

DREAMS, FREEDOM OF SPEECH, AND THE DEMONIC AFFILIATIONS OF ROBIN GOODFELLOW

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Robin Goodfellow in Athens

In darkness, Nashe tells us in *The Terrors of the Night* (1594), mortals are more vulnerable to the machinations of the devil than they ever are by daylight.¹ Dreams and night visions weave Satan's most cunning 'nets of temptation' (Nashe 1972; 210), and after sunset one's eyes turn into magnifying glasses, so that 'each mote [...] they make a monster, and every slight glimmering a giant' (239), multiplying the viewer's proneness to delinquency and despair. For the Elizabethan anti-theatrical lobby, on the other hand – as represented by pamphleteers like Stephen Gosson, Phillip Stubbes and William Rankins – it is drama rather than dreams that constitutes the Devil's weapon of choice in the unceasing siege he lays to the human mind and spirit. Plays, they claim, constitute an elaborate imaginative trap whereby Satan lulls the citizens of London into a false sense of security, then ambushes their souls through the unguarded portals of the senses. So when in about 1595 Shakespeare wrote a comedy called *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and crammed it full of spirits, damned or otherwise, he was playing a witty game with the fears of Gosson and his fellow thespiphobes. What I shall argue here is that the game he played in the *Dream* was already in full swing among the pamphlets and printers' shops of 1590s London, and that the appearance of Robin Goodfellow in the woods of Athens would instantly have alerted his first audiences to Shakespeare's participation in it.

Puck's presence in the *Dream* has long been something of a puzzle – whether acknowledged as such or simply ignored. Classical creatures had found their way into the English landscape often enough in Elizabethan culture before

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Shakespeare started writing: the transformed Philomene had warbled in English woods in Gascoigne's verse satire *The Steel Glass* (1576), Neptune had terrorized Humberside in John Lyly's play *Gallathea* (c. 1588), the sea-god Glaucus had moped by the banks of the Thames in Thomas Lodge's poem *Scilla's Metamorphosis* (1589). But Shakespeare's transplanting of Robin Goodfellow to some woods near Athens was the first time (to my knowledge) that a figure from English folk legend had been relocated to the Mediterranean, and the implications of that relocation have not yet, I think, been fully worked out. For one thing, as a peculiarly northern forest-dweller Robin may have had some effect on the relationship between night and day in his new, more southerly setting. Nashe reminds us in *The Terrors of the Night* that nights are longer in the north, and especially in Iceland, where witches and wizards are plentiful and possess an enviable power over local weather-conditions (223). The *Dream* transplants those northern nights to Greece, curtailing daylight hours and extending the shortest night in the year to giant proportions. Four days and four nights are supposed to have passed between the first and last scenes of the comedy, whereas the audience experiences only two – and has no idea which of those two is the midsummer night of the title. Robin Goodfellow seems the obvious person to blame for this hypertrophied period of darkness, since he is associated in folk tradition with night, dreams, trickery and Devilish magic. Moreover, he had an unusually high profile in print during the early 1590s, featuring everywhere as a spirit who transcends the normal boundaries of space, time, life and death. It is only by recovering this profile that we can hope to understand his function in Shakespeare's ancient Greek extravaganza.

Puck in Print

For the Elizabethans, Robin possessed a strange double nature, as the embodiment both of English Catholic superstition in the past and of an innocent native cheerfulness that had been lost with the advent of continental sophistication in the present. Reginald Scot paints him in the former light in *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), where he features as a bugbear whose ability to terrorize night-wandering papists has been stripped from him by Protestant rationalism: 'Robin goodfellowe ceaseth now to be much feared, and poperie is sufficientlie discovered' (sig. B2^v). The poet William Warner concurs with Scot. His Robin is a spirit who appears like an incubus to sleeping mortals, and in the fourteenth book of Warner's digressive epic *Albion's England* (published in 1606) Robin sits naked on the face of a dormant shepherd and laments the good old days of Mary's reign, when English Catholics everywhere believed in him: 'Was then a merrie world with us when *Mary* wore the Crowne, / And holy-water-sprinkle was beleevd to put us downe' (1971: 368). But Warner's Robin is also a blunt teller of unwelcome truths to Protestants. He goes on to utter a satirical invective against the various

forms of hypocrisy prevalent in the reigns of Elizabeth and James, thus revealing himself to have as much of the satyr as of the demon about him.

