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***Paradoxes of Disbelief: Metamorphosis and Metadrama
in A Midsummer Night's Dream***

***Paradoxes de l'incrédulité: métamorphose et métadrame dans Le songe
d'une nuit d'été***

Mots clés : théâtre rationnel/irrationnel, contrat théâtral, métadrame comique, suspension de l'incrédulité, imagination, métamorphose, convention, dimension métagénérique

Résumé :

Partant de la prémisse que le « contrat théâtral » présuppose, de la part du spectateur aussi bien que de celle de l'acteur, une suspension volontaire de l'incroyance, cet article porte sur l'emploi du motif de la métamorphose dans *Le songe d'une nuit d'été* dans le contexte de la dimension métradramatique et métagénérique de la pièce. Focalisé sur l'épisode comique de la transposition théâtrale, par les artisans athéniens, de l'histoire de Pyramus et Thisbe, empruntée à Ovide, l'article explore la valeur métatropique de ce motif, qui figure le paradoxe de l'expérience théâtrale, définie par la tension entre le détachement rationnel et l'abandon à l'imagination, associée à l'irrationnel.

In an article published in *The Architectural Review*, in 1995, Peter Blundell Jones cites architects Hans Scharoun and Margot Aschenbreuner, who make a distinction between *rational* and *irrational* theatre – not only from an architectural point of view (the rational, “perspective theatre” of the Renaissance and the Baroque was defined by its axis running between the privileged seat of the ruler and the centre stage), but also from the point of view of thematic concerns. According to them, Shakespeare, along with Greek theatre and medieval mystery plays, illustrates *irrational theatre* because he “deal[s] with metaphysical themes, themes exceeding a limited time and place”¹. In “rational theatre” actors and audience are “under the spell of the axis”², and the clear separation of the stage from the audience emphasises the clear division between the play as a fictional construct and the real world.

This division is most of the time accepted tacitly – it is part of the *theatrical contract*³ whereby the audience, while in full knowledge of the untruth of what is presented on the stage, willingly suspend disbelief, embracing the illusion. Voluntary self-delusion – to which, as Samuel Johnson was pointing out, there are “no certain limitations”⁴ – is the essence of theatrical enjoyment.

¹ Peter Blundell Jones, “Irrational Theatre,” *The Architectural Review*, Vol. 197, February 1995. Available at <http://www.questia.com>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. J. L. Styan, *Perspectives on Shakespeare in Performance*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000, p. 111.

⁴ Cf. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays*, 2001, Blackmask online, <http://www.blackmask.com>.

Theatre actually deconstructs the very opposition between the rational and the irrational – to cite Dr. Johnson again, “the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players”⁵. Donald Davidson points to the paradoxical nature of this dichotomy, when he states that “the irrational is not merely the non-rational, which lies outside the ambit of the rational; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason”⁶. With respect to the theatrical representation, this definition must be amended, or at least pondered on: is the suspension of rationality required from the audience a “failure,” or is it a capacity of a different nature, which Shakespeare himself calls “imagination”?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the device of the play-within-the-play, used in a comic key, gives a new twist to the paradox destabilising the opposition rationality–irrationality, in regard to both the actors and the audience. Theseus, who links the faculty of the imagination – a faculty of the irrational mind – with the evocative power of poetry, the intensity of emotion, and the fool’s capacity for unreason, seems to draw a clear line between the realm of solid reality and the world of “shadows,” in which he includes theatrical representation. One of the paradoxes in the play is that such lucid metatheatrical insights are offered at the end of a plot in which high fantasy has already carried the receptive audience far into the world of make-believe. The representation that the Athenian artisans put on before Theseus and his company comically fails to seduce the audience in the play into suspending disbelief, and, together with the scenes of its preparation, counterpointing those of the romantic summer madness in the forest, it dramatizes the actual uncertain dividing line between rational detachment and imaginative abandonment that both watching a play and acting in one presuppose.

The metadramatic insertions in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seem to be, by their comic nature, a lure back to rationality, but their greater effectiveness lies, arguably, in their power of suggesting that theatre is always both rational and irrational, that the audience is always inevitably caught and wavering between the lucid conscience that the theatrical fabrication is “airy nothing” and the mysterious pleasure of abdicating their rational watchfulness.

This double bind of the theatre audience is figured, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by the trope of *metamorphosis*⁷, which acquires a *metadramatic* significance

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Donald Davidson, *Problems of Rationality*, Clarendon Press, 2004, p.169.

