When it befalls Snout to “present” (5.1.154) Wall in the mechanicals’ performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” Shakespeare inserts a dirty joke that is as mischievous as it is revealing of his dramaturgy. Snout of course faces the dilemma of providing the “crannied hole” (5.1.156) through which Pyramus and Thisbe whisper. Because Bottom suggests during the earlier rehearsal (3.1) that Snout hold out “his fingers thus” (3.1.54) to solve the issue, editors routinely add a stage direction to that effect during the actual “Pyramus and Thisbe” scene, and performances have often followed suit. However, a series of jokes indicates that something far lewder is involved. It begins with a pun on “stone” (5.1.159)—another word for testicle even in the Renaissance, as a quick glance through the OED or Jonson’s *Alchemist* will attest. Hence, Bottom can be quite threatening when he says to Wall, “Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me” (5.1.177), and Flute-as-Thisbe can be unintentionally obscene and graphic when she declares, “My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones, / Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee” (5.1.184–85). What “hole” means here should
be quite evident. These moments of hilarious exposure, as it were, reinforce something that the play itself exposes self-reflexively through the act of Snout presenting Wall, in particular, as well as in the play-within-the-play more broadly: that the reality onstage is always a representation. With all the references to stones, Snout testifies, in the etymological sense, to his presence as well as his status as representation, though comically of an inanimate piece of architecture. These references are all part of the larger "trick" (to borrow from Theseus, 5.1.18) joke to which the play asks the audience to consent: belief in representation as reality, even as the play exposes the onstage reality as artificial representation. Because the mechanicals cannot trust their audience to make such a sophisticated distinction between representation and reality, they resort to literal-minded "device[s]" (3.1.13), like preparing a prologue for Snug (lest he be mistaken for a real lion) and assigning parts to actors to bring Moonshine and Wall into the chamber. Unlike his mechanicals, however, Shakespeare trusts that a sophisticated form of consent underlies the power of the audiences' imaginations to fashion reality from representation.

For a play that famously associates poets (and by extension, playwrights) with lovers as creatures of a "seething" (5.1.4) imagination, it should come as no surprise that the audience's consensual imagination in the theatre is linked with consent in the affairs of love. Indeed, one might say that the play sets up audience consent to make-believe as a model for romantic consent: the consensual imagination that makes fiction real—that underlies any understanding of "realism" on Shakespeare's stage—is also what makes love real. This link is deliberately troubled, however, by the fact that love in this play is continually associated with violence from the very start. As scholars have long noticed, violent male conquest characterizes the first instance of love in the play, and thus raises the question of consent from the very first scene: 3 "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries" (1.1.15–16). Rather cleverly in Theseus's formulation, wooing, and not doing injuries, is the action performed by the instrument of violence—the sword—while the word "won" conflates victory in battle with the consensual surrender associated with winning love. The issue of consent becomes more explicit as the scene continues and Egeus enters, asserting the primacy of his "consent" (1.125) in arranging Hermia's marriage to Demetrius. The New Comic conflict that initially drives the play and sends it into the "green world" is then localized in that word "consent" as Hermia forcefully declares that she would rather live and die a virgin than yield her body "[u]nto his lordship, whose unwished yoke / [Her] soul consents not to give sovereignty" (1.1. 81–82). As the play goes on, the issue of consent becomes even more prominent, though the nature of the consent when it is given—often in a state of "half sleep, half waking" (4.1.142)—raises questions that this essay will explore, especially as love is inseparable
from violent conquest, injury, sexual humiliation, and the enchantment of a love potion. One important mediating term in my analysis will be “fancy” (4.1.158), a word that brings together love and imagination, but which also designates the primary faculty that is engaged in the theatrical experience. Hence, on the one hand, the essay will explore how, in this play of love and transformations, the imagination that can turn a bush into a bear—or a bare platform stage into a dark forest—is linked with the “fantasy” (1.1.32) that can “transpose” the dark side of love—“things base and vile”—“to form and dignity” (1.1.232–33). On the other, this essay will also explore how the violence that is inseparable from the experience of love in this play also enters into making theatre real.

Since at least the 1960s, it has not been unusual for productions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to begin by highlighting Hippolyta’s status as a conquered captive and thus the power imbalance in her relationship with Theseus. Productions have ranged from tame to aggressively direct in this regard. Some have simply registered resistance in Hippolyta by having her turn away, for example, when Theseus beckons with “What cheer, my love?” (1.1.122). Others have taken far darker and more menacing interpretive paths, with Hippolyta brought onstage manacled or even imprisoned in a bamboo cage. Whatever the case may be, such productions raise questions about whether and how reconciliation can take place between Hippolyta and Theseus, as well as what the nature of the consent entailed in any reconciliation might be. Looking over the past half century of productions, one might schematically identify three broad ways in which productions have handled the question of consent.