This is hardly surprising, since by the time Warner painted this picture of him in 1606 Robin had long been associated with satire as well as with drama, dreams and devils. Robin's conversion into a satirist is in fact inextricably bound up with his theatrical associations. In a pamphlet of 1590 called *Tarlton's News out of Purgatory* the ghost of the late great comic actor Richard Tarlton appears to the anonymous author in a dream, and soothes his terror at this visitation by reassuring him that he is no devil, but a homely spirit like the noted goblin: 'thinke mee to bee one of those *Familiares Lares* that were rather pleasantly disposed then indued with any hurtfull influence, as *Hob Thrust*, *Robin Goodfellowe* and such like spirites (as they terme them of the buttry) famozed in everie olde wives Chronicle for their mad merry pranckes' (2). As a substitute Robin, Tarlton links himself with Catholicism – but a Catholicism defused of the terrors of damnation with which it had been charged by Protestant dogma. When the author asks the dead clown's ghost how it has managed to visit the land of the living, given the Calvinist belief that 'the soules of them which are departed [...] never returne into the world againe till the generall resurrection' (2-3), Tarlton contemptuously dismisses Calvinist doctrine as unhealthy dualistic. His spirit, like that of Hamlet's father, inhabits Purgatory, the third alternative to heaven and hell, vouched for by the great poet 'Dant' as well as by 'our forefathers' and 'holy Bishops of Rome' (3) – hence its ability to return now and then to the earth's surface. In this way the clown blithely sweeps aside decades of religious conflict; and he goes on to tell a string of stories under the aegis of a non-judgemental version of the afterlife which permits the free flow of merry tales between this world and the next, regardless of the theology. His stories may stink of sulphur but they are 'rather pleasantly disposed then indued with any hurtfull influence'; and in telling them he dismisses out of hand the didactic goody-goodies who saw all such stories – on stage or on the page – as works of Satan.

Tarlton's News was 'published', according to its title-page, by an 'old Companion' of Tarlton's, Robin Goodfellow – the spirit with which the ghost of Tarlton links itself. It seems fitting, then, that when an anonymous 'Cobbler' wrote a story-collection of his own (*The Cobbler of Canterbury* (1590)), and prefaced it with a light-hearted attack on the shortcomings of *Tarlton's News*, Robin Goodfellow should have penned a response to the cobbler's preface, which was printed immediately after it in the first edition. Here the goblin takes the cobbler's objections to his publication as a sign of the times, when respect for good manners has been utterly eroded since the happy days when he was 'so merry a spirit of the Butterie', helping maids to grind malt and getting a 'messe of Creame' for his labour (sig. A4^r). The inhospitable spirit of Elizabethan England has driven Robin to a self-imposed exile in Purgatory along with his old friend Tarlton. It has also made him devilishly vindictive, though not frighteningly so: he promises to 'haunt'

the cobbler 'in his sleepe, and after his olde merrie humour, so to playe the knave with the Cobler, that hee shall repent hee medled so farre beyond his latchet' (sig. A4^r). Damnation and hauntings have here been reduced to pretexts for comic squabbling and trickery, quite bereft of the fear with which the established churches sought to invest them.

