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Discordia Concors: Imaginative Love, Order, and Meaning in *The Knight's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Introduction

The themes of love, imagination, and order play notable roles in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (subsequently referred to as the *Tale*) and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (subsequently referred to as *Midsummer*). In each work, the major monologue delivered by Theseus — the First Mover speech in the *Tale* (2987-3074) and the Lovers and Madmen speech in *Midsummer* (V.i.2-22) — supplies the key to the interpretation of these themes. Both works portray imaginative love as a catalyst for folly and disorder. Yet, as the two Thesean speeches reveal, such love also has the potential to harmonize this discord into order and meaning. Despite these similarities, however, the *Tale* and *Midsummer* still differ significantly in their visions of the causes and nature of this *discordia concors*. In keeping with his medieval cosmology, Chaucer presents divine love as the creative power that brings order and harmony to the world. In contrast, rather than appealing to some benevolent higher power, Shakespeare focuses on the human imagination as the force that creates meaning and stability out of an inherently more uncertain universe.

Shakespeare and *The Knight's Tale*

Though perceived as somewhat difficult to read, Chaucer was widely respected and referenced by dramatists in Elizabethan England, and Shakespeare was no exception. *The*

Knight's Tale probably ranked as Chaucer's most famous work after *Troilus and Criseyde*, and it served as a particularly notable influence on Shakespeare (Gillespie). It is unclear whether Shakespeare encountered the story through the primary text or via some retelling. Whichever was the case, however, critics generally agree that the *Tale* inspired Shakespeare to pen not only a direct adaptation of the tale in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* but also a spiritual successor of sorts in *Midsummer*. The influence of the *Tale* on *Midsummer*, which ranges from slight verbal allusions to noteworthy parallels in plot, is so striking that Anne Thompson goes so far as to call *Midsummer* "Shakespeare's first dramatization of the Tale in some respects" (Thompson 88-92; Gillespie 72-76; Brooks lxxvii-lxxix; Donaldson). As a result, it is worth investigating the scope and significance of the ways in which *Midsummer* resembles or diverges from its Chaucerian source.

The Folly of Love

Scholars generally identify the folly of human love as a central theme of both the *Tale* and *Midsummer* (Brooks cxxx-cxxxvi; Donaldson 30-31). In both works, young lovers engage in erratic and irresponsible behavior in pursuit of love. Chaucer's Palamon and Arcite break their bonds of brotherhood and risk life and limb to compete for the love of Theseus's sister-in-law Emelye, whom they have only ever seen from a distance. Their impetuous, lovelorn actions prompt Theseus to exclaim, "Now looketh, is nat that an heigh folye? / Who may been a fool but if he love?" (1798-1799). Meanwhile, Shakespeare heightens these hints of farce by squaring the Chaucerian love triangle and introducing the enchantment of Love-in-Idleness, which exposes the irrationality and mercuriality of the four lovers (Bethurum 87-88; Thompson 91-92; Donaldson 36-49). Led by Puck's mischievous magic, Lysander and Demetrius break their oaths

of fidelity just as readily as they swear them, while Hermia and Helena reject their childhood friendship for romantic rivalry. Surveying the chaos, Puck sums up the situation: "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (III.ii.115).

In both works, the power of the imagination aids and abets the folly of love (Brooks cxxxvi-cxli; Donaldson 41; Dent). In *Midsummer*, Helena singles out the mind's imaginative vision as a primary source of love's fickleness and folly: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; / And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind" (I.ii.234-235). Similarly, as will later be discussed in more detail, Theseus links love to imagination in the Lovers and Madmen speech, a connection further strengthened by the fact that "fancy" can denote both imagination and infatuation ("Fancy"). In the *Tale*, imagination does not play as major a role as in *Midsummer*, but it still contributes to the knights' obsession with Emelye. As E. Talbot Donaldson points out, Palamon and Arcite fall in love less with the reality of Emelye than with their own mental image of her (41). Moreover, Chaucer explicitly identifies the "celle fantastik" (the imaginative region of the brain) as a culprit in Arcite's lovesickness (1372-1376). In both works, therefore, imagination enables and enhances the folly of love, a theme that will prove significant for our understanding of the two major Thesean speeches.

