Moderation in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

In the great tradition of English literature love, by which I mean lasting, intimate attachment, tends to be presented as the highest good: one thinks of Austen, Conrad, and Dickens, not to mention Saul Bellow. This view differs both from the Platonic view that friendship is merely the means by which philosophy is pursued and from the modern tendency to reduce love to sexual desire and the will to power.[[1]](#endnote-1) Now that attachment has come to be viewed by many psychologists as an absolutely basic drive, as fundamental as sexual desire or the instinct of self-preservation, we should give artists who explore its subtle dynamics their due philosophical weight.[[2]](#endnote-2) I would argue that Shakespeare’s works offer a particularly systematic account of the role which attachment plays in both personal and political life. The argument of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—and I use that word advisedly—is highly intricate, but the main thrust can be simply summarised: the more passionate the attachment, the greater the need for moderation.[[3]](#endnote-3) Moderation shadows desire at almost every point in the play, manifesting itself in rich and varied ways which often go well beyond simple self-restraint.

Whereas Theseus is eager to marry Hippoyta as soon as the old moon has waned, his conquered bride to be fears that her wedding day will arrive all too quickly (1.1.1-11).[[4]](#endnote-4) Theseus makes only decorous gestures towards continence and courtship. He blames the old moon for “linger[ing his] desires,” even though he will only have to wait for four days, and manages to present his lavish nuptial celebrations as an attempt to conciliate Hippolyta, although in reality the forced marriage represents the culmination of his “triumph” over the Amazons:

Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword,

And won thy love doing thee injuries;

But I will wed thee in another key,

With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling.

(1.1.16-19)[[5]](#endnote-5)

His tyrannical behaviour is contrasted to Bottom’s realisation that he must moderate his initial eagerness to take on the role of a ranting “tyrant” in the mechanicals’ play, if he wishes to “move storms” in his audience and be “more condoling” as “a lover that kills himself most gallant for love” (1.2.22-41). Bottom also restrains his desire to dominate the stage as a fierce lion, recognising that he would have to “roar you as gently as any sucking dove,” lest he should “fright the ladies out of their wits” (1.2.70-84). It is significant that the very creative fervour which drives him to volunteer for every role, including that of the heroine as well as the hero, eventually leads him to see that he must limit himself to one part for the good of the whole production (1.2.51-54).

The contrast between Theseus and Bottom points towards the deeper themes of the play: Bottom’s recognition that it would be more effective to attract sympathy as the passionate Pyramus than to inspire awe as a great tyrant, his fervent concern for the sensibilities of his female audience and even his desire to play the part of the heroine all serve to establish an analogy between actors and lovers, which, I will argue, runs throughout the play.[[6]](#endnote-6) Like actors, it is implied, true lovers must learn to empathise with the needs of those whom they wish to captivate and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Thus Bottom’s journey from tyrant to lover illustrates the paradoxical process by which passionate lovers are driven to moderate their desires as soon as they realize that too demanding or overbearing an approach is likely to intimidate or alienate their beloveds and so prevent them from establishing the sympathetic rapport for which they long.[[7]](#endnote-7) We can infer from Bottom’s accommodations that the depth of a lover’s passion is likely to be commensurate with the care which he takes to moderate that passion. He restrains himself repeatedly and in a far less superficial way than the duke because he is much more eager to endear himself to his audience than Theseus is to establish an intimacy with Hippolyta. The non-erotic Theseus does not even make a serious effort to hide the fact that he is motivated by lust and honour, whereas the fervent Bottom knows that he must not only moderate his tyrannical ambitions, but actually seek to reinvent himself completely as a devoted lover, rather in the manner of a method actor: the role of Pyramus will “ask some tears in the true performing,” if he is to “move storms” (1.2.25-27). In the end Pyramus’s suicide does indeed move his aristocratic audience in just the way Bottom predicts, presumably because it keys into their own desire to be loved in a similarly self-denying manner (5.1.288-90). Bottom’s compromises might seem trivial, but the suicide which he is to enact reminds us that lovers can be driven to make the most extreme sacrifices, once they have enshrined their desire to unite with the beloved as a ruling passion. In such cases the instinct for self-preservation itself becomes just one of the many potentially divisive bodily needs which the true lover must suppress.

Nevertheless, although desire culminates in moderation, one may infer from the opening scenes that it is rooted in tyranny: Theseus’s urbane manner and attention to decorum cannot disguise the fact that he is forcing Hippolyta to marry him—just as he previously “ravished” Perigenia (2.1.78)— while it should not be forgotten that Bottom’s initial impulse is to play a tyrant. The opening scenes provide several more examples of the potentially domineering nature of desire: a flippant remark—“You have her father’s love…do you marry him”—might alert us to the fact that only an overmastering affection for Demetrius could induce Hermia’s father, Egeus, to attempt to coerce his daughter into marrying him when she loves Lysander, who is not only “as well deriv’d” as his rival, but possibly even richer (1.1.93-94, 1.1.38-45, 1.1.99-102). Like Egeus and of course Demetrius himself, Helena shows that she is willing to risk Hermia’s happiness to further her own interests, betraying the secret of her friend’s elopement with Lysander simply in order to earn Demetrius’s gratitude and the chance to accompany him as he pursues the fleeing lovers into the wood (1.1.246-51). Overall then in this introductory section of the play Shakespeare shows that desire can manifest itself in two seemingly opposite ways by contrasting the tyrannical behaviour of Theseus, Helena and Egeus with Bottom’s moderation. His aim may be to act as one of those “honest neighbours” who Bottom hopes may encourage “reason and love [to] keep company” (3.1.143-46).