**SITUATIONAL CONFLICT**

*Productions that take this path generally begin by establishing, in Stanislavskian fashion, concrete motivations and objectives for Hippolyta at the outset. Although this sometimes implies later offstage action on her part (since she will not return to the stage until the Act 4 reconciliation scene), her actions in the first scene seem to flow from and reinforce an objective that—in Stanislavski’s own words—carries “in itself the germ of action.” Hippolyta’s initial onstage actions might range from remaining cool and distant to attempting to slap Theseus (as was the case for a 2005 Utah Shakespearean Festival production, though Theseus caught the slap with an unctuously sinister grin). Her resistance is then often reinforced by (or occasionally, first signaled by) a more specifically motivated action when Egeus enters with Hermia and Theseus takes up Egeus’s cause. As Theseus repeats his defense of patriarchal privilege, Hippolyta might underline her solidarity with Hermia’s situation and her determination to resist it by crossing over to Hermia or glowering with more conspicuous...*
hostility at Theseus. In the case of Celia Brannerman’s 1980 production, though Hippolyta began the play on seemingly good terms with Theseus, she angrily snapped shut a “book of laws” that she perused as Theseus defended Egeus’s interpretation of “our law” (1.1.44). That is to say, even when productions do not register a general resistance to patriarchal power, the more specific objective of overturning Theseus’s exercise of power in romantic choice often gets highlighted.

Such production choices clearly require, as Philip Maguire points out, that “another decision be made about when [the] conflict ends, allowing Theseus and Hippolyta to participate in the ‘amity’ engendered by the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania.” It is often the case, given how situationally specific the original motivation or objective tends to be, that the reconciliation takes place onstage in Act 4, Scene 1, after Theseus—seemingly arbitrarily and in contrast to his previous protestations of powerlessness to “extenuate” the “law of Athens” (1.1.119–20)—“overbear[s]” Egeus’s “will” (4.1.174) and “the law” that Egeus “beg[s]” (4.1.150) in order to approve the marriage of Hermia to Lysander. Such was indeed the case in the most recent student production of *Midsummer* that I attended (at Wellesley College in 2011). Hippolyta was every bit the Amazon in an aggressively fashioned leather outfit, and began the play by spitting out her retort to Theseus about the “four days” remaining until the nuptials, underlining, with distasteful regret, how the days will pass “too quickly” (1.1.7). As Theseus presided over the conflict between Hermia and Egeus, Hippolyta grew more visibly angry and saddened. However, after Theseus sided with the young lovers in 4.1, her expression changed dramatically, signaling a decisive turn that led to romantic consent and reconciliation. A similar dynamic operated in the Shakespeare & Company production of 2007 (in Lenox, Massachusetts). The reconciliations of the younger lovers in 4.1 was in fact deeply moving, especially as Demetrius and Helena tried to come to terms with the “power” (4.1.159) that inexplicably overwhelmed them with reawakened and newly clarified love. What was clear, however, was that Theseus made a deliberate and unexpected choice to side with the lovers, which touched Hippolyta, while the emotional power of the reconciliations that the choice enabled clearly swept over her.

As one might expect, such productions tend to be conceived and articulated through a discourse of psychological realism, though it often expands further into other, overlapping discourses. Hence, in the student production noted above, the director explicitly framed the production in her notes as “an exploration of psychology” that delved into “the deepest and darkest depths of the human mind.” As production choices and additional references in the notes to “Freud” and “sadomasochism” made clear, the director sought to combine Stanislavskian psychological realism with an exploration of a deeper, post-Freudian reality. The pro-
production sought, that is to say, to understand how submission through violence might be psychologically compatible with genuine love.

Productions that make such choices do run the risk, however, of appearing in the end to be “conventionally romantic,” with Theseus and Hippolyta reverting to being “harmless lovebirds, like the young couples,” as Gary Jay Williams has suggested.11 From a more explicitly ideological point of view, one might be tempted to say, along with Shirley Nelson Garner, that romantic “harmony” is achieved through “the restoration” of the very “patriarchal hierarchy” that seemed “so threatened”12 or at least challenged at the beginning of the play. If these kinds of assessments resonate compellingly with regard to such productions, it is partly because of the concreteness with which the situational conflict is resolved with an act of consent, or willing submission. The acting out of concrete objectives, I would argue, does too much work to localize the very vexed issue of consent in the play. While I do not wish to argue that naturalistic or psychological realism is incompatible with the dramaturgy and vision of the play per se, utilizing the techniques of realism to resolve as large an issue in the play as consent can become analogous to the mechanicals’ reliance on the literal-minded realism of bringing the moon or a wall onstage.