⁷ Shakespeare’s most certain source for his play was Ovid’s first translation into English by Arthur Golding (1567), but he was surely aware of many other Renaissance translations and adaptations, including a French version, *Ovide moralisé* (cf. David Garrison, *Gongora and the “Pyramus and Thisbe” Myth from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Juan de la Cuesta, 1994, p. 145), and it is supposed that he was acquainted with the Latin original as well. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* borrows the story of Pyramus and Thisbe from Ovid, but this is only part of its indebtedness to the Roman poet. Jonathan Bate has described the play as “deeply but not directly Ovidian” (*Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 131), examining the comic displacements which Ovid’s tale underwent in Shakespeare’s play, but emphasizing at the same time Shakespeare’s faithfulness to the spirit of Ovid’s work: “It is

and bears on the *metageneric* dimension of the play. The experience of metamorphosis presupposes, like theatrical experience, a certain strain on rationality, since one has to admit the quasi-impossibility that something belongs simultaneously to two incompatible orders of being or reality, between which there is a mysterious exchange.

In the middle of the play, Puck's wicked prank of bestowing an ass's head on Bottom the weaver creates astonishment and comic fear among the latter's fellows – most notably, Peter Quince's exclamation "Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! Thou art translated" modulates the grotesque comedy of the Athenian craftsman's scapegoating with the almost mystical suggestion of his "transportation" to another realm (in IV, 2. 4, Starveling accounts for Bottom's absence: "He is transported")⁸.

Translated is a key word in Shakespeare's play. Used only three times, out of which two in connection with Bottom's metamorphosis, it carries nevertheless a host of implications, related not only to the thematic issue of the workings of "strong imagination" (cf. V, 1. 18), or to the plot contrivance of the exchanges between the fantasy world of the fairies and the Athenian "reality,"⁹ but also to the metageneric issues that the play raises and to the complex metadramatic uses to which its main source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is put.

"Translation," in Jonathan Bate's argument, is explicitly an equivalent for "displacement," which is indeed the dominant trope in a play dealing with the unfixedness of human emotions and the unreliability of human perceptions – with the more general theme of the transfiguring powers of love and imagination – both of them seen as manifestations of the irrational mind. Displacement – an essential aspect of the dream work – resolves, in Shakespeare's *Dream*, the conflicts and contradictions of the day by immersing the protagonists in strange nocturnal experiences, involving the metamorphosis of desire. When the light of day (the return to rationality) rescues the characters from the incomprehensible, the erratic, the accidental, and the arbitrary, the young characters are finally "translated" into the appropriate relationship, and Desire and Law are reconciled in marriage.

The cluster of issues that may be associated with *translation* – displacement (*and* condensation, if we stay within the Freudian frame of reference), transposition, transportation, transfiguration, dis-figuration, metamorphosis – is particularly prominent in the strand of plot regarding the Athenian craftsmen and their staging and performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Their "translation" of Ovid's tale into theatrical representation raises not simply the issues of fidelity and originality, but

elsewhere in the play, not in 'Pyramus and Thisbe,' that we find all the marks of true Ovidianism: a philosophy of love and change, the operation of the gods, animal transformation, and symbolic vegetation. It is the translation of these elements out of the play within and into the play itself that transforms *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into the most luminous imitation of Ovid" (*ibid.*, p. 132).

⁸ All the references to Shakespeare's text will be made to the following edition: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited, with a Glossary by W. J. Craig, London: Henry Pordes, 1984.

⁹ The first occurrence of "translated", in one of Helena's lines, carries the implication of "exchange": "Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated, / The rest I'd give to you to be translated" (I, 1. 190-1).

also those of the relationship between the actor and his part, and of the “translation” of the audience. In the metadramatic device of the play-within-the-play, the positions of actors, characters, and spectators become highly unstable, as the boundaries between them are shifting or erased. This displacement and condensation of roles, to which the *Dream’s Pyramus and Thisbe* draws attention, endorses a central idea in Shakespeare’s play: that of the metamorphic logic of the imagination.