Although the opening scenes deal with a variety of tyrannical passions, the play as a whole focuses mainly on the ways in which incontinent sexual desire in particular can disrupt intimate attachments. Oberon uses the magic potion, which clearly symbolises sexual desire throughout the play, to make Titania “madly dote” on the first creature she sees so that he can kidnap her Indian page, to whom he seems to be intensely attracted (2.1.170-72, 2.1.20-27). He tells us that the potion was originally infused into a flower after a botched attempt by Cupid to wound a virgin’s heart (2.1.155-68). Cupid flies “between the cold moon and the earth,” implying that he normally strikes a delicate balance between austere restraint and gross sensuality, but in this case his misfired arrow falls to the ground away from the “chaste beams of the wat’ry moon” and becomes purely earthly (2.1.156, 2.1.162). Since the plant on which the arrow lands is now called “love-in-idleness,” we can presume that the intense physical desire which the potion stimulates in this lower form is fleeting and superficial compared to the more restrained love felt by the “hundred thousand hearts” wounded by the god in his usual, more balanced course (2.1.168, 2.1.159-60). Overall the Cupid parable suggests that in the majority of cases physical passion acts as a catalyst for a moderate and lasting devotion, but that this process can sometimes be disrupted by the intensity of sexual desire. Thus Oberon’s infidelity has clearly damaged his marriage, although the suggestion is that this sort of disruption is no more the norm than the unseasonable weather which is triggered by the couple’s fierce arguments (2.1.88-117).

Shakespeare sets most of the play in the wildwood in order to explore the essential nature of desire in a world without conventional restraints. Here the potentially overbearing or tyrannical nature of sexual desire in particular is thrown into sharp relief.[[8]](#endnote-8) Despite his protests to the contrary, Oberon could be seen as the ruler of a sinister, nocturnal realm where all sorts of dreams and desires are liberated from conventional social constraints, including of course those which protected boys in ancient Athens from sexual predation (3.2.378-95, 4.1.93-98). Even on the most superficial viewing of the play audiences are invited to mock the childish wilfulness displayed by most of the characters, but those who wish to pursue the implications of the plot beyond the explicit narrative can see the disturbing consequences of sexual incontinence: the fate of the Indian boy is left vague, but Hippolyta is certainly being forced to marry Theseus, while Bottom would probably have been raped if he had not responded to Titania’s blandishments. Throughout the play we see how sexual desire can undermine even fairly deeply rooted attachments: the loyal Lysander is instantly charmed into transferring his affections to Helena; the “ancient love,” by which she and Hermia “grew together, like to a double cherry” is “rent…asunder” by jealousy; while Titania easily gives up a boy whom she has vowed to protect forever, simply because she loves an ass (2.2.103-44, 3.2.192-219, 4.1.59-61). Moreover, Bottom’s song about the pervasiveness of cuckoos, and therefore, by implication, of illegitimate children, reminds us of the impact of promiscuity on society at large (3.1.130-36). Puck’s unexpectedly sombre penultimate speech sums up this aspect of the play: dreams “follow… darkness,” while the night contains “the hungry lion,” emblematic perhaps of the potential ferocity of sexual desire (5.1.371-87). The implication is that purely sensual desires tend to be immoderate, since they are inherently private and inevitably ephemeral.

However, it is important to note that the fairies are also motivated by moderate emotions such as gratitude, sympathy and guilt: before Titania is distracted by her lust for Bottom she is moved to protect the Indian boy from the predatory Oberon by loyalty to the memory of the child’s mother, with whom she shared an intimate friendship (2.1.121-37). She also attempts to make peace with her husband by inviting him to “patiently dance in our round,” presumably in order to save her marriage, but also to limit the cataclysmic effects of the quarrel on the wider environment, which she clearly regrets deeply (2.1.140-41). (Dancing is a fitting emblem of the temperate joys of a harmonious marriage, since it combines instinctive delight with “patient” discipline and precise synchronization.) More surprisingly, perhaps, Oberon too honours “true love,” taking considerable pains throughout the play to harmonise the relationships between the four lovers’ and bless their marriages (2.1.259-66, 3.2.88-99, 5.1.401-22). His decision to release the doting Titania from his spell—after, however, he has secured the Indian boy—is prompted as much by “pity,” and perhaps therefore by guilt, as by jealousy, and he too suggests that they dance together, no doubt also in an attempt to restore marital harmony (4.1.47, 4.1.85-90). Thus, in this magical state of nature gratitude, sympathy and guilt continue to exert a deep influence. Ultimately, I would argue, these moderate emotions are derived from the need to form close, lasting attachments, since they all tend either to cement intimacy or to restrain potentially divisive passions. Although moderation is rooted in lovers’ needs and cultivated in personal relationships, the consideration which the fairies show towards the human world suggests that it will naturally spill over into a broader generosity which one might fairly call altruistic. Having said all this, it is also clear that Oberon and his potion have the power to disrupt even quite committed attachments. Thus the chaotic events of the wildwood highlight the need for the codes and conventions of the city, which, as Shakespeare later implies, play a valuable role in restraining sexual desire.