“A MIDSUMMER NIGHTMARE”

“A Midsummer Nightmare”—so read the headline of a Newsday review of a production from 1966–1967 directed by John Hancock.13 About Ariane Mnouchkine’s Le Songe d’une nuit d’été (1968), it was similarly said that “the dream is entirely a nightmare.”14 The word “nightmare” and its variants continued to be used regarding a number of productions in the decades that followed, from Liviu Ciulei’s 1986 production at the Guthrie Theatre to Robert Lepage’s 1992 production at the National Theatre. In such productions, a post-Freudian vision of perversity let loose in a midnight world of the unconscious combined with, as Gary Jay Williams puts it, “the spirits of Artaud and Kott.”15 Kott’s reading of the play as a passage through “animal eroticism” that departs violently from “Petrarchean idealizations of love”16 is melded with his sense that Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies enact the brutal workings of the “Grand Mechanism”(10) of human history. Hence, in Kottian stagings, figures of power like Theseus and Oberon take on a sadistic perversity and even become aligned with forces of state brutality. At the same time, the fairies take the play into an elemental world in an attempt to provide the spectator, as Artaud himself put it, “with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, his utopian sense of life and of things, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level that is not counterfeit and illusory but internal.”17 In such produc-
tions, realism is configured as a combination of primordial brutality and forms of authoritarian terror. It reflects what Artaud meant by “reality” in his rallying cry that theatre’s “only value lies in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and with danger.” Powerful as such productions can be, and useful as they are in tearing away the dead accretions of tradition, the idea of consent often disappears altogether in them as elemental forces overwhelm individuals or get expressed in savage forms of dominance, erotic and otherwise. Robert Lepage’s production, for example, featured a muddy pool into which all the lovers in the forest plunged, as though it was a form of “primordial mud,” as Jay Halio has written, “that was meant to take us back to the beginning of life . . . and the primitive world.” This production was certainly “directly opposed” to the “literal-minded realism” of the mechanicals, but one might still suggest that it worked within the aesthetics of a Grand Realism that seeks a magical connection to a (nightmare, primitive) reality that goes far beyond the realm of individual choice and consent.

**DREAM VISION**

For the third category of productions, one could do worse than start with Peter Brook’s landmark production from 1970. As has been well documented, Brook was enormously influenced (directly and indirectly) by Kott, Artaud, and Freud, and presented the events in the forest as a dreamlike reflection of the desires of the young lovers and, in particular, of Theseus and Hippolyta. With the (now familiar) doubling of Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania, the characters became dream-world reflections of each other “down to their very shadows,” a relationship David Selbourne reports that Brook worked explicitly to achieve during rehearsals; hence, one might think that “Theseus and Hippolyta dreamt themselves into Oberon and Titania,” as Jay Halio has written. This dream certainly had its share of “true nightmare emotions” and menacing “sexual rage” — perhaps most famously in an animal phallus being suggested by the fisted arm of a fairy jutting through Bottom’s legs—but the play also highlighted genuine reconciliations. Although Oberon’s intention in using the love juice on Titania was clearly to “degrade [her] as a woman” through sexual humiliation, her awakening from the “nightmare” led to “a feeling of recovery . . . formal balance . . . and wonder,” which immediately led to rediscovered “harmony” with Oberon. With regard to Theseus and Hippolyta, they also began the play with deep tensions simmering between them—with “a passionate and melancholy anger” that reached into “the deepest currents of dream and nightmare.” More specifically, Hippolyta maintained her distance from Theseus in the opening scene, and as the situation involving Hermia unfolded, her movements, silence and turning away “brought into focus,”
as Philip Maguire has written, “her unspoken resistance to the sovereignty over her that Theseus had won in battle and would now exercise in marriage.” However, as she re-emerged with Theseus in the woods outside Athens in 4.1, she too appeared as though having rediscovered harmony, and shared her dialogue with Theseus (about the barking of the hounds) with “a bated sense of wonders beheld in far-off regions inaccessible to mind” so that “it surpassed all previously heard resonance of voice and feeling.”

If harmony was visible without a concrete sense of the consent that might have enabled it, that was intentional. As Brook himself said about this sense of wonder that attends crucial moments of the production, it was “mysterious.” The change from menacing hostility and sexualized violence to harmony—from a base and vile state to one of form and dignity—was part of the series of mysterious “transformations—including those of physical appearance—from dream-world to waking, and of transfigurations wrought by force of the imagination.”

Yet Brook was also insistent on emphasizing that such transformations were “transitions through ‘different levels of the real.’” Indeed, in comments about the play, Brook was consistently insistent on using the word “reality” to argue that the play, with its fantastical and seemingly illusory transformations, brought one closer to the real. For Brook, this was Shakespearean realism: “What does magic, what does fairy magic actually mean as a reality within the two hours that you’re in the theatre?”