Love has the same metamorphic capacity, as Helena’s meditation shows: “Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity” (I, 1. 232-3). The comic counterpart of this romantic theme is dramatized in Titania’s infatuation with “a monster” – the “translation” of Bottom into Titania’s ass-headed lover being Shakespeare’s displaced version of Ovidian metamorphosis. In this episode, the two themes – love and imagination – are brought together to be given a comic, even grotesque, twist. The magic potion that Puck places on the eyelids of Titania and the other characters – the displaced equivalent of Cupid’s arrows – has actually the symbolic role of activating the imagination and its transfiguring power, just as the theatrical representation does, when it requires the audience to suspend their disbelief about the “shadows,” the things with “no quantity,” the “airy nothing” that “beguiles” the spectator’s eye. As in love, which “looks not with the eyes, but with the mind”, as Helena puts it (I, 1. 234), a certain “blindness” – a postponement of rational judgement – is required from the imaginative spectator of a theatrical representation, who should be willing to forget that “the best in this kind are but shadows”, as Theseus reassures Hippolyta (V, 1. 217).

Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe undergoes a double metamorphosis in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. On a first level it is “translated,” in comic-romantic key, into the story of Hermia and Lysander and their threatened love, thwarted by parental authority. At the hands of the Athenian craftsmen, it turns into burlesque, but develops metadramatic levels which constitute implicit comments on the limits and possibilities of theatrical art. For the simple artisans, the attempt to convert one kind of discourse into another (narrative into dramatic) poses more problems than they can be aware of, yet their delightfully comic unself-consciousness creates a context for reflection on the workings of dramatic imagination.

At once bound by inherent theatrical convention – reason’s roundabout way of dealing with the untruth of the world on the stage – and aiming at exact representation, the artisans wonder, for instance, how they are to solve the problem of “moonshine” and “wall,” two “hard things” for Quince (cf. II, 2. 52), which require dramatic “translation.” They are tempted by the realistic, literalistic extreme of bringing the objects themselves on stage (Bottom is eager to find a calendar, to “find out moonshine” and suggests leaving open the casement of the window so the moon may shine in during their performance). Quince, more aware of the limitations of dramatic representation, pushes conventionalism to the extreme, suggesting that moonshine be embodied by an actor: “Ay, or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lanthorn, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine” (II, 2. 69). Bottom, newly awakened to the range of choices that the theatrical trade offered, promptly suggests a similar solution to the problem of the wall: “Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some

plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify Wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper” (II, 2. 76). In the context of the larger issue of metamorphosis as the “translation” of the actor into his role, this episode derives its comedy from the idea of the demotion of the human to the status of dramatic signifier for an object¹⁰, and of the object raised to the dignity of “person” – a possible displaced allusion to the traditional metamorphic exchange between the realms of the human and non-human.

The issue of irrationality looms again here, since acting requires, in its turn, the suspension of the rational self which we take as the ground for one’s identity. American drama critic John Lahr, for instance, considered that “[p]erforming is a kind of ecstasy, an act so inspired and irrational that – at its extremes, it can seem vulgar, lunatic and dangerous”¹¹. Snout’s “metamorphosis” into “Wall” is an extreme example of the irrationality of role-playing.

The very idea of metamorphosis, central to Ovid’s work, is most successfully displaced in this metadramatic frame. This metamorphosis at the second power – a craftsman turned actor turned Wall/Moonshine/lion is literally a dis-figuration. Bottom’s directions for Snug, who will “play” the lion, hint at this destruction of the figure that metamorphosis entails: “you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion’s neck; and he himself must speak through” (II. 2. 48). The actor coming forth and “presenting” Wall, but also insisting on his real identity, does indeed “disfigure” Wall, in the sense that he thus destroys the metaphor which binds him to his role. Performing a role may be assimilated, like metamorphosis, to the metaphoric order of discourse: it amounts, as metaphor does, to “feigning to describe something else while also describing the sameness of the changed self”¹². However, in the process, the figure is destroyed, since, while metaphoric relationship is one of simultaneity, therefore excluding time, metamorphosis presupposes “time, process and displacement,” a before and an after. As Michel Le Guern argues, “metamorphosis takes place only because there is no more metaphor... The metaphor gives the poet the idea of metamorphosis, but the poetic illusion can only be produced through the figure’s destruction”¹³. Quince’s solecism, offering “disfigure” as an alternative to “present,” conveys a paradoxical unwitting wisdom about metamorphosis as a trope for acting and about the necessary play with the distinction between the literal and the figurative that it involves¹⁴.

¹⁰ For Bergson, the essence of risibility consists in the rigidity of the object taking over the human. An actor embodying a wall represents a “momentary transfiguration of a person into an object” – a classic source of laughter (cf. *Teoria risului*, Iași: Institutul European, 1991, p. 54).

¹¹ Quoted in J. L. Styan, “The Drama: Reason in Madness,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, Oct. 1980, p. 371.