However, it would be a mistake to think that even crudely sensual desires are simply tyrannical. Titania’s physical passion for the transformed Bottom is initially expressed in the most overbearing terms: she orders her beloved to stay in the wood “whether thou wilt or no,” declaring bluntly, “I do love thee: therefore go with me,” presumably so that she can “kiss [his] fair large ears” and “wind [him] in [her] arms,” as Shakespeare euphemistically puts it (3.1.152-56, 4.1.4, 4.1.40). However, the fairy queen seems almost immediately to realise that sex with Bottom would be more pleasurable if it were consensual, for she quickly softens her fierce possessiveness, instructing her fairy servants to feed and entertain him in any way he desires (3.1.157-97, 4.1.1-39). Titania’s eagerness to minister to her beloved may be more transparently self-serving than that of the devoted romantic lover and is certainly more ephemeral (4.1.79), but it nevertheless suggests that even a purely physical passion has the potential to moderate itself.

Conversely, we have seen that lasting attachments are rooted in a tyrannical desire to possess, even though they usually demand restraint. It is clearly frustrated devotion rather than simple physical attraction which drives Helena to pursue the fickle Demetrius relentlessly through the wood: her fervent assertion that she is “as true as steel” to her beloved, who is “all the world” to her, substantiates Lysander’s earlier claim that she “dotes, devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry” on Demetrius, ever since “he made love to [her] and won her soul” (2.1.196-97, 2.1.223-26, 1.1.106-10). Deep attachments clearly create their own intransigent demands, which seem to be even more pressing than sexual attraction: there are strong indications that Helena would let Demetrius sleep with her, not primarily out of sexual desire, but simply as a way of demonstrating her absolute devotion (2.1.214-26). Helena professes a servility which is far more extreme than Titania’s attempts to conciliate Bottom: she will “fawn” on Demetrius like a “spaniel,” and is even resigned to the possibility that he might assault her, for no “mischief” could equal the ongoing pain of separation (2.1.203-04, 2.1.236-39). Her behaviour is paradoxical, however, for she forces her servility on her beloved, disregarding his repeated requests to be left alone as completely as the predatory Apollo ignored Daphne’s protests (2.1.230-34). Her shamelessly intrusive pursuit of Demetrius contradicts her apparently self-denying determination to serve him, revealing it to be essentially a strategy by which she hopes to possess her beloved, body and soul; albeit one that she maintains with absolute sincerity. Similarly, the previously coy Hermia is driven to abandon all dignity and restraint when Lysander deserts her, resorting in the end simply to clinging desperately to her beloved (3.2.257-68). It is likely then that the tension between moderation and tyrannical desire is embedded in the nature of passion itself, since the most devoted attachments appear to be rooted in a potentially predatory urge to possess the beloved, while even purely sensual seducers instinctively adopt moderate strategies.

Helena is driven to give direct expression to her tyrannical possessiveness only as a last resort, when she fears that she has lost her beloved forever. Her desperate pursuit of Demetrius is thus the exception which proves the rule that lovers are naturally moderate when their loyalty is reciprocated. The overbearing passion which leads Hermia and Lysander to reject family and civic ties as well as all their own arguments for patient resignation also induces them to treat each other with restraint in the end, even after they have entered the wildwood, where they are completely free to follow their own inclinations (1.1.132-68). As they settle down for the night Lysander eagerly proposes that they have sex, but Hermia tactfully but firmly declines (2.2.41-61). She concludes her tactful refusal with a plea, “Thy love ne’er alter till thy sweet life end” (2.2.61), which partly expresses a simple hope that her lover should remain faithful despite his patent frustration, but at the same time suggests (in an understandably indirect manner) that his love might be more likely to “alter” in the first place if she acceded to his demands. Hermia clearly fears that her lover might be distracted from his pursuit of a lasting attachment by the fleeting intensity of sexual pleasure; a concern which Lysander perfectly understands, as his pun on ‘lying with’ and ‘lying to’ reveals (2.2.52). Although Lysander is insistent enough to illustrate the potential unruliness of sexual desire, he fairly quickly agrees to prioritise his longing for a lasting relationship over his physical passion, sealing his commitment with a great oath: “then end life when I end loyalty” (2.2.62-63). In this way Shakespeare shows us that lasting, mutual attachments naturally impose their own restraints: Lysander would in the end rather please his beloved than satisfy himself sexually, while Hermia resists his advances (and no doubt her own sexual desire) because she realises that a physical consummation might interfere with her deeper objectives.[[9]](#endnote-9) The scene implies that social conventions like marriage which help to reinforce continence are rooted in a natural concern on the part of lovers to ensure that sexual desire is regulated by deep and lasting attachments.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Quite apart from sexual desire, the fierce possessiveness of attachment itself is disguised and sublimated in loyal relationships. Unlike Helena, Lysander and Hermia can behave as if their mutual commitment to serve were an end in itself, because they are both so sure that their deepest needs will be satisfied. The amusing indirectness of their conversation is itself a sign of the couple’s moderation: since they both understand that their fulfilment depends on achieving as close a union as possible with their lover, they both work hard to preserve an illusion of selflessness, even though their ultimate desire is to possess the beloved, body and soul. Similarly, Bottom’s tyrannical ambitions are in the end side-lined by his humble eagerness to establish a rapport with his audience, even though, ironically, his humility itself stems originally from a desire to captivate the audience completely. This analysis is not as reductive as it seems: the lover’s apparent self-effacement is no less noble for being rooted ultimately in a desire to further his own deeper interests; in fact, paradoxically, it seems that he can only fulfil his longing to achieve complete intimacy with his beloved if his self-abasement is sincere and absolute. Love may be an act, as the central metaphor of the play implies, but it is one that can only be successful if both the actors involved immerse themselves so completely in their role that they can be said to reinvent themselves as each other’s devoted servants. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe reminds us that love can demand the most extreme sacrifices, but it should not be forgotten that ordinary, committed relationships are also inevitably founded on countless minor acts of moderation and self-denial. Thus, as Lysander and Hermia repeatedly prioritise their long term relationship over potentially divisive desires, they build up a shared fund of trust, gratitude and mutual sympathy.

