

6. Shakespeare's Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The Romans celebrated the midsummer solstice with a Saturnalia, where young people drank wine in flower-wreathed boats. Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough*:

In modern Europe, the great Midsummer festival has been above all a festival of lovers and of fire; one of its principal features is the pairing of sweethearts. ... And many omens of love and marriage are drawn from the flowers which bloom at this mystic season. It is the time of the roses and of love. Yet the innocence and beauty of such festivals in modern times ought not to blind us to the likelihood that in earlier days they were marked by coarser features, which were probably of the essence of the rites. [202]

This is Frazer's way of saying that they began as fertility rites. If we are to believe the Puritan opponents of such rites, the 'coarser features' were much in evidence in Shakespeare's time. The church, in its attempt to extirpate paganism, realized in its wisdom that Nature was too big to be abolished; that if all forms of nature-worship were banned, it would simply go underground and escape the control of the church altogether (which happened under James I). Therefore certain days were set aside when such rites might be tolerated. The principal occasions were May, Whitsuntide, Mid-summer's Eve, and the Winter Revels, including Twelfth Night. But to the Puritans these were abominations. In 1583 Phillip Stubbes wrote:

Against May, Whitsuntide, or other time all the young men and maids, old men and wives, run gadding over night to the woods, groves, hills, and mountains, where they spend all the night in pleasant pastimes. ... And no marvel, for there is a great Lord present among them, as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sports, namely, Satan, prince of hell. But the chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their Maypole, which they bring home with great veneration, as thus: They have twenty or forty yoke of oxen, every oxe having a sweet nose-gay of flowers placed on the tip of his horns, and these oxen draw home this Maypole (this stinking idol, rather) which is covered all over with flowers and herbs, bound round about with strings, from the top to the bottom, and sometime painted with variable colours, with two or three hundred men, women and children

following it with great devotion. And being reared up with handkerchiefs and flags hovering on the top, they strew the ground round about it, set up summer halls, bowers and arbors hard by it. And then fall they to dance about it, like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the Idols, whereof this is a perfect pattern, or rather the thing itself. I have heard it credibly reported (and that *viva voce*) by men of great gravity and reputation, that of forty, three-score, or a hundred maids going to the wood over night, there have been scarcely the third part of them returned home again undefiled. These be the fruits which these accursed pastimes bring forth. [quoted by C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 21-2]

These are just the assumptions Pentheus had made about the pastimes of those who had followed Dionysus to the woods and mountains.

Stubbes is quite right. The maypole is a survival of pagan tree-worship. Despite its name it was (and still is in Sweden) more frequently erected on midsummer's eve than in May. The tree-spirit was one of many woodland deities whose marriage to produce the regeneration and growth in spring and summer was thought to be aided by representing it in the choosing of a May King and Queen, a Whitsun Bride and Bridegroom, and by such literal coupling as appalled Stubbes. Frazer writes:

We may assume with a high degree of probability that the profligacy which notoriously attended these ceremonies was at one time not an accidental excess but an essential part of the rites, and that in the opinion of those who performed them the marriage of trees and plants could not be fertile without the real union of the human sexes. ... Some rites which are still, or were till lately, kept up in Europe can be reasonably explained only as stunted relics of a similar practice. [178-9]

The poets were normally opposed to the Puritans in their response to these rites. A few years before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Thomas Nashe wrote, in *Summer's Last Will and Testament*:

From the town to the grove
Two and two let us rove
A Maying, a playing:
Love hath no gainsaying.

And a few years after it Shakespeare wrote:

Between the acres of the rye,
With a hey and a ho and a hey nonino,
These pretty country folks would lie,
In spring-time, the only pretty ring-time ...

All Shakespeare's comedies are attacks on the Puritans, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the most thoroughgoing of them all.