Brook’s conceptual approach to the play—more so than the justly famous stagecraft of acrobatics in a white-box theatre—would be echoed in numerous productions in the decades that followed his production. An example would be Adrian Noble’s RSC production of 1994–1995 that was subsequently reworked into a somewhat different film. Noble’s production explicitly acknowledged its debt to Brook in the program notes, though the conceptual framework made this debt clear enough. With trapeze-like swings, umbrellas as the primary props (representative of ordinary objects refigured into something magical) and stand-alone doors on the perimeter of the stage as entryways into different worlds, it was clear that the dream world would be created not with high-tech illusionism but by imaginatively transfiguring the visible materials at hand. And indeed, the stage version would be framed as the dream of Hippolyta as it began with Hippolyta on a swing within a room with a door that led into the court and, from there, to other doors that appeared later. Although Hippolyta was not conspicuously combative in the opening scene, she did register her anger at what one reviewer called Theseus’s “ruthless, authoritarian treatment of Hermia.” Again with Hippolyta/Theseus doubled as Titania/Oberon, the battle between Oberon and Titania (with some elegant and therefore all the more disturbing sexualized grotesquerie involving Bottom) came across as the unconscious acting out of submerged conflicts. Though some felt that both the
fairy and human royal couples were too “easily reconciled,” far more mystery and wonder attended their rapprochements (certainly when I saw the performance).

One might still argue about both the Brook and Noble productions (as well as others that followed suit) that “mystery” is simply a form of mystification that thinly obscures patriarchal domination. After all, the reconciliations do take place with the restoration of a male-dominated order. Given the play as it is written, I believe it is impossible not to acknowledge the force of such an argument. However, I would also argue that the play’s power resides to an important degree in complicating the consent that attends restoration while also linking it with the consent of audiences. That is to say, the audience is put into the position of enduring some form of violence that leads in a process touched by wonder and mystery toward a form consent that confers a sense of reality to the spectacle onstage. Because productions in this last category of “Dream Visions” lend themselves (whether intentionally or not) to illustrating this element of the play, they will act as springboards to the next section in which I discuss at greater length my reading of consent in the play and its relationship to stage realism.

A recent attempt to complicate consent in the play can be found in Melissa Sanchez’s provocative argument that “pleasure in domination or abjection may challenge hetero- and homo-normative ideas of proper and healthy female sexuality.” More specifically, Sanchez reconfigures agency in Helena in particular to argue that “fantasies of female submission and obedience can pervert and threaten men’s privileged access to sexual initiative and agency.” Hence, it is not only overt resistance to eroticized forms of patriarchal power that can challenge the “tyranny of the normal”; “women’s desires for sodomy, group sex, bestiality, and sadomasochism can equally challenge gender hierarchies and sexual norms.” One might think as well of Titania in this connection, as she exercises erotic power over Bottom (“Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” [3.1.126]), even as she unwittingly suffers what Helena might call an “injurious” (3.2.195) form of “torment” (2.1.147) at the hands of Oberon. Titania’s victimization could then be said to generate an eroticized form of power and agency. However, the sense of injury becomes even more complicated as Oberon asserts that his stratagem is in retaliation for having suffered “injury” (2.1.147) himself at the hands of Titania. By “injury,” Oberon presumably means something like an “unlawful” act (as the etymology of “injury” indicates), and thus something that violates the kind of patriarchal law that Theseus and Egeus embrace. But “injury” also echoes the injuries done to Hippolyta in battle by Theseus and recalls—as all the instances of love in the play do—the wounding at the heart of love in the etiological story behind the central prop in the play, the flower “love-in-idleness.” As it gets hit by the “bolt of Cu-
Violence and Consensual Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

The flower goes from “milk-white” to “purple with love’s wound” (2.1.165–67), as though bruised with a physical injury. However, it is presumably this wound that also gives the flower its power of inducing love and reproducing its own wound. That is to say, whatever the injury or wound may be when it comes to the affairs of love, love as it is depicted in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* involves the active—and sometimes reciprocal—exchange of violence and power.

We might thus borrow Theseus’s words when he talks of a father’s godlike power to shape or “disfigure” a maid’s “form” (1.1.48–51) and say that, in the way that the flower is itself disfigured by love, disfigurement attends the experience of love. Whether it is Hippolyta disfigured by injuries, Helena disfigured as a “spaniel” (2.1.203) or even a “bear” (2.2.100), or Titania doting in degraded fashion on Bottom disfigured into an ass, desire is both conditioned by and expresses itself in disfigurement. Again, however, for the women in the play in particular, suffering a form of disfigurement is the precondition for converting the power behind disfigurement into love—for exercising power of their own by transposing something base and vile into love. But Theseus’s word “disfigure” also recalls the dramaturgical deficiencies that attend not only the mechanicals’ performance but theatrical representation in general in Shakespeare’s Wooden O. Peter Quince’s malapropism as he describes the device to bring moonshine into the chamber is inadvertently apt: “one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine” (3.1.46–48). All the dramaturgical devices—everything from female impersonation by boy actors to lighting the stage with the person of Moonshine—are disfigured in some way. One might recall the Prologue to *Henry V* in this connection. The Chorus asks that for the cast of thousands at the Battle of Agincourt, the audience empower its “imaginary forces” (18) to turn “a crooked figure” (15)—both a number set before numerous zeros and a bent-over actor on stage—into a “million” (16). Simply put, the audience is given the power to transpose the disfigured materials of artificial representation, with all their “imperfections” (23), to form and dignity.