¹² Kai Mikkonen, “Theories of metamorphosis: from metatropes to textual revision,” *Style*, 6/22/1996, citing Pierre Brunel. Available at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-19175945.html>.

¹³ Quoted in Mikkonen, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Cf. Mikkonen, *op. cit.* A further play on this distinction, and another instance of metamorphosis as the destruction of metaphor, is illustrated in Bottom’s partial transformation into an ass.

It is not, as Jonathan Bate argues, the “obsessive literalism” of the craftsmen that makes the play a risibly “deficient translation”¹⁵; the metamorphosis of a tragic tale into grotesque comedy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is rather the effect of the players’ indecision about which strategies of representation are more appropriate to their purpose.

There is, on the one hand, the issue of total identification, the elimination of the conventional distance between actor and character, as when Bottom is persuaded by Quince that there is a necessary connection between him and the role of Pyramus: “You can play no part but Pyramus; for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man; a proper man, as one shall see in a summer’s day; a most lovely, gentleman-like man; therefore you must needs play Pyramus” (II, 1. 92).¹⁶ In this case, the relationship actor-character emphasises similarity and substitution, which are defining for *metaphor* as a trope. On the other hand, Bottom’s insistence on keeping the audience aware of the distance between actor and part, his suggestion that a prologue should exhibit this difference and tell them that the lion “is not a lion” makes role-playing incline more towards the trope of *metonymy* (etymologically, a change of name: *meta+onoma*). He even conceives the script for Snug’s disclaimer to the audience: “«If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life: no, I am no such thing: I am a man as other men are», and there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner” (III, 1. 44-48).

This hovering between extreme approaches to the actor’s art suggests that metamorphosis as the actor’s “translation” into a role – and more generally as “the specific function of the imagination in the comprehension and production of forms”¹⁷ – occupies indeed an unsettled middle ground between metaphor and metonymy. Kai Mikkonen cites Bachelard’s definition of metamorphosis as a *metatrophe*, “a trope that stands for troping and imagination”¹⁸, which is particularly applicable to its status of metadramatic device in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

The actual metamorphosis of Bottom into a monstrous ass-headed creature may ultimately be interpreted in the light of the play’s metadramatic strategies. It is interesting that Bottom appears initially as the supercompetent actor, feeling equally capable of moving the audience to tears as Pyramus (“I will move storms”), of speaking “in a monstrous little voice” as Thisbe, as well as roaring, if necessary, “as gentle as any sucking dove,” “as ‘twere a nightingale” in the role of the lion. Of all the would-be actors, Bottom, in the enthusiasm of his self-discovery as a multi-

¹⁵ J. Bate, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-2.

¹⁶ In the immediate context, it may seem as if Quince’s argument is only a sweetening technique, meant to quell Bottom’s frustration at not being able to play all the roles; later, however, when Bottom disappears on them, being “transported” to Titania’s “flowery bed,” they seem convinced of Bottom’s irreplaceability:

“Flute: If he come not then the play is marred: it goes not forward, doth it?”

Quince: It is not possible: you have not a man in all Athens able to discharge Pyramus but he” (V, 1. 5-9).

¹⁷ K. Mikkonen, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

valent actor, seems to have no problems with metamorphosing himself for any role. It is this extreme *availability for metamorphic experience* – comically suggested by his absurd eagerness to play all the roles at once – that qualifies him for the “real” metamorphosis. Bottom’s involvement with the dramatic art goes so far as frequently taking over the role of director – his ignorance of the original story does not prevent him from offering “creative” solutions (often “mistranslations”) in its staging. It is part of the structure of irony in the play that Bottom will be arbitrarily cast in a role in whose scripting he could have no hand and which he will play with complete unself-consciousness. Half-turned into an ass without being aware of it, he continues to apply the word “ass” to himself figuratively and jokingly, without realising that the metaphor has been destroyed by literalisation (“methinks I am marvellous hairy about the face; and I am such a tender ass, as if my hair do but tickle me, I must scratch” – IV, 1. 27-29). In his complete assumption of his new condition, he naturally settles for “a peck of provender,” “good dry oats” and “a bottle of hay” (IV, 1. 35-37) when Titania asks her “sweet love” what he desires to eat. The grotesque comedy of Bottom’s “translation” has serious metadramatic implications concerning the successful discharging of roles and the changes in one’s sense of identity that it involves.