The actual fairy folk were probably the remnants of pagan tribes which had fled to the fastnesses of forests and mountains. They had kept up their pagan rites, including the worship of the horned god, who was the god of the animals, Pan to the Greeks, Cernunnos to the Romans. In England the horned god had many names including Herne the Hunter, Nick, Puck (from the Welsh *Boucca*, meaning 'God') and Robin Goodfellow. The church, of course, called him Satan, and those who continued to worship him witches. Fairies, according to the church, were evil spirits. Though Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* claims that the friars had purged England of fairies:

Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,
Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
And that's the reason why there are no fairies.

these beliefs and rites lingered on into Shakespeare's time and beyond in the form of folklore and superstition, to the horror of the Puritans. In 1584 Reginald Scot mocked such superstitions in *The discovery of witchcraft*:

These bugs specialle are spied and feared of sicke folke, children, women, and cowards, which through weaknesse of mind and bodie, are shaken with vaine dreames and continuall feare. ... But in our childhood our mothers maids have so ... fraied us with bull beggars, spirits, witches, urchins, elves, hags, fairies, satyrs, pans, faunes, sylens, kit with the cansticke, tritons, centaurs, dwarfes, giants, imps, calcars, conjurors, nymphes, changlings, *Incubus*, Robin good-fellowe, the spoorne, the mare, the man in the oke, the hell waine, the fierdrake, the puckle, Tom thombe, hob goblin, Tom tumbler, boneles, and such other bugs, that we are afraid of our owne shadowes: in so much as some never feare the divell, but in a darke night. [A *Midsummer Night's Dream* 147]

However, even such a hostile witness admits that Robin Good-fellow was not entirely a hob-goblin to inspire fear. In return for a bowl of milk he would (so said the 'grandams maides') grind malt or mustard, or sweep the house at midnight.

In the frenzy of witch-hunting initiated by James I, attitudes to Puck hardened. In *Robin Goodfellow, his mad pranks and merry gests*, a pamphlet published in 1639,

Robin is depicted as an ithyphallic god of the witches with young ram's horns sprouting from his forehead, ram's legs, a witches' besom over his left shoulder, a lighted candle in his right hand. Behind him in a ring dance a coven of men and women witches in Puritan costume, a black dog adores him, a musician plays a trumpet, an owl flies overhead.

[Graves, *Goddess*, 396]

Shakespeare's Puck is the same Trickster and shape-changer of the popular imagination, but he is not in the least satanic. He does no harm beyond 'mad pranks and merry gests'. He claims to be glad when his mistakes cause 'jangling', but: 'Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck, / You do their work, and they shall have good luck' [II i 40-1].

Similarly, Shakespeare goes out of his way to remove all sense of evil or threat from his fairies. Oberon's attitude to humans is from the start benevolent. And when Puck seems to fear the approach of dawn, as if he were indeed an urchin or goblin such as those Prospero employs to pinch Caliban, which may work only at night, Oberon assures him that 'we are spirits of another sort'. Although the night is their element, and they run from the presence of the sun, they do so by choice, having nothing to fear, as evil spirits have, from its 'fair blessed beams'. They are, specifically, 'triple Hecate's team' - not, that is, Hecate the goddess of witchcraft, but the Great Goddess who is queen of the realms of earth and heaven, as well as of the underworld. Even as goddess of the underworld, of winter and death, she is Proserpina who will be miraculously renewed every spring.

These fairies are throughout closely associated with the wood and its flora and fauna. This, together with their preoccupation with marriage, makes them clearly, in Barber's words 'tutelary spirits of fertility' [137]. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Shakespeare's attempt to reclaim this world of fairy as necessary to human health and wholeness.

Shakespeare may have gone too far in the direction of prettifying and miniaturizing the fairies to a degree unknown up to that time, in order to

counteract any doubts and fears about them in his audience. This play alone (or the long tradition of sentimental productions of it) is largely responsible for our modern view of fairies as tiny charming winged gossamer creatures.

Shakespeare can hardly have intended that, since there were no more actors then than now capable of creeping into an acorn. In countries where Shakespeare is less of an influence, fairies are not like that at all. If his purpose in this play is as anti-Christian and subversive of conventional belief as I take it to be, he may have found it necessary to make most of his fairies as far removed as possible from the hobgoblins of Puritan nightmares, so that Robin Goodfellow and even Hecate can be smuggled in with them.