The analogy between lovers and spectators extends further in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in that the spectators are also understood to be in danger of suffering some form of injury. Given the comic foundations of the play, the concern with audiences is, to be sure, often lighthearted. Peter Quince bumblingly worries about doing offense in the first two lines of his Prologue, for instance: “If we offend, it is with our good will. / That you should think, we come not to offend” (5.1.108–119). Then, in the play’s Epilogue, Puck echoes Quince in his famous first line: “If we shadows have offended” (5.1.399). It should be pointed out, nonetheless, that the word “offense” is quite a strong word, with its root meaning “to strike” (fendere) and thus to wound or injure. Certainly, when King Claudius uses the word in *Hamlet* about its play-within-the-play, he seems to
give it considerable weight: “Is there no offence in’t?” (3.2.212–13). The
mechanicals will also allude in other, though equally comical ways, to the
possibility that they might harm or offend the audience, as when Bottom
worries about the risk that bloody violence or a lion’s roar might “fright
the ladies out of their wits” (1.2.63–64). Once again, one hesitates to put
too much pressure on these words and instances, but it should also be
noted that to be out of one’s wits is to suffer lunacy—the midnight mad-
ness induced by the love potion and suffered more generally, according
to Theseus, by “The lunatic, the lover and the poet” (5.1.7).

Indeed, Theseus’s disquisition on the imagination in Act 5 provides a
vocabulary for understanding the relationship between the two primary
faculties in this play—sight and imagination. When a seething, overactive
imagination supposes a bush a bear, it “bodies forth / The forms of things
unknown” (5.1.15); these “forms” might be reducible to “airy nothing”
(5.1.16), but in the psychology of early-modern optics (which assimilated
and developed classical and medieval optics), those “forms” were also
real and variously called “species,” “images,” and “idola,” among oth-
ers. These were immaterial substances either sent out toward objects by
the seeing faculty itself (in the classical, so-called extra-missive model of
sight) or thrown off by the objects that entered the eye (in the so-called
receptive model of sight, which the Renaissance gradually adopted). In
the paradigm asserted by Theseus, the imagination bodies forth specular
forms—or “fancy’s images” (5.1.25), in Hippolyta’s words—that then the
“poet’s eye” (5.1.12) receives in an insular, self-generating world of fanta-
sy. For antitheatricalists of Shakespeare’s time, a similar model was cru-
cial in their attack on the dangers of the theatre. The spectacle on stage
embodied the poet’s vision and sent forth dangerous forms, images,
beams, or simulacra into the eyes of the spectators, as the beams of a
basilisk—as it was often asserted—infected the spectator with a deadly
poison. Stephen Gosson in The Schoole of Abuse succinctly wraps up the
danger: Players are “the Basiliskes of the world, that poyson . . . with the
beame of their sight.” As Nova Myhill has written, Gosson’s model
conflates the extra-missive and receptive function of the eye in suggest-
ing that players, like Basilisks, “project” contagion, which is received by
“the receptive eye of the spectator.” Gosson is not simply being meta-
phorical here, as Myhill has also shown in relating Gosson’s thoughts to
early-modern writings on physical contagion through sensory percep-
tion. In the following excerpt from Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, he
cites classical authorities to reaffirm that material infection and injury can
result from the exchange of “spiritual vapours” through sight: “So the
beams that come from the agent’s heart, by the eyes, infect the spirits
about the patients, inwardly wound, and thence the spirits infect the
blood.”

Hence, it is telling that Bottom would say in warning about the audi-
ence (though he is referring primarily to the supposed tears they would
shed), “let the audience look to their eyes” (1.2.20). As Jennie Votava has indicated, the play is very much “about the ocular contagion of desire, mediated by a love potion applied to its victims’ eyes.” Hence, when Oberon says before using the juice on Demetrius, “I’ll charm his eyes” (3.2.99), the word “charm” carries a hint of bewitching with an infectious potion. Consider, in this context, the following exchange between Helena and Demetrius:

Demetrius: I am sick when I do look on thee.
Helena: And I am sick when I look not on you. (2.1.212–13)

If we return to the mechanicals’ anxiety about inducing a kind of fearful madness in the audience with the sight of blood and killing on stage, we might note that William Prynne—perhaps the most notorious and hysterical of the antitheatricalists—cites Augustine’s story of a man driven to madness as a warning about this particular danger of stage spectacles:

[H]ee opened his eyes; and forth-with hee was smitten with a more grievous wound in his soule. . . . For as soone as he saw that blood . . . he dranke in cruelty together with it, and . . . now hee was not the same man that hee came thither. . . . Hee beheld, hee shouted, hee grew outrageous, he carried away madnesse with him from thence. 45