Shakespeare even shows us in detail how lovers can present themselves as thoroughly humble: in the next rehearsal scene the mechanicals plan to subvert what they fondly imagine to be the terrifying spectacle of Pyramus’s sword and the “fearful” lion by a direct address to the audience, in which they will reassure any ladies in the audience who might find the play frightening that they are just weavers and joiners acting parts (3.1.9-46). Bottom, now much more proactively temperate, carefully instructs Snug, who is playing the lion, to step out of role and urge his female audience in a manner that is neither servile nor bossy—“entreat” is pedantically preferred both to “beseech” and “request”—“not to fear, not to tremble,” since he is in reality their humble servant; a point which is to be underlined by a solemn oath, as it was in Lysander’s equivalent speech to Hermia: “my life for yours” (3.1.39-42). To achieve the deep rapport which they ultimately desire, Shakespeare implies that lovers should court their beloveds in just the way Bottom recommends, emphasising their willingness to moderate the potentially tyrannical demands of the body.

The errors committed by the mechanicals as they rehearse their play are designed to hint at the contrast between the fickleness of physical passion and the constancy of deep attachments: Bottom, for instance, mistakenly calls Thisbe’s breath “odious” instead of “odorous” (3.1.82-85). The potential ‘odiousness’ of sexual desire is implicitly linked with its fleetingness: Pyramus’s complexion is like “the red rose” set on a phallic “triumphant brier,” but at the same time somehow manages to display a “lily-white,” or funereal, pallor (3.1.93-94). By delivering “all his part at once, cues and all” Flute misrepresents Thisbe as immediately agreeing to meet Pyramus at “Ninny’s tomb,” as if she is so spellbound by the revelation of his physical charms—on which she dwells at some length—that she simply assumes that he is “true as truest horse, that yet would never tire” (3.1.93-100). In Flute’s version, Thisbe has indeed behaved like a “ninny,” or fool, since she has cut short the conversations that would have allowed her to gauge her lover’s trustworthiness, whereas in Quince’s original script Pyramus is given time to prove himself the very embodiment of fidelity. Taking his cue from “never tire”—just as Lysander was inspired to proclaim his undying loyalty by Hermia’s prayer that he should remain constant—Quince’s Pyramus declares that whatever physical charm he might possess is unimportant, since fidelity itself is the only truly beautiful thing: “If I were fair, Thisby, I were only thine” (3.1.102-03).

This contrast is sharpened by a recurrent trope in which sight and hearing are juxtaposed and contrasted. It is significant that the most faithful lovers in the play, Pyramus and Thisbe, must conduct their courtship entirely through conversation because of the wall that divides them, whereas the love potion, which stimulates a purely physical attraction, is applied specifically to the eyes. Throughout the play eyes, whether looking or being looked at, embody the power of physical desire to initiate or destroy relationships in an instant. Helena ruefully reflects that love is traditionally represented as a blind child because it gives “dignity” to “things base and vile” (1.1.232-41). The symbolism of dreams and charmed vision which runs throughout the play implies that lovers often behave overbearingly because their desires distort their perspective, overriding or completely transforming uncongenial truths; for if the imagination “apprehends some joy, it comprehends some bringer of that joy” (5.1.19-20). Thus Helena cannot accept that her beloved has deserted her, while Egeus must believe that Hermia has been “bewitch’d” in order to make sense of her preference for Lysander over Demetrius (1.1.27). The arbitrariness of judgements based purely on physical beauty is implied by the fact that the charmed Lysander praises Helena’s eyes in particular, while Helena herself is convinced that her rival’s eyes are more attractive than her own (2.2.121-22, 2.2.91-99, 1.1.230). Although, like the blindfolded Cupid, lovers see only what they want to see, they feel that they must rationalise their arbitrary visions: thus Lysander is convinced that “reason says [Helena is] the worthier maid,” while Titania describes the transformed weaver as “wise” and of “fair virtue” simply because her eye is “enthralled to [his] shape” (1.1.232-37, 2.2.116, 3.1.139-40, 3.1.147).

Conversely, whereas Titania orders her fairies to “tie up my lover’s tongue, bring him silently,” Hermia misses Lysander’s words rather than his body when he deserts her, and knows his voice so well that she finds him even when “dark night…from the eye his function takes” (3.1.201, 2.2.152-55, 3.2.177-82). Whereas Lysander’s admiration for his new mistress’s beauty is completely fickle—“who will not change a raven for a dove”—and Titania’s “eyes do loathe [Bottom’s] visage” as soon the love potion is removed, Hermia remains utterly constant, as is shown here by her determination to find “either death” or her lover as soon as she realizes that he has gone (2.2.114, 4.1.79, 2.2.156). Like Pyramus, Hermia has been encouraged by Lysander’s repeated vows of loyalty to rely on him to such an extent that she is willing to risk her life in order to preserve the relationship.