Shakespeare was not interested in the actual existence of fairies, but in their symbolic potential. What they, as spirits who took over the world at night, symbolized for him was the contents of the inner dark, the unconscious, repressed by day, but taking over the sleeper in dreams. Joseph Campbell speaks of 'the realm that we enter in sleep' as 'the internal world', 'the everlasting realm that is within', 'the infantile unconscious':

We carry it within ourselves forever. All the ogres and secret helpers of our nursery are there, all the magic of childhood. And more important, all the life-potentialities that we never managed to bring to adult realization, those other portions of ourself, are there; for such golden seeds do not die. If only a portion of that lost totality could be dredged up into the light of day, we should experience a marvellous expansion of our powers, a vivid renewal of life. ... The first work of the hero is to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them in his own case and break through to the undistorted, direct experience and assimilation of what C.G. Jung has called 'the archetypal images'.
[*Hero*, 17]

It is the function of Shakespearean comedy to fertilize those golden seeds; not only to show us but to give us a renewal of life. Those 'causal zones of the psyche' he symbolizes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the triple imagery of dream, darkness and wood, all of them teeming with archetypal images, which are images so deeply rooted in the racial unconscious that they recur in dreams, visions and imaginative art in all times and cultures. One such archetype is the horned god.

Jung describes dreams as 'pure nature; they show us the unvarnished natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an

attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed to far from its foundations and run into an impasse':

We have known for a long time that there is a biological relationship between the unconscious processes and the activity of the conscious mind. This relationship can best be described as a compensation, which means that any deficiency in consciousness - such as exaggeration, one-sidedness, or lack of a function - is suitably supplemented by an unconscious process. ... If such a compensatory move of the unconscious is not integrated into consciousness in an individual, it leads to a neurosis or even to a psychosis. [Jung 10, 218-20]

When this deficiency is in a king, the consequences reverberate throughout his kingdom, with dire results in both histories and tragedies. But it is the nature of Shakespearean comedy that the deficiency is never disabling, that integration can and does take place, (which is the happy ending), symbolized by marriage, music and dance.

At the beginning of the play all seems concord until Egeus enters, 'full of vexation'. Love now appears not as a cause of marriage but of discord - a polarization between the irrational fantasy and doting which Egeus takes Hermia's love for Lysander to be, and the rational determination of his own judgement. This vexation immediately drives a wedge into the apparent harmony, for Theseus feels himself obliged to side with Egeus and the 'sharp Athenian law', while Hippolyta clearly sympathizes with Hermia. Egeus is only behaving as a cussed old father might be expected to behave. We might reasonably expect Theseus to know better. We might expect him, four days before his nuptials, and having just declared his intention to 'turn melancholy forth to funerals', to be well disposed to young lovers. Egeus seems totally oblivious of the claims of love. His objection to Lysander's wooing is that it took the usual form of wooing, that is, it played on Hermia's heart and 'fancy' rather than her reason. The songs Lysander has sung at her window by moonlight are to Egeus the equivalent of witchcraft. Already we have a whiff of the difficulty the Athenians have in coping with whatever belongs to the female, or to the night, or to the natural world. Egeus is a walking embodiment of Athenian law and 'the ancient privilege of Athens', which is patriarchal and cruel. That law sets male judgement above female feelings. Hermia says that she does not know 'by what power' she is made bold to refuse. The rest of the play defines that power and sets it up in opposition to the sterile and arbitrary legal power which governs Athens.

Theseus does offer Hermia an alternative to death: to 'abjure For ever the society of men', to become a nun. He goes through the motions of praising the vocation of the nun as 'thrice-blessed'; but everything else he says of it presents it as barren, cold, fruitless and inhuman:

But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives, and dies, in single blessedness.

By the time we reach the word 'blessedness' it has been drained of all possible meaning, an empty gesture towards a lifeless, unnatural spirituality Theseus has no real belief in. Indeed the power to bless is shortly to be handed over to the fairies.

The cold fruitlessness of 'single blessedness' is exactly the opposite of what the rites of May and Mid-summer seek to guarantee - an access of warm fruitfulness. They seek to promote and bless coupling, love and marriage, not barren singleness.