It should be noted, nonetheless, that it is not only through the eyes that infection is said to occur, either in the play or early-modern pamphlets and treatises. Stephen Gosson, for example, is just as wary of “corruption” whether it enters “by the passage of our eyes” or “eares into the soule.” What matters for Gosson is that the “sense is tickled, desire pricked, & those impressions of mind are secretly conveyed” into the souls of the audience who “depart infected.” Similarly, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, infection occurs in multiple ways, and a more general language of contagion recurs throughout the play, as in Helena’s wistful words to Hermia: “Sickness is catching. O, were favor so, / Yours would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go” (1.1.186–87). When Puck puts the mechanicals in a state of “distracted fear,” he describes them as follows:

Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong,
Made senseless things begin to do them wrong,
For briers and thorns at their apparel snatch;
Some sleeves—some hats; from yielders all things catch. (3.2.26–31)

“Imagining some fear” (5.1.21), as Theseus says, the mechanicals in effect suppose a bush a bear and yield to and catch a kind of contagion. Egeus talks in a related language, and in similarly physiological terms, when he accuses Lysander of having “stol’n the impression” of Hermia’s “fanta-sy” (1.1.32) and “bewitched” her “bosom” (1.1.27) with “feigning verses” (1.1.31). The implication is that Hermia’s condition is as Oberon describes
Helena’s: “All fancy-sick she is and pale of cheer / With sighs of love, that cost the fresh blood dear” (3.2.96–97).

The sense that both the characters and the spectators are susceptible to a wounding, contagious madness, or fancy-sickness, is reinforced, as scholars have long noticed, by the experiences of both the lovers and the audience being likened to that of dreamers. Whether directly affected by the love juice to the eyes or not, all the lovers, along with Titania and even Bottom, cast their experience as some form of dream, which is then echoed most directly in Puck’s epilogue in which he exhorts the audience to treat the theatre experience as a “dream” (5.1.404). That is to say, an analogy is made between the “fierce vexation[s]” (4.1.64) of dreams that the characters experience and what the audience might experience. Or perhaps that is both the fear and the hope. The history of A Midsummer Night’s Dream in performance since the 1960s might be seen as an ongoing experiment in exploring what the antitheatricalists most feared—how a stage spectacle might infect the audience with what the characters experience. The influence of Artaud in the performance of this play in particular is telling. As Jennie Votava has noted, “Artaud’s understanding of the psychic penetrability of theater-as-plague has much in common with early-modern antitheatricalists’ perspectives on the particular dangers theater represented to the five senses, all of which were regarded as portals for the contamination of the soul.”

As Peter Brook understood, however, becoming infected by a play is ultimately an act of consent—of “assisting” at a play. Especially in this play, infection occurs when the consensual imagination transforms the disfigured materials of the stage into something “real,” to borrow Brook’s word again. Yet, as I have been suggesting all along, this act of consensual infection also involves becoming vulnerable to the kinds of injury suffered by the lovers. While talking about his own experiments at the RSC with Artaud’s vision of a “Theatre of Cruelty,” Brook approvingly recounts what he thinks is Artaud’s idea of how an audience might ideally be affected by a play:

He wanted an audience that would drop all its defences, that would allow itself to be perforated, shocked, startled, and raped, so that at the same it could be filled with a powerful new charge.

We have here a form of consent that is complex and potentially disturbing; it is directly related to “allowing” an experience that is likened to sexual violence, but is ultimately imagined to be empowering. The power enabled by such a form of consent would not only make the “invisible . . . visible”—bring to the surface the darker passions hidden by “the world of appearance”—but also make the fictive unreality on stage real. I would argue that this vision of consent underlies both the romantic resolutions and the desired audience responses in Brook’s famous production
of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as well as numerous others that I have categorized as “Dream Visions.”

I will thus turn now to examine in some detail how consent gets dramatized in the romantic resolutions, beginning with the appearance of the court hunting party in the forest in 4.1. As the first words of Theseus upon entering indicate, listening to “the music of [his] hounds” (4.1.101) oddly appears to be the chief pleasure of the hunt for Theseus. Yet Hippolyta seems to be like-minded, as she responds to him with enthusiasm and recalls the “gallant chiding” (4.1.119) of the hounds she once heard in Crete. What seems so uniquely pleasurable to both Theseus and Hippolyta is “musical confusion” (105)—the clamorous dissonances that create harmony, the “sweet thunder” that creates “so musical a discord” (113). This kind of harmony is clearly an emblem for the achieved harmony or reconciliations in the various love relationships in the play. Somehow, because of, and not despite, the elements of violence, dissension, betrayal, and injury, a discordant but dynamic harmony results. We do not get a concrete moment of choice and reconciliation. Certainly, this model of harmony applies to the immediately preceding reconciliation between Oberon and Titania. As soon as Titania awakens from her sleep with Bottom, she expresses disgust (“O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!” [4.1.81]), as though she had degraded herself in some sordid sexual encounter. Just as quickly, however, she and Oberon dance together, “new in amity” (4.1.82). If there is “wonder” and “mystery” associated with the sense of “recovery” or “balance” that Titania feels (as indicated in Peter Brook’s words quoted earlier), it is again partly because rational consent and concrete objectives are absent from the scene.