However, Bottom’s stunned account of his affair with Titania—he is much more deeply affected by the affair than the queen—implies that sexual delight and the satisfactions of intimacy can merge together seamlessly in truly passionate relationships, reinforcing each other in a way which seems to dissolve the dichotomy of sight and hearing: “The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen…what my dream was” (4.1.204-14). Just as audiences might continue to be entertained by the workers’ play after Snug has punctured the illusion of the lion, so committed lovers will be free to enjoy what one might call the spectacle of their beloved’s body, suspending their painstakingly acquired understanding that on a deeper, but of course less immediately stimulating level, he is in fact a determinedly humble human being, whose physical appetites are regulated by a desire to establish and sustain a lasting intimacy. Love of this sort constitutes a summum bonum, or heaven on earth, as Bottom’s allusion to chapter 2, verse 9 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians suggests.[[11]](#endnote-11) (It should be noted at this point that Demetrius never has the love potion removed from his eyes.)

As we have seen, lovers who are thoroughly alive to their own deeper interests yearn for a relationship of absolute constancy. Once this goal has been enshrined as their ruling passion, they strive to transcend any urge which might divide them from their beloved, and especially their bodily drives, which are of course ineluctably private. Thus Hermia is the last of the four lovers to succumb to sleep, having driven her body to a point where her “legs can keep no pace with [her] desires” (3.2.444-45). As she settles down for the night, her first impulse is to bemoan her own “woe,” but she concludes her desperate soliloquy with an impassioned prayer that “Heaven shield Lysander, if they mean a fray,” regardless of the fact that her beloved has just rejected her cruelly and is even at that very moment attempting to fight Demetrius for the right to court Helena, her hated rival (3.2.442-447). Over the course of a committed relationship Hermia’s attachment to Lysander has clearly become a ruling passion, inspiring a deep concern for his welfare which overrides her own pain and humiliation.

Although Shakespeare makes less attempt than usual to develop the characters of the four lovers—perhaps in order to highlight the arbitrariness of desire—they are by no means interchangeable in the way that some critics have argued.[[12]](#endnote-12) Helena’s eventual decision to abandon the chase, although taken reluctantly as it involves leaving behind her “foolish heart,” implies that Demetrius left her before the alchemical process by which desire is transmuted into self-denial had time to run its course (3.2.314-20, 3.2.341-43). Unlike Hermia, who stays awake the longest of the four lovers, Helena focuses purely on her own humiliation and fatigue as she is settling down, and therefore welcomes sleep as a release from her pain (3.2.431-36). Lysander, whose passion for Helena is based entirely on physical attraction, is the first to sleep, while Demetrius stays awake a little longer, indicating perhaps that he retains some vestiges of his previous attachment alongside his magically induced sexual desire (3.2.418-30). The superficiality of the men’s attraction to Helena is ironically indicated by the fact that they leave her to escape the enraged Hermia as best she can while they fight for the right to protect her (3.2.330-43). Thus Shakespeare hints at a sort of hierarchy of eroticism, using the characters’ resistance to sleep as a measure of the extent to which their attachment overrides their other needs and desires.

Shakespeare’s celebration of moderate, constant relationships has political implications. The play certainly defends the freedom of lovers to choose their own partner, since it implicitly criticises Theseus’s cool indifference to Hermia’s wishes and ultimately rewards her determination to reject the city and pursue her dreams. However, although Hermia’s innate constancy is undoubtedly a substantial force, the painful and chaotic events of the wildwood suggest that desire requires some degree of social regulation. This in turn requires political authority, but Shakespeare implies that such authority creates its own problems. The contrast between Theseus and the passionate Hippolyta—whose name literally means ‘horse let loose’—exposes the duke’s emotional detachment. Hippolyta’s nostalgic account of the “musical…discord” and “sweet thunder” of Hercules’s pack points again towards the paradox of desire, for the exuberant energy of dogs is typically tempered by an instinctively loyal obedience—reinforced no doubt in this case by the dogs’ Spartan breeding—which leads them to focus single-mindedly on the hunt (4.1.112-18). In contrast, Theseus declares initially that he can only hear a “musical confusion” when his own hounds give chase, but then Hippolyta’s praise of Hercules’s pack seems to goad him into asserting that they are in fact uniquely “tuneable” (4.1.110-11, 4.1.124-26). We can infer from this that the duke is so concerned to emphasise his own ability to control the inchoate desires of his subjects that he overlooks the extent to which these desires are self-regulating. Similarly, Theseus dismisses the events of the night as the “shaping fantasies” of “the lunatic, the lover, and the poet,” whereas Hippolyta argues that with “all their minds transfigur’d so together [the lovers’ story] grows to something of great constancy” (5.1.2-27). Since “constancy” may mean ‘loyalty’ as well as ‘consistency,’ the queen’s response could be taken to imply that dreams can indeed become substantial when they inspire absolute, mutual fidelity. It is arguably Theseus rather than the lovers who lives in a fantasy world, since he appears to prioritise the insubstantial rewards of status and honour over such dreams.