Theseus has the opportunity to nip discord in the bud. To the dismay of Hippolyta he does not take it, but pleads helplessness in the face of the law, as though it were an absolute. As Harold Brooks puts it: 'The inescapable fact about love and reason in the *Dream* is that when the human love-conflict is first presented for judgement, reason has its chance to solve it, if unaided reason can; and it cannot, even to the satisfaction of the judge himself' [Arden cxxxvi]. Bottom shows himself wiser than Theseus when he says: 'Reason and love keep little company together nowadays. The more the pity, that some honest neighbours will not make them friends'. Theseus postpones final judgement. Hermia and Lysander seize that time to flee to the woods, and so the whole discordant action of the play is precipitated. The faults requiring to be corrected are small, which makes it all the more inexcusable (and comic) that matters are allowed to get out of hand.

Love without reason is just as much of a deficiency and imbalance as reason without love. It is the doting which causes Helena to betray her friend and her self-respect. It is the unreasoning love of Titania for her changeling boy, and later, in concentrated overdose, for an ass.

All the forms of deficiency or imbalance among the human characters are presented as, in varying degrees, unnatural. It was unnatural for Hippolyta to devote herself to a military life, as for Theseus to gain her by force of arms. This they both now recognize; but Theseus cannot see the relevance of what he has learned to the problem before him. The unnaturalness of a father suing for

his daughter's death is blatant enough. Demetrius' rejection of the woman who loves him (and of his own love for her) in favour of one who hates him is unnatural. It is unnatural of Helena to love him the more the more he spurns her. Perhaps we should see (given the parallel of Titania) Hermia's insistence that Lysander sleep further off as mildly unnatural (especially on a night sacred to love). It is the distance between them which causes Puck's mistake and Lysander's subsequent unnatural behaviour.

Demetrius says at the end that he has come to his 'natural taste'. The movement of the whole play is the restoration, through the agency of the fairies, of all things unnatural (whether by folly or mischance) to their true nature. The woods are not a place of licence. They have their own deities and sanctities and morality (different though these may be from those of organized religion). Here unnatural is evil.

Oberon and Titania are, above all, the spirits who promote and bless coupling. Oberon's presence near Athens is accounted for by his desire to give joy and prosperity to Theseus' and Hippolyta's bed. Yet the first thing Titania tells us is 'I have forsworn his bed'. Oberon and Titania are the equivalent on the dream plane of Theseus and Hippolyta. Each is behaving unnaturally. There would be nothing wrong with Titania's attachment to the 'little changeling boy' and his dead mother, were those attachments not exaggerated to the point where Oberon is displaced entirely from her affections and the marital bed. Oberon, on the other hand, rides roughshod over her sympathetic and maternal feelings, and overreacts by trying to deprive her of the boy altogether. No honest neighbour being on hand to mediate, their tiff escalates to undermine their essential function.

Oberon, like Theseus, seeks to compel love by force. He does so again, even with benevolent intention, when he uses the rough magic of love-in-idleness, derived from Cupid's poisoned arrow. It is important that the love-juice should be rubbed on the eyes of a sleeper rather than drunk. This makes it more external, by-passing judgement. It is only, in concentrated overdose, what happens with any love at first sight which has nothing more to it than what the eyes can register. As Cressida is to say, 'The error of our eye directs our mind. ... Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude'. The too-much-love which is doting has to be cancelled by the antidote of too little which is virginity (Diane's bud). Oberon betrays his own essential nature as preserver of the natural by forcing on Titania the most unnatural love he can think of:

What thou seest when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy true love take;

Love and languish for his sake.
Be it ounce, or cat, or bear,
Pard, or boar with bristled hair,
In thy eye that shall appear
When thou wak'st, it is thy dear.
Wake when some vile thing is near.

[II ii 26-33]

On the dream plane of imaginative magnification, Titania is much more than a surrogate mother. She is the very goddess of motherhood and all nature's riches. Every mother or pregnant woman is a votress of her order. But every mother, like the goddess herself, requires a consort. The changeling boy has been stolen from its father, and becomes in turn a substitute for a husband. Oberon's jealousy further disturbs the delicate balance of the natural order, releases a plague of Theban proportions (Seneca's *Oedipus* was Shakespeare's main source for this passage), and reenacts the fall:

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which, falling in the land,
Hath every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents. ...
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock. ...
The human mortals want their winter cheer:
No night is now with hymn or carol blest.
Therefore the moon, the governess of floods,
Pale in her anger, washes all the air,
That rheumatic diseases do abound.
And thorough this distemperature we see
The seasons alter: hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose;
And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown,
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set; the spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;

We are their parents and original.