At this point in our story the immensely popular writer of romances and comedies Robert Greene gets mixed up with Puck's Elizabethan biography. Evidently a rumour went round that Greene had written *The Cobbler of Canterbury*, and to deny this rumour Greene wrote a pamphlet called *Greene's Vision* (1592) in which he is visited in his sleep by the ghosts of Chaucer and Gower, who debate the merits and demerits of Greene's prolific scribblings. At the end of the dispute the spirit of King Solomon appears and elicits a promise from Greene that he will from henceforth devote himself to theology; and perhaps for this reason Greene did not publish the pamphlet in his lifetime, reluctant to commit himself to such a career-changing *volte-face* until he had exhausted the profitable vein of fiction he was still working at the end of his life. When it did appear, the pamphlet reintroduced the fear of hell into the dialogue between pamphleteers, since it opened with a section where Greene articulates his 'trouble of minde' in distinctly Faustian terms: 'can the hideous mountaines hide me, can wealth redeeme sinne, can beautie countervaile my faults, or the whole world counterpoyse the balance of mine offences?' (Grosart 1881-83: XII 207). Greene's fellow pamphleteer Barnaby Rich pounced on this hint at Greene's posthumous fate, and described him in *Greene's News both from Heaven and Hell* (1593) as wandering between Heaven and Hell in search of the happy third location, Purgatory, where he can escape damnation while retaining all the venial faults that made him so attractive a writer in his lifetime. (On his journey he meets Dick Tarlton, who has now become Lucifer's resident satirist-entertainer.) The devil finally expels Greene's ghost from hell at the request of the cony-catchers he exposed in his final pamphlets; and at this point Greene is transformed into a particularly aggressive incarnation of our old friend Robin Goodfellow, a spirit who troubles the nocturnal wanderings of living sinners. 'I woulde therefore wish my friendes,' he declares, 'to beware howe they walke late a nights, for I will bee the maddest Goblinc, that ever used to walke in the moonshine' (sig. H3^r), haunting the sleep of women and persuading them to cuckold their husbands, infecting men of all occupations with the spirit of avarice so that they will do anything to amass wealth for their heirs, and urging lawyers, courtiers and clergymen to persevere in the corrupt practices already rife in their professions. Robin has resumed his mantle as a night-dwelling satirist; but by now he trails in his wake the ghosts of clowns and popular authors, whose activities had been denounced as devilish by the theatre- and fiction-haters along with Robin himself. The implication here as elsewhere is that the target of the moralists has been badly misjudged, and that they have wasted their energies in denouncing fictions and the

makers of fictions, when in fact these are far more effective and energetic in attacking social abuses than they are.

For all his residence in a fictitious Catholic Purgatory, then, Robin Goodfellow was seen as mostly harmless by Shakespeare's predecessors in popular print. Indeed, he was represented as the victim of a miscarriage of justice, sharing with the common people of England the burden of an inequitable social and legal system, and endowed with gifts that enable him to expose these inequities. In the anonymous pamphlet *Tell-Troth's New Year's Gift* (1593) he joins forces with the honest narrator Tell-troth to denounce the operations of jealousy or envy at every level of the English commonwealth. Here he is characterised as 'Robin good-fellow... who never did worse harme, then correct manners, and made diligent maides' (sig. A2^r), a kind of incorruptible agent for the discovery of hidden vices, who 'could go invisible from his infancy', is 'subject to no inferiour power whatsoever', and has 'a generall priviledge to search every corner, and enter every castell to a good purpose' (sig. A2^r-A2^v). Robin's affiliation with hell is explained as a consequence of this privilege, which means he can visit even the infernal regions without becoming contaminated by them, and use what he sees and hears there 'to a good purpose'. The insistence on his independence of all authority apart from nature's is intriguing: it is the most explicit statement so far that Robin has become a figure for the legendary liberty of imaginative writers, a liberty invoked by the ghost of the executed poet Collingbourne in William Baldwin's hugely influential collection of political poems, *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1563).