When Hippolyta intervenes—with characteristic compassion—to spare the mechanicals embarrassment, because she “love[s] not to see wretchedness o’ercharged, and duty in his service perishing,” Theseus initially assures her that he will show the actors “noble respect,” since he is used to having to “pick a welcome” from subjects who are overcome by “the modesty of fearful duty,” but then in fact proceeds to mock them mercilessly (5.1.85-105, 5.1.125-26, 5.1.182-83, 5.1.215-18, 5.1.235-38, 5.1.253-54, 5.1.355-61). This implies that the gulf in status between the duke and his subjects has prevented him from cultivating moderate emotions such as guilt, sympathy and gratitude in the give and take of ordinary relationships. He is restrained, if at all, by a proud determination to pay lip service to his gentlemanly code of honour: thus he behaves with all due decorum as he coerces Hippolyta into marriage and, by offering Hermia the option of becoming a nun, even manages to present his enforcement of Egeus’s tyrannical demands as an act of mercy (1.1.38-90). In contrast with Oberon, who always responds to the lovers sympathetically, Theseus treats Hermia in a coolly authoritarian manner, only reversing his judgement that she must marry Demetrius in the end because of the latter’s change of heart (4.1.154-81). Even he cannot completely override the desires of his subjects, it seems. Theseus’s detachment means that his own marriage is likely to be as unsuccessful as Oberon’s, although for very different reasons. By forcing Hippolyta to marry him without acknowledging her resentment, far less begging her forgiveness, he has surely forfeited any chance of possessing her in any manner beyond the purely physical. Because he is too detached to be able to appreciate the role played by moderate emotions in constant relationships, he tends to see passion simply as a disruptive force which needs to be suppressed. Thus Theseus is as likely to create frustration by repressing eros as Oberon is to cause chaos by liberating it. His emotional detachment is presented as an inherent problem in political life, since it stems from the statesman’s necessarily elevated status.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare implies that it is still possible for the city to play a role in reinforcing natural constancy, while at the same time encouraging erotic freedom. This balance is, I would argue, the underlying theme of the mechanicals’ discussion of props. When they discover that light might be provided on the date of the performance simply by opening the casement, Quince suggests that it would also be prudent to have an actor “present the person of Moonshine” (3.1.59-61). Like the moonlight with which it is traditionally associated, chastity is natural, at least according to the above argument, but not of course entirely reliable. The artificial moon will supplement the actual one in the same way as the restrictions imposed by social codes and institutions might complement the innate moderation of the true lover. Similarly, the artificial wall that separates the lovers—a particularly graphic embodiment of the power of social constraints—might be seen as reinforcing the natural barrier represented by the moon’s “bush of thorns” (3.1.61-71). Thus the innate modesty of Pyramus and Thisbe --signified by the fact that the lovers’ elopement is to be by moonlight-- has doubtless been encouraged by the restrictions of the wall, which have hitherto limited them to a purely verbal courtship (3.1.49-50, 3.1.62-71). Similarly, although Hermia and Lysander’s mutual loyalty is rooted in their passionate attachment, it is also reinforced by conventional codes of honour and piety which set a high value on chastity and marital fidelity: Hermia displays an honourable concern for what “becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid,” while Lysander’s vow of loyalty is couched in pious terms: “Amen, amen, to that fair prayer say I” (2.2.58-62).[[13]](#endnote-13)

By criticising both forced marriages and the chaos of the wildwood the play suggests that a good regime would encourage free erotic choice in the initial stages of a relationship, but would subsequently strive to consolidate that choice, reinforcing an innate bias towards loyalty with a robust framework of traditional codes and institutions.[[14]](#endnote-14) The realms of Theseus and Oberon are, respectively, repressive and chaotic, but each contains elements which hint at the possibility of achieving such a balance: the fact that Theseus ultimately finds himself sympathising with Pyramus’s absolute, self-denying devotion to Thisbe—and therefore implicitly with his decision to reject the city—suggests that poetry can move even the coolest politicians to appreciate the potential nobility of moderate emotions (5.1.288-90). Conversely, the fairy king’s decision to venture into the city before the wedding day in order to ensure that the couples “ever true in loving be” implies an acceptance on his part that even the most passionate unions may benefit from being ratified by marriage (5.1.407-08). Shakespeare’s decision to set the play in ancient Athens reinforces the sense that he has some such compromise in mind, since Athens is conventionally seen as allowing a degree of erotic freedom, but within a tight framework of traditional laws.