Although six of the characters spend a good deal of time asleep, only one of them actually dreams (when Hermia dreams that a serpent ate her heart away while Lysander sat smiling). All the other many references to dreams in the play are not to real dreams at all. They are metaphors, like wood, night and fairies, for the altered state of consciousness in which mere reason relaxes its grip and allows other powers and modes of perception to flood in, for those 'causal zones of the psyche' peopled by archetypal images, for, in a word, imagination. Lovers might have the experience, but, not being poets, miss the meaning. The main action of the lovers is framed by the repeated statement of their ignorance of the nature of the power they experience, Hermia's 'I know not by what power' in the first act, and Demetrius' 'I wot not by what power' in the fourth. As soon as they awaken, the experience seems to them cloudy, 'undistinguishable', 'everything seems double'. But they have enjoyed its benefits whether they understand it or not, and Shakespeare the poet has found archetypal images, objective correlatives to make all clear to the audience. The lovers enter the woods in flight, fear, anger and dotage. They return to Athens transfigured, made one with nature and their own natures. What has transfigured them is remembered as no more than 'the fierce vexation of a dream', but the privileged audience knows they have not dreamed it, that they had entered a deeper reality than 'the world of secondary effects', the spirit world, the Dream Time, where all has been corrected and atoned.

Oberon's word 'vexation' marks the end of the process necessitated by Egeus' entry, 'full of vexation' at the beginning. Shakespeare was throughout his life fascinated by alchemy. His last hero, Prospero, is an alchemist. The alchemist sought in his laboratory to correct the imbalance of matter. He used, like the poet, marriage (the chymical marriage, or coniunctio) as an image of the perfect union, fusion of opposites, which he sought. Shakespeare in the laboratory of the spirit often used terms from alchemy as images. 'Vexation' is one such term, a dangerous but necessary stage in the great work where the mixture had to be violently agitated. So here, the deficiencies and imbalances in the communal psyche of Athens, which threatened to spoil Theseus' nuptials, are put through the 'fierce vexation' of exposure to the world beyond rationality, as if that psyche were being violently stirred to exorcise its self-generated demons. As Barber puts it:

The teeming metamorphoses which we encounter are placed, in this way, in a medium and in a moment where the perceived structure of the outer

world breaks down, where the body and its environment interpenetrate in unaccustomed ways, so that the seeming separateness and stability of identity is lost. [135]

When Oberon strikes the lovers 'more dead than common sleep', he prepares the way for their awakening to parallel the renewal of earth after the death-like sleep of winter. To sleep on the cold earth and awaken revitalized is a common feature of May rites throughout Europe. Oberon can exercise this power only because he and his queen are now themselves 'new in amity'.

The beginning of the last act returns us to Athens and Theseus, who immediately dismisses what the lovers have said and the audience witnessed as untrue, 'antique fables' and 'fairy toys'. Theseus claims that 'cool reason' comprehends everything, that love is a matter of 'seething brains' and 'shaping fantasies', that, since all are dominated by 'imagination', there is no difference between 'the lunatic, the lover, and the poet'. In other words, love and poetry, being non-literal and beyond reason, are forms of madness. That he should mock the poet's capacity to move freely between earth and heaven implies that for him heaven itself is no more than 'airy nothing'. He has allowed his reason to block off his access to the world of imagination, fearing that to relax strict control is to invite confusion. In so doing he has held feeling at arms length, consigning it to the unreal world of dream and the dangerous world of night. It is Theseus who, for the lovers, 'hath turned a heaven into a hell'.

Theseus' reference to 'fairy toys' is gratuitous, since the lovers can have told him nothing of fairies - they saw none. One human did see the fairies. Again Bully Bottom is the standard by which Theseus, for all his rank and urbanity, is found wanting. If only he or Peter Quince were enough of a poet, they could turn Bottom's dream into a 'gracious' ballad to counterbalance the death of Thisbe.

They are not, but Shakespeare is. The poet is someone who can enter the Dream Time while fully awake, and bring its contents into consciousness and expression, usually as story or drama. This activity is commonly dismissed by the exclusively rational as so irrational as to be crazy.

Hippolyta gently but totally refutes Theseus, making, in fact, Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy, and telling us what the whole play is about:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,

And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.

