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"For Evermore Be True": Fancy and Fidelity in Demetrius's Final Monologue

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare presents the story of four lovers named Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander. Formerly engaged to Helena, Demetrius has broken his vows to her so that he can compete with Lysander for Hermia's hand instead. As a result, these lovers become entangled in a series of love triangles that are complicated — and eventually resolved — by the intervention of fairy magic. By the end of the play, the couples have achieved a seemingly happy ending, but in typical Shakespearean fashion, the play leaves some loose ends for the audience to ponder. Perhaps the most troubling of these is the fact that Demetrius's love for Helena reawakens only because of a fairy enchantment, leaving the audience to wonder how stable and healthy his magic-induced marriage to her will be. At the end of Act 4, Demetrius gives a short speech to explain his own perspective on his sudden change of heart. Since this speech serves not only as Demetrius's last monologue but also as the only extended reflection on the events of the play offered by any of the lovers, it is key to understanding Demetrius's and Helena's future prospects. At surface level, this speech seems to support the idea that the couple has finally achieved a true and lasting love. However, a contextually informed close reading of this monologue undermines this optimistic interpretation by casting doubt on the authenticity and constancy of Demetrius's rediscovered love for Helena.

Demetrius begins his speech with a recap of the events that led the four lovers into the woods at the beginning of the play:

My lord, fair Helen told me of their stealth,

Of this their purpose hither to this wood,

And I in fury hither followed them,

Fair Helena in fancy following me. (4.1.159-162)

In this passage, initial alliteration, terminal assonance, and parallelism closely connect the phrase "in fury" to the phrase "in fancy." These phonetic and syntactic links help to establish a sharp contrast between Demetrius's and Helena's motivations. The term "fancy" and its derivatives appear more often in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than in any other play by Shakespeare, occurring a total of six times. Both in this play and in Shakespeare's comedies more generally, the term predominantly denotes erotic attraction and love.[1] Given this context, we can see that Shakespeare is using the word "fancy" in this passage to juxtapose Helena's devotion with Demetrius's disdain. The contrast between Helena's "fancy" and Demetrius's "fury" reminds us how one-sided and toxic the relationship between the two characters was at the start of the play.

Ostensibly, now that Demetrius has been enchanted to reciprocate Helena's love again, the situation has changed for the better. However, the term "fancy" has additional meanings that call into question the stability and permanence of Demetrius's newfound affection for Helena. In Shakespeare's time, "fancy" encompassed a range of meanings related to the fickleness of human imaginations and desires, including "apparition," "hallucination," "[c]aprice," and "changeful mood" ("Fancy"). Although these imaginative and capricious senses of "fancy" occur less often in Shakespeare's comedies than the erotic sense does, they still charge the word with connotations of illusion and mercuriality, a fact that Shakespeare sometimes exploits for

[1] In this context, "comedies" refers to the group of plays classified as comedies in the First Folio.

wordplay.[2] These fantastical connotations — reminiscent of Theseus's observation that "[t]he lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" (5.1.7-8) — are especially fitting given the role of fairy enchantments and illusions in the plot. In turn, these undertones of delusion and caprice cast doubt on how permanent and stable Demetrius's magic-induced transformation from "fury" to "fancy" truly is.

Demetrius continues by attempting to describe and justify his transition from disdain to devotion:

> But, my good lord, I wot not by what power,--
> But by some power it is, — my love to Hermia,
> Melted as the snow, seems to me now
> As the remembrance of an idle gaud
> Which in my childhood I did dote upon;
> And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,
> The object and the pleasure of mine eye,
> Is only Helena. (4.1.163-170)

According to Demetrius, his infatuation with Hermia has "[m]elted as the snow" thanks to the intervention of some unknown power (which the audience recognizes as fairy magic). The word "melted" occurs as a trochaic substitution in the first foot, a disruption of the iambic meter that draws the audience's attention to the simile and highlights its importance in the monologue. The image of snow melting away suggests that Demetrius's attraction to Hermia was merely a seasonal, temporary aberration from his proper love for Helena. However, this interpretation is

[2] For an example of "fancy" having an ambiguous and possibly multivalent meaning, see *Midsummer* 5.1.23-27. For examples of "fancy" being used for wordplay, see *Much Ado About Nothing* 3.2.28-35 and *Twelfth Night* 1.1.9-15.

undermined if we recall that a similar image occurred earlier in the play with a strikingly different effect. In Act 1, Scene 1, Helena laments,

> For ere Demetrius look'd on Hermia's eyne,
> He hail'd down oaths that he was only mine;
> And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
> So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt. (1.1.242-245)

As with Demetrius's monologue, Helena gives us an image of an old passion melting before the heat of a new one. However, in this case, it is Demetrius's love for Helena, not Hermia, that has melted away. The simile of snow in Demetrius's speech thus serves as a callback to his former infidelity to Helena, reminding us that the character has a marked habit of inconstancy. Comparing these two analogies, we cannot help but question whether Demetrius's new vows to Helena will melt away as easily as his old ones.