Behind all these vision-pamphlets, in fact, the *Mirror* looms as a monumental presence, containing as it does the richest collection of posthumous first-person narratives in the English language. Its versified stories of the decline and fall of great men and women throughout English history are narrated by the spirits of the dead, and its representation of the past is repeatedly linked to political and social abuses still current in the present. Interestingly, too, it features a representation by a protestant poet of a Hell that is based on classical accounts of Hades (as it is in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1589) and *Tell-Troth's New Year's Gift*) and which is also explicitly linked to the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. This representation of Hell occurs in the celebrated 'Induction' to Thomas Sackville's tragedy of the Duke of Buckingham, and is followed by a discussion of Purgatory among the protestant writers who have gathered to hear the narrative. The Induction's Hell, complains one writer, 'savoreth so much of Purgatory... that the ignorant maye thereby be deceyved' (fol. 137^r) – presumably into thinking that Purgatory really exists. But the chief editor of the *Mirror*, the printer-poet William Baldwin, disagrees. In his poem, says Baldwin, Sackville has depicted not Hell or Purgatory but the grave, 'wherin the dead bodies of al sortes of people do rest till tyme of the resurrection. And in this sence is Hel taken often in the scriptures, and in the writynges of learned christians' (fol. 137^r). A second listener goes further. What does it matter if Sackville's Hell resembles Purgatory, he says, since

‘it is a Poesie and no divinitye, and it is lawfull for poetes to fayne what they lyst, so it be appertinent to the matter’? True enough, Baldwin replies, but such liberty has not always been accorded to poets; and he proceeds to read out the tragedy of Collingbourne, who was executed for writing satirical verse in the reign of Richard III, and whose ghost warns all poets to beware of speaking the truth about tyrants in an age that has grown ‘so fell and fearce / That vicious actes may not be toucht in verse’, and when ‘The Muses freedome, graunted them of olde, / Is barde, aye reasons treasons hye are helde’ (fol. 138^r). The tragedy closes with the heartfelt wish from its listeners that the warning it contains ‘may take suche place with the Magistrates, that they maye ratifie our olde freedome’ to speak openly in verse (fol. 146^v). Restoring this liberty will work for the ruling classes as much as for the common people in whose name the poet speaks, since rulers need to know what their subjects think of them if they are to defend themselves from popular insurrection and eventual dethronement.

The audience of Collingbourne’s tragedy speak with the heartfelt hopefulness of Protestants who have lived through persecution under a Catholic monarch and who hope for something better under her successor. The first print-run of *A Mirror for Magistrates* was suppressed in the reign of Mary Tudor, and the 1563 edition from which I have been quoting couches its plea for poetic liberty in terms that are wittily designed to shock both radical protestants and Catholics alike – invoking the concept of Purgatory while at the same time dismissing it as a poetic fabrication – as if to test the Elizabethan reader’s capacity for greater tolerance. The references to Purgatory in the pamphlets of the 1590s seem to take up this notion of Purgatory as emblematic of the poet’s exemption from political or religious persecution, as does their frequent invocation of that figment of the superstitious Catholic imagination Robin Goodfellow. Robin is a spirit of the buttery – that is, the bar or pub – rather than of the infernal regions, and his location in Purgatory indicates his temporary immunity from knee-jerk moral judgments based on over-rigid notions of right and wrong.

In the spirit of the other pamphlets we have touched on, Henry Chettle’s *Kind-Heart’s Dream* (1593) deploys its revenants to argue against simplistic views of the theatre and popular print. Robin does not figure in it (though it addresses itself to ‘Gentlemen and good-fellowes’, sig. B1^r), but the ghosts of both Tarlton and Robert Greene are summoned up, the latter appealing to Pierce Penniless – a pseudonym of Thomas Nashe – to defend his memory against the posthumous slanders of Gabriel Harvey, and the former defending the stage against its detractors while acknowledging the shortcomings of the modern theatre. ‘Mirth in seasonable time taken,’ the ghost of Tarlton avers, ‘is not forbidden by the austerest Sapients. But indeed there is a time of mirth, and a time of mourning. Which time having been by the Magistrates wisely observed, as well for the suppressing of Playes, as other pleasures: so likewise a time may come, when honest recreation shall have his former libertie’ (sig. C4^r). The latter sentence so

closely echoes the discussion of Collingbourne's tragedy in the *Mirror* that it is hard not to read it as a reminder of William Baldwin's hope that liberty of speech will be restored to poets at last – even if only at the latter end of Elizabeth's reign. Greene and Tarlton, poets and players are 'good fellows' in two Elizabethan senses: good drinking companions (Kind-heart sees their apparitions while dozing in a tavern) and morally upright citizens who tackle vice wherever they see it. And both wish the same punishment on all moralistic 'maligners of honest mirth': that is, 'continuall melancholy' (sig. C2^v).

