness demand the audience's attention, and they help to make the play significant. Anne Barton holds a similar view:

For the theatre audience, granted a perspective wider than the one enjoyed by Theseus and his court, the Pyramus and Thisby [sic] story of love thwarted by parents and the enmity of the stars consolidates and in a sense defines the happy ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It reminds us of the initial dilemma of Hermia and Lysander, and also of how their story might have ended: with blood and deprivation. (162-63)

The play-within-the-play reminds us of what Foucault says of "laceration" or "death" resulting from madness (28). However, Shakespeare addresses mad love in a very different vein: he not only produces a traditional tragedy comically performed by Bottom and his gang, but also makes the play-within-the-play a contrast to the narrow escape that Hermia and Lysander make in the main play. The impact

of mad love is tamed by the poet's arrangement. The truth of love can only be discovered in a careful examination of the play: as Lyne writes, "A collective experience, like the lovers' night in the forest, or the audience's in the theatre, can create, or discover, special truth in the metaphors" (105). In this sense, studying the poetics of the play becomes the responsibility and the privilege of the audience:

What the play does so forcibly is to accommodate different kinds of irrationality—ignorance, misprision, folly, bewilderment, perceptual disorder, passion, anger, and "demonic" power—as products of reason's failure, alongside common-sense reality within a continuous narrative. (Salkeld 50)

Transcending the sadness/madness in the sonnets, the poetic narrative created by Shakespeare in the play tempers the madness caused by vehement love and transforms the destructive power of madness into a favorable strength. The play, in other words, provides various positive visions of mad love.

When we return to Marshall's discussion about "exchanging visions," we may see even more clearly the visions in the play. Marshall is right to point out that the dreams in the play provide double visions:

The magic of the play is that separate minds appear to be transfigured together; dreams (or what seem like dreams) appear to be shared. This is the dream that will mend the spectators of the play if they think that they have slumbered and witnessed the same visions and dream. (111)

Nevertheless, his conclusion seems dubious:

To learn this exchange of visions would be to release others from the roles we cast them in, to permit them to stop being changelings. Only when these visions are double—each of us learning how to look—will we be able to recognize disfiguring and provide it in exchange [for] another sense. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* figures these relations as loss, and in a sense it inscribes us in it. (115)

While the play does address the problems of "seeing" and "double-ness," it does not teach us to "exchange visions." *A Midsummer Night's Dream* instead shows us the double visions of love and madness through poetry. We are not requested to replace our original visions with the characters' visions; instead, we are invited to

witness the coexistent but divergent visions of the characters. Similarly, the speakers in the sonnets offer their diverse visions of mad love. Overall, Shakespeare explores the interrelationship of love and madness with his poetry.

Conclusion

While Shakespeare wields his poetic skills in delineating the mad lover in his sonnets, the power of poetry is further elaborated as he reveals the madness in love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A cognitive approach to the sonnets can aid interpretation of the relationship between love, madness, and poetry; this interrelation is actualized by both the speakers of the sonnets and the characters of the play. When we read between the lines, we see how mad love contributes to the production of poetry, and this reading helps reach a different understanding of poetry. Instead of reading the three themes separately, we can comprehend the coalescent representation made by Shakespeare.

As a poet and playwright, Shakespeare seems to mock himself for indulging in complex relations and fantastic visions, but when the reader or the audience recognizes the extraordinary wonders in his works and the coexistence of love, madness, and poetry, the idea of divine madness—as defined in Plato's *Phaedrus*—is embodied and re-created in the experience of their reading/seeing. After all, through these sonnets and the play, Shakespeare reveals the following subtle situation: mad love inspires poetry, mad poetry delineates love, and love poetry lays bare the notion of madness. Through fantastic poetic mediation, love and madness become divinely interwoven in Shakespeare's works.

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