Something similar might be said about the four lovers after they are awakened by Theseus and asked to explain themselves. Lysander begins by fumblingly recounting only the facts that we already know (“I came with Hermia hither” [4.1.157]). Not remembering the previous night’s events, he does not mention his switch of affections. But Hermia presumably does remember, and thus would remain confused, perhaps still feeling injured (“What, can you do me greater harm than hate?” [3.2.271], she had asked Lysander earlier), even if hopeful of reconciliation. However, Egeus interrupts Lysander to press his claim against Hermia again, and reiterates the primacy of the “consent” (4.1.165) that he has bestowed on Demetrius. Demetrius steps in at this moment of fraught and possibly awkward emotional tension. Significantly, even as he also recounts known facts, he twice calls Helena “fair” (155, 158)—or beautiful. For a character who had thought herself “ugly as a bear” (2.2.100) as a result of her rejection by Demetrius, this word must surely resonate. Demetrius then disavows his love for Hermia (“my love to Hermia / Melted as the snow” [4.1.160-61]), which effectively releases her, before he turns to Helena. In candidly heartfelt language that lacks the comically rhapsodic hyperbole of earlier passages (“goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!”
he pledges the “faith” and “virtue” (4.1.164) of his heart to Helena. All this he ascribes to a “power” (160) that he cannot understand or name, but of which he clearly feels the force.

We know that the “power” in question is the love juice, which could make the love seem artificial as well as involuntary—something devoid of conscious consent. Perhaps even more disturbingly, we also know Demetrius had previously betrayed Helena to pursue Hermia. Demetrius does acknowledge this last point, but turns everything around. He did come to “loathe” Helena, but that was in “sickness” (168). Now, returned to “health,” to his “natural taste” (169), he wishes, loves, and longs for her and vows “forevermore” to be “true” (171) to her. Whether artificial, or lacking in conscious consent, the reality of what he is feeling at the moment seems authentic—or can certainly be played so onstage. If done so, this moment can be unexpectedly powerful if Helena returns the commitment—by embracing him, breaking down, or more comically, becoming giddy. In doing so, she too would indicate that somehow, through humiliation, discord, and injury, a newfound harmony has resulted that possesses, at the present moment, reality and substance. This act of consent can cue the audience to accept that an inexplicable power—not simply artifice or the love juice—underlies the new romantic realities. Certainly, for Hermia, the wonder-filled nature of Helena’s consent seems to lead her to give in to the dreamlike confusion of seeing things “with parted eye” (4.1.197)—of offering her own form of dazed, dreamy consent. We can see the “power” that the love juice has on Demetrius in this scene, as he in effect suffers (though unwittingly) another wound or bout of fancy-sickness that he characterizes as health. But we can also say that the true “power” in this scene lies in both Helena and Hermia—in the consent that they must give onstage for the play to end as a romantic comedy.

To define this form of consent further, we can turn to Hippolyta’s response to Theseus’s speech on the imagination in 5.1. While Theseus remains skeptical about the lovers’ stories, Hippolyta takes a different tack and gives primary importance to the shared nature of the experience—the fact that “all their minds” have been “transfigured so together” (5.1.24). At the surface level, Hippolyta is highlighting the consistency in the lovers’ stories as evidence that more than fantasy might be involved. More importantly, in emphasizing the reality of the shared changes the lovers have undergone, she also provides a new way of defining consent. To be “transfigured so together” is to give each other consent in the etymological sense of the word (con-sentire, to think or feel together). The reality of their love stories is created and substantiated through consent, though not the conscious form of consent that Egeus and others think of, or the kind of consent that might result as concrete objectives are realized. It lies somewhere in the elusive space between conscious and unconscious, between waking and dream.
The additional suggestion in the word “transfigured” is that as a result of their experiences in the forest, the lovers have undergone significant change. It is not simply that new romantic alignments have taken shape; their minds now share a transformed vision or understanding of love. Again, whether this was induced by fantasy, dream, artifice, or love-juice—or involved injury—becomes secondary if the audience adopts Hippolyta’s perspective and vocabulary. What matters most is that the change is real. To borrow a formulation, it is as if a real rabbit has been pulled out of an imaginary hat. Clearly, we can extend the ideas here to the experience of the audience more broadly, and again Hippolyta is the guide. Hippolyta initially adopts a scornful attitude toward the mechanicals’ play (“This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard” [5.1.223]). But then, as Pyramus discovers Thisbe’s bloody mantle and unleashes a lament, Hippolyta seems to have a change of heart, as she says, “Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man” (5.1.272). I would submit that, for all its farcical ineptitude, the mechanicals’ performance does offer opportunities for the audience to respond with something other than just laughter. It could be here, as Bottom jumps with all his heart into the thumping rhythms and histrionic pathos of the speech. It might be when Thisbe, employing the most homespun and comically mismatched similes—“His eyes were green as leeks” (5.1.352)—displays an artless simplicity that could be touching. In fact, productions since Peter Brook’s have included moments when “Pyramus and Thisbe” modulates into unexpected poignancy, or at least stops being only funny. Such a moment may not be tragic, but if in that moment the audience takes seriously—if even for a split second—the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, then anything’s possible. That is how powerful the imagination can be, which is also to say, that is how much power the audience holds. It is also a reminder that it involves only a difference in degree, not kind, to go from imagining a moonlit forest on a bare stage to feeling an emotional tug for Pyramus and Thisbe. Anything—any representation put on by shadows, to borrow Puck’s words from the epilogue—can become real on stage. Put another way, to pity Pyramus or Thisbe is to celebrate the consensual imaginative power that makes realism onstage possible.