Demetrius goes on to explain that his former attraction to Hermia now resembles "an idle gaud / Which in [his] childhood [he] did dote upon" (4.1.166-167). In other words, his previous love for Hermia was a sign of childishness, while his current love for Helena is the result of newfound maturity. This simile, while persuasive at first glance, seems somewhat ridiculous when one considers the implication that Demetrius has apparently grown from the childhood of loving Hermia to the adulthood of loving Helena in a single day's span. Moreover, this rationale would be more convincing if it did not resemble an earlier argument offered by the bewitched Lysander in Act 2. Trying to justify his broken vows to Hermia, Lysander asserts that "[t]hings growing are not ripe until their season / So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason" (2.2.117-118). In other words, much like Demetrius, he argues that his former love for Hermia was immature and thus inconsequential. But in Lysander's case, unlike Demetrius's, the context

clearly encourages the audience to view this rationale as a bad-faith attempt to excuse faithlessness. In turn, this makes us question whether Demetrius's use of the argument in his monologue holds as little water as the earlier precedent offered by Lysander.

Demetrius concludes his monologue by asserting that he will henceforth remain true to his rediscovered love for Helena:

> To her, my lord,
> Was I betroth'd ere I saw Hermia:
> But, like in sickness, did I loathe this food;
> But, as in health, come to my natural taste,
> Now I do wish it, love it, long for it,
> And will for evermore be true to it. (4.1.170-175)

Demetrius's simile of sickness suggests that the fairies' love-magic is a cure rather than a curse. Like the previous analogy of melting snow, this figure of speech implies that his love for Hermia was merely a temporary, illness-induced deviation from his "natural taste" of loving Helena. However, even this analogy may fail to assuage our misgivings once we remember that the play has already established sickness as a metaphor for being in love. "I am sick when I look not on you," Helena tells Demetrius near the beginning of the play (2.1.213). A few scenes later, Oberon describes her as "fancy-sick" because of her unrequited love (3.2.96-97). Especially in the context of the preceding two lines ("To her, my lord, / Was I betroth'd ere I saw Hermia"), which remind us of Demetrius's past infidelity, the metaphor of love as sickness raises the possibility of relapse. Given Demetrius's history of broken vows, we have little assurance that he will not fall ill with some other love in the future that will cause him to break his vows to Helena again.

In the speech's conclusion, Demetrius rejects the possibility of future infidelity by promising that he "will for evermore be true" to his love for Helena (4.1.175). This line, which emphasizes the term "true" by making it the last stressed word in the speech, seems to confirm that Demetrius and Helena have finally found their happy ending. Once again, however, the sentiment is undermined by parallels from earlier in the play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* repeatedly grapples with the question of what makes love "true," a word that Shakespeare uses in this play to refer to authenticity, to fidelity, or to both concepts at once.[3] The four lovers repeatedly assert that their declarations of devotion and disdain are true (that is, veracious) while also insisting that they will remain true (that is, faithful) to one another. But both Lysander and Demetrius go on to prove themselves wrong thanks to the interference of the fairy magic, which can turn both "true" love "false" and "false" love "true" (3.2.88-91). Ultimately, it is left up to the audience to decide whether or not the fairies have changed Demetrius's false love of Helena to a true one. But given this context, we may well wonder whether Demetrius's vow of faithfulness in this speech will prove to be as void of truth as most of the other professions of true love in the play.

In conclusion, conducting a contextually informed close reading of this speech leads us to doubt the constancy and stability of Demetrius's rediscovered love for Helena. As we have seen, Demetrius attempts to justify his sudden transition from "fury" to "fancy" by asserting that his former state of devotion to Hermia and disdain for Helena was as transient as melting snow, as immature as childish desires, and as aberrant as sickness. However, by analyzing his choices of words, images, and rhetorical strategies and comparing them to those used elsewhere in the play, we recognize that his new love is not necessarily any more genuine or authentic than his previous

[3] For an example of a passage where Shakespeare uses both senses to create wordplay, see *Midsummer* 3.2.122-133.

ones. In turn, this realization raises more general questions about the relationship between love and truth in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What truth exists in a marriage made possible only by magical deception? What will happen to that marriage if the magic is dispelled? Should Demetrius's magic-induced love for Helena wear off after the end of the play, the only thing keeping their marriage together would be their vows, which Demetrius has an established history of breaking. Perhaps one of the main points of this play, then, is to remind us that erotic desire on its own cannot secure lasting happiness, since it is subject to the fancies of both fairy magic and the human heart. To remain truly faithful to one another, lovers must commit to keeping their word to one another even if their physical desires cease to accord with their vows. At the end of his speech, Demetrius asserts that he "will for evermore be true" to Helena because he now "wish[es]," "love[s]", and "long[s]" for her (4.1.174-175). What he should have promised, however, is to be true to her forever regardless of whether his wishes, loves, and longings remain similarly constant.

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