In Nashe's *Terrors of the Night* – a pamphlet where spirits and devils are reduced to the size of dust particles so that 'not a room in any man's house but is pestered and close-packed with them' (1972: 212) – Don Lucifer himself, 'their grand Capitano', is described as having taken on the form of a 'puritan' with an aversion to shows and ceremonies of all kinds (230). In doing so he has ceased to be the cheerful entertainer he was of yore, when he 'was wont to jest and sport with country people, and play the Goodfellow amongst kitchen-wenches' (231). As a result of this transformation 'there is no goodness in him but miserableness and covetousness'; he has shifted his allegiance to the camp of the theatre-haters and laughter-loathers, and the world is a poorer place. Here again Robin represents a form of night mischief that is finally harmless, despite its devilish associations, and those who set themselves against it condemn both themselves and others to an unalleviated depression (the condition for which laughter was prescribed by early modern physicians).

Shakespeare's Robin Goodfellow is the heir to all these Robins, Greenes, Tarltons and merry Devils. Like his precursors he frequents the sleeping places of mortals, shaping what are in effect their dreams (all the lovers concur in retrospectively perceiving the business in the wood as dreamlike). Like the Robin of *Tell-Troth's New Year's Gift* he can make himself invisible at will and go with impunity wherever he wishes in the globe or, presumably, out of it. *Tell-Troth's* Robin has the licence accorded to fools (and sometimes poets) to meddle with the doings of all classes, and Shakespeare's Puck takes the role of Oberon's fool, making and discovering fools wherever he turns up. The merry tricks he plays are mentioned often in the pamphlets, and became the subject of a jest-book in the seventeenth century, *Robin Goodfellow his Mad Pranks and Merry Jest* (1628), filled with stories like the ones he tells the fairy on his first appearance in Act Two. And his connection with fairies is taken for granted by nearly all the pamphleteers, as it is by Shakespeare. Nashe, for instance, associates Robin with 'elves, fairies, hobgoblins of our latter age' in *The Terrors of the Night* (210); and it is striking that Puck's fairy friends in Shakespeare's play have the capacity to shrink themselves to the size of Nashe's mote-like devils. Even Puck's fondness for hemp, for stamping and for bellowing 'Ho ho ho!' is shared with the Robin of *The Cobbler of Canterbury*, whose catchphrase when provoked is 'What Hemp and Hampe, here will I never more grinde nor stampe' (sig. A4^v). Clearly Shakespeare was deeply

immersed in the recent literary as well as folkloric history of his 'merry wanderer of the night' (2.1.43), and knew how well the ground had been prepared for the rapprochement between popular superstition and sophisticated comedy by his precursors among the Elizabethan pamphleteers.

Shakespeare's artfully managed rapprochement between popular superstition and romance, too, was prepared for by the pamphleteers we have glanced at. Robin's interest in lovers is first established in *Tell-Troth's New Year's Gift*, where he condemns greedy fathers for seeking to wed their daughters to wealthy men against their will, and catalogues the many forms of jealousy and fallings-out between sweethearts which occupy the central scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Tell-Troth* ends with a general blessing bestowed by Robin on young lovers, which foreshadows Oberon's blessing of Theseus's household at the end of the *Dream*:

Their dalliaunce shall bee rewarded with darlings, whose sweete favoured faces, shall be continuall pledges of their faithfull kindnesse [...] Their encrease shalbe multiplied, their substance doubled and trebled till it come to aboundance [...] They shall adde so great a blessing to their store as time shall not take away the memory of them, nor fame suffer their antiquitye ever to die [...] Thus shall loves followers be thrise happy, and thus Robin goodfellowes well-willers, in imitating his care bee manifolde blessed [...] (sig. F4^v-F5^r).