It is also telling that Hippolyta prefaces her expression of pity by saying, “Beshrew my heart.” No doubt this phrase is a mild, throw-away oath, but to beshrew is literally to be bitten and infected by a shrew. This is how one becomes “shrewd” (2.1.33), as Puck is described as being, or acquires a “gift . . . in shrewishness” (3.2.301), as Helena implies that the “keen and shrewd” Hermia does when she is “angry” (3.2.323). “Beshrew,” that is, glances at the contagious cycle of wounding and infection that begins with a bite from a shrew. Submerged somewhere in the oath, then, is the sense that one must suffer a kind of wound to acquire the power to give reality to the spectacle on stage with an act of imaginative sympathy, or consent. Perhaps her wounding in the actual story also
contributes to her susceptibility to this sympathy. However, this wound is ultimately figured as a regenerative injury that the play also blesses—as implicitly recognized by productions like Peter Brook’s. Of course, one might still continue to resist the connection between wounded consent to a stage spectacle and the enigmatic romantic consent that issues from suffering violence. Nonetheless, as scholars have indicated, Titania and Oberon take on the ritual function associated with comedy of celebrating fecundity in the final sequence of the play as they dance (presumably) through the house and “bless this place” (5.1.376) as well as the “the couples three” (383). But the “place” they bless is clearly also the stage. When Oberon specifies further that the fairies should “each several chamber bless” (5.1.434), the word “chamber” just as surely continues the pun (as during the mechanicals’ rehearsal) on the name of Shakespeare’s company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. That is, the fairies—and the play—give blessing to all forms of fecundity, including the generative power of the imagination that gives reality to the disfigured representations on stage. A Midsummer Night’s Dream blesses, that is, the power that makes Shakespeare’s realism possible.

NOTES

1. Gail Kern Paste and Skiles Howard, eds., A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Texts and Contexts Series (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1999). All references to A Midsummer Night’s Dream will be to this text.

2. Sir Epicure Mammon’s declaration to Doll Common, “I am the lord of the philosopher’s stone” (4.1.120), is just one example among many of the jokes and puns on “stone” that recur throughout Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist, ed. Elizabeth Cook (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1991).


4. This was the case in John Hancock’s production of the play at various venues in the 1960s. See Gary Jay Williams, Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the Theatre (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1997), 216.


8. Ibid., 152.


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14. Ibid., 221.
15. Ibid., 220.
18. Ibid., 253.
26. Ibid., 239.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. Ibid., 5.
31. Ibid., 5.
32. Peter Brook, quoted in Halio, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 52.
34. Williams, *Our Midnight Revels*, 256.
36. Ibid., 505.
37. Ibid., 504.
38. Ibid., 496.
42. This is from an unpublished paper circulated at the Shakespeare Association of America conference in 2014 (St. Louis). Nova Myhill, “On Basilisks,” 6.
44. Jennie Votava, “Dangerous Sensations: Contagion and Spectatorship in Gosson and Shakespeare,” 6. This unpublished paper was also circulated at the Shakespeare Association of American conference in 2014 (St. Louis).
47. Demetrius, for example, says after the reconciliations, “It seems to me / That yet we sleep, we dream” (4.1.188–89).
52. Ibid., 62.
53. I borrow the phrase from James Sallis, “The Incomparable Paco,” in The James Sallis Reader (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2005), 92. The phrase has also been applied to A Midsummer Night’s Dream, but I have not been able to find the reference.

54. Peter Brook famously asserted that “Pyramus and Thisbe” contained “the truth of a drama within a drama” (quoted in Selbourne, The Making of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 7) and therefore dispensed with slapstick in its performance.