The Authority of Theseus

Before considering the portrayal of imagination and love in the two major speeches, we must first consider the moral authority of their speaker, Theseus, since our verdict on his trustworthiness and reliability may play a role in our interpretation. Critics generally agree that the character of Theseus in *Midsummer* borrows considerably from his Chaucerian counterpart in the *Tale*, not only in terms of his situation and character traits but also "in his role as the slightly

aloof spectator, judge, and figure of authority *vis-à-vis* the lovers," as Anne Thompson puts it. However, as a somewhat impatient bachelor, Shakespeare's Theseus bears a closer resemblance to the foolish young lovers he helps than does Chaucer's Theseus. Furthermore, Titania alludes to Theseus's checkered past as a womanizer in *Midsummer*, a subject about which the *Tale* remains notably silent (Thompson 89-90; Donaldson 33-35; Gillespie 76).

Scholars have responded to these points in two main ways. On the one hand, scholars such as Harold F. Brooks interpret Theseus as an embodiment of mature rationality to which the foolish young lovers should aspire. In keeping with this reading, they attempt to ignore or explain away Titania's allegations (Dent 116; Donaldson 35). On the other hand, critics such as Peter Holland and Rafael Major, who take Titania's allegations more seriously, investigate a more sinister and self-serving side to the duke that leads them to question how trustworthy or exemplary he truly is. For example, Major argues that political expedience shapes Theseus's attitude towards the arts, since he patronizes them when they bolster his rule but criticizes them when they threaten it (242-244, 248-250). Despite these scholarly disagreements, what seems clear from this debate is that, at least on the surface, Shakespeare's Theseus is a less morally authoritative figure than Chaucer's.

However, it may be an oversimplification to characterize the Theseus of the *Tale* as inherently more noble and authoritative than the Theseus of *Midsummer*. For older critics such as Charles Muscatine, Theseus unquestionably represents a noble and benevolent ruler who, as the human counterpart of the First Mover, maintains order on earth (921-922). But more recent scholarship has called the nobility of Chaucer's Theseus, like that of Shakespeare's, into question. For example, Terry Jones analyzes how Theseus resembles the Italian tyrants of Chaucer's day and concludes that the character's "primary motivation is self-aggrandizement, his actions are

arbitrary and oppressive, and his main concern is to assert his own authority and to satisfy his own will" (192-202). In light of these allegations of caprice and self-interest, whatever moral authority Theseus seems to wield in the *Tale* rings as hollow as that of his Shakespearean counterpart.

Whatever else we may conclude about these two versions of Theseus, we should rightly suspect their reliability and motives as we investigate their two major monologues. Nevertheless, our misgivings need not preclude the possibility that their words may provide meaningful insights into these two works. Insofar as Chaucer's Theseus articulates traditional Boethian philosophy, he does so eloquently and insightfully, even though he may be doing so merely as a means of shoring up his regime. Similarly, although we may recognize that cynical politics underlie the critique of imagination offered by Shakespeare's Theseus, this does not necessarily mean that we should ignore what he says about poets and lovers. Rather, it suggests that we should be open to interpreting his words in ways other than he himself intends.

The Two Major Thesean Speeches

Having considered the reliability and authority of Theseus in each work, we turn next to the interpretation of the two major Thesean speeches themselves. Each monologue comes near the end of its respective work, following events that have provided a solution for the foolish young lovers' dilemmas. In each speech, Theseus reflects on these events and their significance, offering the audience some guidance for how to interpret the story's resolution. By examining these speeches, we can thus gain insight into each author's perspective on how the foolish discord of love can be harmonized into some sort of order and closure.

In the *Tale*, Theseus delivers the First Mover speech after Arcite's fatal accident, which the gods bring about as their brutal solution to the love triangle. "The Firste Moevere," the duke explains, "made the faire cheyne of love" and used it to bind the discordant elements together into the concord of creation, where everything has its own appointed place and time (2987-2999). From the very beginning of his monologue, Theseus thus establishes the theme of order and harmony. However, a note of discord enters as the speech continues. Although the "stable" and "eterne" First Mover is the source of all created things, as the chain of love "descend[s]" from the Mover, creation becomes "corrumpable" and subject to decay and death. Yet even this, Theseus asserts, is part of the creator's wise "ordinaunce." As a result, mortals should "mak[e] vertu of necessitee" and seek to die with honor rather than complaining or rebelling against their fates (3000-3056).