In the last two acts Shakespeare begins to focus on the relationship between the dramatist and his audience in its own right, rather than as a metaphor for courtship. This shift in focus is introduced by Bottom’s lengthy meditation on his mysterious dream. Unlike Theseus, who criticizes poets alongside lovers and madmen for mistaking their imagined visions for reality, Bottom does not consider his dream of love to be any less substantial because it is impossible to “expound” in any rational way; indeed he sees the elusiveness of his experience as a sign of its awesome profundity: “man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was” (5.1.4-22, 4.1.206-14). Bottom’s dream has “no bottom,” for ruling passions are by definition limitless, even if they entail moderate strategies (4.1.216). Nevertheless, although such experiences cannot be analysed, it seems that they can be evoked through poetry, especially tragedy: Bottom decides that his ballad would become “more gracious” if it were recounted immediately after Thisbe’s death, presumably because her suicide would be likely to remind the audience of the limitlessness of their own passionate dreams (4.1.218-19). Nevertheless, Bottom, whose name reminds us of his own capacity and inclination to set limits, believes that poetry can best evoke ‘bottomless’ dreams if it is carefully structured: he plans to “get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream,” no doubt in the “eight and eight” form which he seems to favour (4.1.214-15, 3.1.23-26). (By now Quince has come to embody the moderate element or phase of the creative process, since it is his role throughout the play to shape Bottom’s impetuous visions into a form which might please the audience: 1.2.55, 1.2.74-77, 1.2.85-89, 3.1.47-61, 5.1.108-115). It seems that poets, like lovers—not to mention weavers like Bottom—must exercise nit-picking care in order to realise their creative visions. We find the same tension in philosophy itself: Shakespeare’s exhaustive exploration of attachment is limited to the moderate means by which a noetic intuition of fulfilment might be realised, since the effectiveness of these means can only be measured in relation to the supreme good, whereas the good itself is desired immoderately for its own sake and is therefore impossible to measure.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The fact that Bottom—whom we may by now identify as Shakespeare’s alter ego—is not in the end allowed to recite his ballad at Theseus’s revels could be taken as a hint that a serious evocation of love would be inappropriate in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (5.1.355-56). The parallels between the plots of *Romeo and Juliet* and the Pyramus and Thisbe play remind us that elsewhere Shakespeare is perfectly willing to use tragedy to make ‘bottomless’ passions “more gracious,” and so invite us to wonder why he turns to comedy in this particular play. If we think of the three productions which Theseus dismisses as representing approaches that Shakespeare himself has rejected for various reasons, we may gain a rare insight into the playwright’s priorities and strategies. It is significant that Theseus actually approves of the first piece—a poem “sung by an Athenian eunuch” celebrating Hercules’s victory over an army of Centaurs who attempted to abduct a bride from her own wedding—so much so in fact that he has already told it to his love “in glory of my kinsman” (5.1.44-47). Like Shakespeare’s own play, this poem defends marriage, but it does so in a worthy, moralistic manner, more congenial to honour-lovers like Theseus than to passionate poets. It does not offer a thoughtful or passionate analysis of the erotic foundation of constancy, as is evident from the fact that its sentiments are entirely compatible with Theseus’s approval of forced marriages.

The second piece, which would have dealt with the Bacchanals “tearing the Thracian singer” when he rebuffs their sexual advances, echoes the paradoxical theme of Shakespeare’s own play much more closely, since Orpheus’s stubborn continence is motivated by passion; in his case grief for his beloved Eurydice (5.1.48-49). Orpheus is of course “a singer,” or poet, which means that his “tearing” could serve as an apt symbol for the resentment that an audience is likely to feel towards a playwright who seems to scorn sexual desire. This invites us to wonder how Shakespeare himself avoids incurring a similar resentment. The answer to this question is implicit in Theseus’s decision to prefer the Pyramus and Thisbe play over an uncompromisingly “keen and critical” attack on “the death of Learning,” on the grounds that the former might provoke “merry tears…of loud laughter,” albeit unintentionally (5.1.52-55, 5.1.68-70). Comedy can, it seems, divert audiences --in both senses of the word-- from themes which they are likely to find dry or objectionable, or both. Shakespeare uses Quince’s contradictory portrayal of his work as “a tedious brief scene” containing “tragical mirth” to insinuate that his own apparently frivolous play might nevertheless instruct those who are prepared to reflect at length on its darker implications (5.1.56-60).[[16]](#endnote-16)

We can infer from the above that Shakespeare practises the moderation that he preaches in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, emulating Bottom’s attempts to disarm the audience, although in his case to deliberately comic effect. Audaciously, he hints at these tactics in the epilogue, where he has Puck urge any who might be “offended” to see the play merely as “a weak and idle…dream” (5.1.423-28). Puck is best understood as embodying the spirit of comedy itself: he is introduced as Oberon’s jester, a “merry wanderer of the night,” who lives to make himself and—incidentally— others “loff and waxen in their mirth” at his trivial pranks (2.1.42-57; see also 3.2.114, 3.2.352-53). If this is his symbolic role in the play, then his unique detachment from any romantic or sexual entanglement—Oberon notes that Puck “could…not” see Cupid—can be seen as a way of reminding us that humour is the antithesis of, and even at times the antidote to, passion (2.1.155). Puck’s stance of detached, mocking superiority—“Lord what fools these mortals be”—is characteristic of comedy, as is his reduction of sexual and romantic love to its basest level—“the man shall have his mare again”—through the tricks with the love potion and the ass’s head (3.2.115, 3.2.463). Shakespeare ensures that the audience broadly share Puck’s perspective throughout the play, which means that the playwright can explore the dangers of immoderate sexual desire without causing offence.

The other side of the play’s argument is, however, completely missed by Puck: because he assumes that romance is purely a matter of animal attraction, and therefore that nearly all relationships will “fail, confounding oath on oath,” the hobgoblin cannot understand that Bottom’s dream transcends his physical relationship with Titania, or that the lovers’ “fond pageant,” may culminate in sincere expressions of loyal devotion (3.2.92-93, 3.2.114). It is significant that the mistake he makes with the love potion stems from his failure to understand Hermia and Lysander’s continence (2.2.76-79). As when Theseus’s laughter suddenly turns to pity for Pyramus, the audience’s Puck-like detachment may at times be punctured, especially when Hermia and Helena’s suffering reveals, however dimly, the potential nobility of passion. Thus the ambiguity of Puck, who is sharp-witted in his contempt for physical passion, but cold in his failure to sympathise with romantic attachment, points those who want to understand the play towards Shakespeare’s ambivalent attitude to desire.