That 'something of great constancy' is, within the terms of this play, the wholeness of nature. The idea of the wholeness of nature was anathema to the Puritans. Ted Hughes writes:

The idea of nature as a single organism is not new. It was man's first great thought, the basic intuition of most primitive theologies. Since Christianity hardened into Protestantism, we can follow its underground heretical life, leagued with everything occult, spiritualistic, devilish, over-emotional, bestial, mystical, feminine, crazy, revolutionary, and poetic.

[*Winter Pollen*, 132]

Shakespeare reclaims and renews them all.

Theseus at this point drops his argument, and speaks to the lovers from the heart:

Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth.
Joy, gentle friends, joy and fresh days of love
Accompany your hearts.

He calls for mirth and revels, rejects offerings on the subjects of war, rage and mourning, and chooses the love story of Pyramus and Thisbe.

The unnaturalness, the gross artificiality and absurdity of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is compounded by the incompetence of the rude mechanicals. Yet, though they violate all the proprieties of art and courtly behaviour, their instinctive naturalness and goodwill overrides objections such as those of the Master of the Revels, eliminates the class divide, and humanizes the courtiers. The couples receive a blessing from Peter Quince and his team as well as from the fairies.

The declared purpose of the entertainment is to 'ease the anguish' of 'this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bed-time'. When the Bergamask is over it is almost midnight, and even the sceptical Theseus in his excited anticipation drops his rational guard: 'Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time'. He speaks truer than he knows, for a moment later Puck enters to prepare the way for 'the King and Queen of Fairies, with all their Train'. They come to bless the bride-beds, the couples themselves, their unborn children, the palace, Athens. Their holy water is 'field-dew consecrate', and their deity is the triple

Hecate, who embodies in one indivisible goddess the world, the underworld, and the heavens. Her power extends over day and night, city and country, waking and dreaming. When she is welcomed, she brings concord, healing, a blessing on house and city. In the words of Graham Bradshaw, 'although Theseus does not believe in fairies, he needs, and receives, their blessing'. They are the powers we live or are lived by.

Nature is herself a poet, an imaginative artist whose manuscripts cannot but contain the occasional blot, whose creations are not without unnatural accidents - the mole, hare-lip or birthmark. These the fairies try to protect the unborn young against.

In Oberon's final speech we can no longer miss what has been steadily accumulated throughout the play - Shakespeare's arrogation of Christian terminology for his fairies. All Christianity's strongest words are there - grace, hallowed, consecrated, and, innumerable times, blessed - all usurped on behalf of pagan deities and nature spirits which nearly every Christian of the time would have thought satanic and sought charms to protect the house against:

Saint Francis and Saint Benedight,
Bless this house from wicked wight,
From the nightmare and the goblin
That is hight Goodfellow Robin;
Keep it from all evil spirits,
Fairies, weasels, rats, and ferrets;
From curfew time
To the next prime.

[Murray 40]

And this fear of and hostility to nature is not restricted to Christian or to benighted centuries long ago. In *The Myth of the Goddess* Baring and Cashford write:

Nature is no longer experienced as source but as adversary, and darkness is no longer a mode of divine being, as it was in the lunar cycles, but a mode of being devoid of divinity and actively hostile, devouring of light, clarity and order. The only place where the voice of the old order breaks through, though so disguised as to be barely recognizable, is where the inspiration of poetry re-animates the old mythic images.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that voice is unmistakable: Shakespeare brings about no less than a marriage of heaven and hell.

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Pagan rites are again in evidence in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but much closer to home, not in the woods near the Athens of antiquity, but in Windsor Forest close to a community of solid bourgeois Elizabethan citizens.

Falstaff is seen by the whole community as a threat to the order on which it depends, as the embodiment of riot, vice, in particular the deadly sin of lechery. In spite of the comic context, the words used of him - 'corrupted', 'tainted', 'unclean' - are very strong. He is the old Adam to be castigated and cast out. Almost, he is the devil himself. The pre-Christian horned god, known to the Romans as Cernunnos, 'lord of the animals', god of the chase, appears in British folklore as Herne the Hunter. This god was still worshipped by the witches of Shakespeare's time. But apart from the witches, knowledge of such cults had become for the average Elizabethan almost as shadowy as our own knowledge of the significance of such pagan rituals as still survive, our maypoles, bonfires, holly and ivy. Ford has an irrational hatred of witches, though he admits to knowing nothing of their practices. They are, he says, 'beyond our element'. That Falstaff should be disguised as the witch of Brainford is a parody of the shape-shifting powers of the witches and their god. The name of Herne the Hunter meant almost as little to the Pages and Fords of Shakespeare's day as it does to us:

The superstitious idle-headed eld
Receiv'd, and did deliver to our age,
This tale of Herne the hunter for a truth.