As critics like Jones point out, this speech's emphasis on order, obedience, and conformity certainly serves to reinforce Theseus's power and justify the status quo (Jones 202-208). Its tidy moral of accepting one's fate lets Theseus gloss over the shocking reality of Arcite's death, burying the discord under insistent talk of order. However, our misgivings about the motives behind this moral should not rule out the possibility that Chaucer is using this speech to convey wisdom that can guide our interpretation of the events and themes of the *Tale*. Just as the foolish love of humans reflects, however imperfectly, the divine love of the First Mover, so too the political expediency of Theseus can still reveal the wisdom underlying Chaucer's worldview.

The First Mover speech draws heavily on Boethian philosophy with its imagery of the chain of love descending from the incorruptible First Mover to the corruptible earth, binding even the discord of the elements and the imperfections of mortality together into harmony. Chaucer thus echoes a wider medieval conception of the world as possessing an orderly, divinely

governed structure perceptible to human reason, a worldview C. S. Lewis referred to as the "Medieval Model" (13, 98-99). This speech teaches us to see that earthly love, combined with the deceits of the imagination, can give rise to disharmonious folly and conflict. But even this discord is put into perspective and given meaning by the divine, creative love that orders all things.

The Lovers and Madmen speech in *Midsummer*, on the other hand, presents us with a strikingly different view of meaning and order in the world. By Shakespeare's time, the advent of the Renaissance had already begun to lead to the decline of the Medieval Model. As Lewis explains, "look[ing] up at the towering medieval universe is . . . like looking at a great building" attributable to an awe-inspiring yet clearly discernible design. But "to look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist," a largely uncharted expanse that "may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie" (98-99). In Elizabethan England, of course, the replacement of the Medieval Model with this more modern perspective was not yet as complete as in our own day. Compared to the Medieval Model, however, Shakespeare's view of the world nevertheless offers less certainty about the perceptibility of divine order and more room for humans to create their own individualized, subjective forms of meaning.

In the Lovers and Madmen speech, Theseus responds to the strange stories told by the reconciled lovers, who have recently emerged from the enchanted woods. Dismissing their accounts as "antique fables" and "fairy toys," he proceeds to reflect on the resemblances between "[t]he lunatic, the lover and the poet," who are "of imagination all compact." According to Theseus, all three see things that are not there and mold reality to conform to their imaginations, "giv[ing] to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name." The poetic imagination does not

merely observe preexistent forms of order in the world; it also "bodies forth / The forms of things unknown" and "[t]urns them to shapes," imposing the poet's own vision of meaning on a sometimes unknowable reality (V.i.2-22).

Perhaps fearing the impact such wild tales could have on his rule, Shakespeare's Theseus clearly intends his words as a denunciation of poetry. But Hippolyta's rejoinder that the lovers' story "grows to something of great constancy" (V.i.23-27), together with Shakespeare's own implicit endorsement of imagination in the project of the play itself, suggest that the true meaning of the speech in the play belies its speaker's intentions. Following Brooks, I argue that Theseus's observations about love and poetry in this speech should be read ironically as praise rather than condemnation (Brooks cxl-cxli; Major 236-237).

Although the decline of the medieval view of the universe has left the world more empty and less orderly, it has also made it more malleable to the forces of human imagination. The Lovers and Madmen speech shows us that, through the power of the imagination, love and poetry can give meaning and stability to the world where formerly there was neither. Love and poetry both possess the godlike power to create something out of "airy nothing," and, as Helena observes earlier in the play, they can "transpose to form and dignity" things that were formerly "base and vile" (I.ii.232-233; V.i.14-17; Brooks cxl; Mebane 264-265). *Midsummer* dramatically demonstrates how lovers can be deluded by their imaginations, make mistakes, and go astray. But Theseus's speech, when read ironically, asserts that imaginative love can still create a better reality in the world, "something of great constancy" though "strange and admirable" (V.i.26-27).

Since it is unclear whether Shakespeare encountered the *Tale* through primary or secondary sources, we cannot be certain whether Shakespeare consciously intended this speech to serve as a counterpart to Chaucer's First Mover speech. Nevertheless, both monologues are

spoken by the same character, occupy analogous places in their respective works, and serve similar functions in providing a lens through which to interpret the resolutions of the plots. Functionally, therefore, we can regard the Lovers and Madmen speech as Shakespeare's response to the First Mover speech.