To sum up: Shakespeare practises his own moderate strategies, using comedy to disguise his critique of incontinence, since he is aware that many in the audience will find it deeply uncongenial.[[17]](#endnote-17) He bases his esoteric argument on his intuition that fulfilment is to be found in lasting, intimate attachment, which he distinguishes sharply from sexual gratification, while acknowledging that these two very different types of pleasure may merge seamlessly in a deeply erotic relationship. Romantic relationships of this sort are originally rooted in an entirely selfish urge to possess, or unite with the other forever, body and soul, but passionate lovers are driven to moderate their desires as soon as they realize that too demanding or overbearing an approach is likely to alienate their beloveds and so prevent them from establishing the sympathetic rapport for which they long. Such a rapport can only be achieved through conversation, since it is only in conversation that lovers can reassure their beloveds that they are willing to restrain potentially divisive passions. In contrast, unalloyed sexual desire tends to be particularly overbearing and disruptive, since it can be satisfied in a manner that requires neither constancy nor intimacy. The most basic demand of romantic love is therefore sexual fidelity, but true lovers will also be prepared to practise continence even within a loyal relationship in order to prevent their attachment from being overshadowed and perhaps ultimately side-lined by the fleeting intensity of an early consummation. As such lovers ascend the erotic hierarchy, they will begin to sublimate their desire to possess their beloveds in increasingly radical ways, making all sorts of sacrifices in their efforts to cement trust and inspire gratitude. In their pursuit of the *summum bonum* of an absolutely harmonious union lovers will in the end devote themselves to their partners with such determination and, one might say, nobility of purpose that the selfish core of the attachment is completely concealed from all concerned. Shakespeare would therefore reject modern distinctions between altruism and egotism and fact and value as springing from a failure to recognise that even --or indeed especially-- the most domineering egotist can only satisfy his deepest desires by recreating himself as his beloved’s most devoted servant.

Even as he contrasts the moderation of deep attachment with the potential tyranny of sexual desire, Shakespeare implies that this view is in some ways an oversimplification. A passionate lover may in the end abandon their strategic moderation after the breakdown of a relationship and resort to more direct methods in a desperate attempt to retain possession of the beloved, thus exposing the tyrannical core of the attachment for the first time. Conversely, even the most crudely sensual seducer may find it useful to exercise some degree of moderation in order to establish a consensual relationship with the object of their desires. It is therefore possible that the tension between moderation and tyrannical desire is embedded in the very nature of passion itself.

Although all lovers long for constancy, whether they know it or not, the chaotic events of the wildwood imply that in many cases this longing needs to be consolidated by careful social regulation. Shakespeare implies that a good regime would encourage lovers to make a free erotic choice, but would then use established codes of piety and honour as well as binding marital vows to control the vagaries of sexual desire.[[18]](#endnote-18) Such a regime would avoid the extremes of chaotic liberalism and repressive authoritarianism. In traditional cities statesmen tend to view desire as merely disruptive, and therefore in need of suppression, since their own elevated status prevents them from experiencing the rewards of moderation as they are generated in the give and take of ordinary relationships. Conversely, in contemporary liberal democracies lovers must rely entirely on those intrinsic rewards to secure their mutual commitment, since it is generally accepted in such regimes that no authority should override individual erotic choice. In this modern wildwood many purely passionate commitments of this sort will endure in an absolutely robust way, but a fair proportion will also inevitably be disrupted, particularly by sexual infidelity.

1. Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993): 410, 500. See also David Bolotin, Plato’s dialogue on Friendship (London; Cornell University Press, 1979): 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 1998): 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the view that the tension between desire and restraint is fundamental to the play see David Bevington, ‘”But We Are Spirits of Another Sort”: The Dark Side of Love and Magic in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, in Richard Dutton (ed.), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, New Casebook series (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996): 24-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All references to the play are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A. D. Nuttall, ‘*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: Comedy as *Apotrope* of Myth’, *Shakespeare Survey: An annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production; 53: Shakespeare and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For the parallel between lovers and actors see John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare and his Comedies*, 2nd edn, with a new chapter on the last comedies (London, Methuen, 1962): 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Like Bottom, Socrates pursues pleasures which require him to moderate his tyrannical nature. However, Bottom’s understanding of true pleasure differs radically from Socrates: see Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny. An Interpretation of Xenophon’s ‘Hiero’*, 2nd edn revised and enlarged (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963): 105-06. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, 2nd edn revised 1967, University Paperback Drama Book series (London: Methuen, 1967): 176-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Comedy of Love* (London: Methuen, 1974; reprinted 1978): 111. See also Bevington: 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the view that the lovers have been habituated into continence see Elliott Krieger, *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare’s Comedies* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979): 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Frank Kermode, ‘The Mature Comedies’, in John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (eds), *Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 3: Early Shakespeare* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961): 218-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jan Kott: 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The critical debate over whether the continence of the eloping lovers is natural or the product of society is summarised in Nicolas Tredell, *Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 85. My own view is that it is both. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a similar view see Bevington: 31-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Statesman: The Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. According to Leo Strauss, Aristophanes uses comedy in a similar way: *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Bks., 1966). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Compare Plato’s way of resolving this tension, which Shakespeare implicitly criticises: Leo Strauss, *The City and the Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964): 109-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For the play’s celebration of ordinary marital life see Donald C. Miller, ‘Titania and the Changeling’ in G. Kirchner, L. Whitbread, Donald C. Miller, A. H. King, Eilert Ekwall, Z. S. Fink, ‘Notes and News’ *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 22.1 (1940): 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)