Yet his oak in Windsor Forest still seemed a fearful place to them, to be avoided after dark:

Why, yet there want not many that do fear
In deep of night to walk by this Herne's oak.

When the tree finally fell, two hundred years later, it must have been something more than mere antiquity which caused its wood to be made into curios, some of which survive to this day. One of them belonged to Ted Hughes, the author of *Gaudete*, in which a man who is part oak and part fertility god, a lecherous seducer of the village wives, throws their husbands into a panic and is hunted down by them, killed and burned.

Why should Shakespeare drag Herne the Hunter and all that hazy pagan folklore into so casual a comedy as *The Merry Wives*? Within the shallow materialistic world of Windsor, Falstaff comes to seem a representative, however degraded, of the fertility god himself. He sees himself as a scapegoat persecuted by Puritans: 'This is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking through the realm'. He invokes, at the climax, 'omnipotent love', 'that in some respects makes a beast a man; in some other, a man a beast'. He has indeed become a beast - 'a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think, i' th' forest' - but simultaneously a god shape-shifting for love: 'When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?' His frank sexuality ('My doe with the black scut') is much to be preferred to the puritanical violence Parson Evans schools the children in:

Fie on sinful fantasy,
Fie on lust and luxury! ...
Pinch him, and burn him, and turn him about,
Till candles and starlight and moonshine be out.

Had Evans the power of Prospero and real hobgoblins at his disposal, Falstaff would no doubt have been as tormented as Caliban.

The 'public sport' which the merry wives improvise to exorcise Sir John is clearly based on, made up of vestiges from, ancient rituals whose original meaning has been quite forgotten. Falstaff is told to come to Herne's oak at night 'disguised like Herne, with huge horns on his head'. Their children, dressed as fairies, will then 'pinch him sound, And burn him with their tapers'. The original fairies were probably an ancient race, worshippers of the horned god. Herne is, according to Graves, closely associated with Hermes, who was Hecate's messenger and lover. Fairies had not, for Shakespeare, quite lost their association with the triple Hecate, but for the merry wives they have already declined into the gossamer creatures of children's stories. The pinching may be a dim memory of the fate of the hunter-god - to be torn apart by his hounds. It may also remind us of the pinching of Caliban by sprites. Caliban's mother Sycorax is identified by Graves with triple Hecate. The real fairies might well have danced round the horned god, dressed in white and green, 'with rounds of waxen tapers on their heads' (as in surviving Scandinavian rituals). They may well have burned him - to death, but not as an act of moral cleansing; rather, on the contrary, as a guarantee of his rebirth the following year rejuvenated and revitalized in order to be able to resume his role as fertility god. This is the opposite of Mistress Page, who, intending to 'dis-horn the spirit', is proposing a symbolic castration.

Falstaff's venery is also to be preferred to the cold materialistic calculation of those who triumph over him. Their 'virtue' and 'scruple' is devalued by the mutual deception of Page and his wife over the marriage of their daughter. Guarding her own honour so scrupulously, Mistress Page does not scruple to try to sell her daughter:

You would have married her most shamefully,
Where there was no proportion held in love.

Ford admits that money buys lands, not wives. And Page concedes that 'What cannot be eschew'd must be embrac'd'.

Falstaff, like the green girdle, is precisely that which cannot be eschewed from a full and balanced life. 'Banish plump Jack and banish all the world', he had said to Prince Hal. And here, this being a comedy, he is not banished. The union of Anne and Fenton under Herne's oak vindicates him. The distinction between love and lust dissolves in laughter. He is welcomed back into the human community:

Master Fenton,
Heaven give you many, many merry days!
Good husband, let us every one go home
And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire,
Sir John and all.

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