Doing so reveals striking differences between the two authors' perspectives on the relationship between imaginative love and order. For Chaucer, harmony is achieved by finding one's place in the divinely maintained order as perceived by reason. For Shakespeare, on the other hand, harmony is achieved by finding one's place in a humanly created order as perceived by the imagination. Similarly, in the *Tale*, the deeper meaning of reality is established by divine love and creativity descending from the heavens to the earth. But in *Midsummer*, such meaning is created by human love and creativity ascending from the earth to the heavens. In some sense, Shakespeare thus uses the power of the imagination to fill in the gaps in the world left by the decline of the Medieval Model.

Comparison with Mebane's Analysis

In making these observations, I am indebted to the insightful analysis of John Mebane. Much as I do, Mebane argues that, while the *Tale* and *Midsummer* both portray a "cosmic order" perceptible to humans, the two works differ in their identification of the primary faculty responsible for revealing this order. According to Mebane, the *Tale* depicts reason as the faculty that allows humans to discern the order of the universe, whereas *Midsummer* emphasizes the imagination as the means by which humans uncover the harmony of creation (256). Although I largely agree with Mebane's points, I expand upon his analysis in two major ways.

Firstly, I improve upon his insights by adding a new emphasis on the theme of love, which is notably lacking from his original arguments. While Mebane correctly highlights the importance of reason in the *Tale*, he fails to mention that love plays an equally significant role, as demonstrated by the fact that "the faire cheyne" that binds all things together is specifically identified as a "cheyne of love" (2988). This is a problematic omission because the union of rationality and love in the speech is what enables it to present a wise and relevant response to the plight of the foolish young lovers rather than merely a dispassionate and even sterile justification of the status quo.

Secondly, Mebane's argument does not adequately acknowledge that the power of the imagination in the Lovers and Madmen speech is not only perceptive but also inventive. For Mebane, the imagination primarily uncovers preexistent "spiritual realities" which "logic and the senses alone" cannot apprehend (265). While this is certainly part of Shakespeare's meaning in this passage, I diverge from Mebane's analysis by interpreting imagination in this speech as much more fundamentally creative, a faculty that not only discovers external realities that already exist but also "bodies forth" new, subjective forms of meaning out of "airy nothing" (V.i.14-17).

Conclusion

As we have seen, the folly of imaginative love leads to disharmony and folly in both the *Tale* and *Midsummer*. Nevertheless, the two works also present love and imagination as key to harmonizing such chaos into a meaningful order, as analyzing the two major Thesean speeches reveals. The source of the problem is thus also its own solution. Shakespeare differs from Chaucer, however, by focusing on imagination rather than reason and on the human rather than

the divine. In this sense, Shakespeare inverts Chaucer's themes to develop his own take on the connections between love, creativity, and meaning.

These differences between Chaucer's focus on reason and Shakespeare's focus on imagination are striking and intriguing. However, we must be careful not to oversimplify or overstate the contrast. It is worth noting that the concepts of imagination and reason may have carried different meanings and connotations for Shakespeare than for Chaucer, so the comparison may not be exactly one-to-one. Moreover, it is true that the First Mover speech does not explicitly mention imagination as a factor in the establishment of cosmic order. However, imagination still implicitly plays a role in the vision of *discordia concors* in the *Tale*, at least insofar as the divine love that binds all things together wields a creative power. Finally, even though the Lovers and Madmen speech pits imagination and reason against each other (V.i.4-6), the play taken as a whole does not necessarily depict these concepts as irreconcilable. Rather, it encourages us to see the possibility of harmonious coexistence between love, imagination, and rationality in keeping with Bottom's desire that these faculties become friends (III.i.138-141; Brooks cxxxv-cxxxvi; Dent 116-117).

With these nuances in mind, recognizing the similarities as well as the differences between the *Tale* and *Midsummer* can help us better understand the complex portrayal of love in the corpora of both Shakespeare and Chaucer. The two authors each dramatize the mercurial and foolish nature of imaginative love. Yet they also recognize such love as the foundation of order and meaning, whether divinely or humanly created. The result is a mature and nuanced perspective that acknowledges the flaws and shortcomings of imaginative love while still affirming its role in bringing harmony out of chaos. Unifying the opposites of discord and

concord, of folly and meaning, the portrayal of imagination and love in both the *Tale* and *Midsummer* thus becomes itself a sort of *discordia concors*.

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