Metamorphosis in Shakespeare’s play is definitely a metatropé for the structural convention of *confusion* in the comic plot, but as such it functions also *metagenetically*, pointing to the confusion and mixture of different kinds of drama. The laying bare of the principles of theatrical performance and role-acting, in the “rude mechanicals” staging of Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, effects the complete metamorphosis of a tragic story into a burlesque comedy. Shakespeare was notoriously fascinated with the possibility of mixing or transforming generic conventions, his work displaying in a unique way the decision to ignore the Aristotelian segregation between tragedy and comedy. Critics have been pointing out the difficulty of classifying Shakespeare’s plays at least since Samuel Johnson, who remarked in his Preface to the 1765 edition: “*Shakespeare’s* plays are not in the rigorous or critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind (...)”¹⁹. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is Theseus that hints at the pleasure to be derived from generic confusion: when Hippolyta expresses her apprehensions at the player’s incompetence (“He [i.e. Philostratus] says they can do nothing in this kind [i.e. tragedy]”), he replies: “Our sport shall be to take what they mistake (V, 1. 88; 90). He thus excuses in advance the apparent incongruity in the title of the craftsmen’s play: *A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe; very tragical mirth*,” moulding thereby the audience’s attitude into one of joyous receptiveness, by proposing to “find the concord in this discord” (V, 1. 60).

The metamorphosis of a tragic tale into comic metadrama creates a subtle *myse-en-abyme* for the play’s main conflict, with its confusions and mistakes, and, above all, with its potentially tragic ending, adumbrated by Egeus’s early invocation of Athenian law, according to which Hermia may incur death punishment for her disobedience (cf. I, 1. 42-44). Lysander might even have had in mind Ovid’s tale and

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, *op.cit.*

its tragic outcome when he says: “for aught that I could read, / Could ever hear by tale or history, / The course of true love never did run smooth” (I, 1. 132-4). It might seem curious, therefore, that the four lovers should not recognize a possible version of their own predicament in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe.

This detachment and “un-recognition” may be accounted for, on the one hand, by the “dream” quality of the confusions of the previous night, as Demetrius’s reference to those events also suggests: “These things seem small and undistinguishable, / Like far-off mountains turned into clouds” (IV, 1. 193-4). Their present light-heartedness is founded on forgetfulness: not being able to fully bring to consciousness the strange experiences they have been going through is a proof of the effectiveness of the metamorphic power of whatever in the play counts as “dream”²⁰.

On the other hand, their apparent blindness to the possibility of comparing their ordeal with that of the Babylonian lovers may be explained by the dramatic distance imposed by the carnivalesque “translation” of Ovid’s tragic tale into a “palpable-gross play,” as Theseus describes it (V, 2. 376). The would-be actors step out of their roles apologetically, to reassure the audience about their “real” identities, while the metadramatised audience – the actor-characters become spectators – insert their own comments in the script, exchange replies with the performers, and even assume a directorial stance (as when Lysander gives a mock indication to one of the players: “Proceed, Moon” – V. 1. 262).

This metadramatic carnivalisation – in essence a metamorphic technique – whereby the low-born players and the elite audience are drawn together into a theatrical impromptu in which frames are transgressed, positions are shifted, and the mimetic illusion is completely destroyed, produces generic ambivalence, and the confusion of positions and distances that it presupposes prevents the audience in the play from achieving suspension of disbelief, and thus from experiencing tragic *katharsis*, whose precondition would have been the empathic identification ensured by successful mimesis.

Comedy has always claimed alliance with reason, and to some extent any metadramatic (or metafictional) strategy partakes of the comic, as it presupposes a distraction (in the sense used by Bergson) from content or substance to the workings of form – an instance, ultimately, of what Bergson saw as “the letter of the text trying to tease the spirit of the text”²¹. Through the artisans in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare shows that the dramatist must be

²⁰ Bottom, whose half-metamorphosis into an ass is accompanied by an unexpected, paradoxical display of wisdom, knows too well what Freud was to formulate three centuries later: the most effective dreams are indeed those which defy articulation upon awakening (cf. Sigmund Freud, *Interpretarea viselor*, traducere de Leonard Gavrilu, Editura Științifică, București, 1993, p. 474). His contentment rests on the acceptance of his incapacity of translating the dream into words: “I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about expounding his dream” (V, 1. 210-14).

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 52 (transl. mine).

confident that the spectators “are always in their senses.” Over-concern with the mechanics of the performance and with “realism” (therefore with the rational), and the excessive effort to control audience reaction represent attempts to re-write the terms of the “theatrical contract.” The comic determination with which they proceed to eliminate the irrational component from the audience’s response might entitle one to remark, inverting the words of Polonius: “there is madness in their method.”

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