Oberon too promises that the issue created in the 'bride beds' of Theseus, Hippolyta and the rest will be 'fortunate', free from the 'blots of nature's hand', and that the 'couples three' who engendered them will 'Ever true in loving be' (5.1.394-411); and Puck follows up this promise with a heartfelt appeal to his well-willers among the audience. Shakespeare's Puck shares, too, with *Tell-Troth's* Robin a particular concern for the well-being of amorous women, as he shows when he mistakenly dismisses Lysander as 'this lack-love, this kill-courtesy' for his apparent spurning of Hermia (2.2.83). The goblin, then, was associated with the defence of romance as well as of the stage at the point when Shakespeare introduced him into his Athenian love story. He was also already seen as a link between English and classical myth, one of the *Lares familiares* or household spirits transformed into an impudent English imp who lives in a classical-Purgatorial Hades, well before Shakespeare gave him a new home in the woods of ancient Greece; and a half-demonic champion of laughter with a heart of gold, well before Shakespeare gave him the capacity both to laugh at and pity the mortal fools he spies on.

The combination of mischief-making with benevolence is shared by Shakespeare's goblin with his namesakes in *Tarlton's News*, *The Cobbler of Canterbury* and *Tell-Troth's New Year's Gift*. In Shakespeare's play, it is Oberon

who speaks most openly about this fusion of qualities, when he invokes the link between himself, his fellow spirits and the devil at the end of the third act, telling Robin to 'overcast the night' with 'fog as black as Acheron' (3.2.355-7) – one of the rivers in the classical underworld – and encouraging him to mimic the voices of Demetrius and Lysander (3.2.360-3) as devils are said to mimic men's voices and shapes in Nashe's *Terrors of the Night* (Nashe 1972: 211). But when Robin tells him that this must be done swiftly before dawn sends 'damned spirits' back to their 'wormy beds' (no hint of Purgatory here), Oberon replies by dissociating himself and Robin utterly from souls who have 'themselves exiled from light'. 'We are spirits of another sort', he claims, and goes on to describe his delight in dallying with the morning sunshine like Apollo, the classical god of learning (3.2.378-93); and this assertion of benevolence is reinforced at the point when the fairies and Puck extend their benison to the sleeping lovers in the play's last scene. If plays resemble dreams, in this play they are evidently dreams that bring peace and health to those who experience them.

Having said this, the terror of damnation with which the theatre-haters had infected the playhouse is by no means absent from Shakespeare's comedy. When Robin Goodfellow turns 'actor', for instance, after witnessing the amateur theatrics of the craftsmen (3.1.75), he throws them into a superstitious panic by assuming a range of terrible forms: 'Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn' (3.1.106). But the devilry he practises is finally harmless, like the merry pranks played by the demonic Vices of an earlier dramatic tradition, or the antics of the devilish satyr-spirits in the pamphlets of the 1590s. And if it is both harmless and health-giving, the theatre-haters who saw it only as monstrous stand condemned for crude thinking, moral cowardice, and a lack of generosity. After all, the craftsmen welcomed Bottom back into their midst when they saw he was no monster (4.2); whereas the theatre-haters at their most extreme could find no place in a civil commonwealth for comedy.

It is hardly surprising, then, if in the last lines of the play Robin himself should turn defender of the theatre, like Tarlton in *Kind-Heart's Dream*. Theseus lays the groundwork for this defence earlier in the scene when he teaches his contemptuous master of the revels Philostrate the proper way to respond to well-meant drama. 'Never anything can be amiss,' he says, 'When simpleness and duty tender it' (5.1.82-3); and he goes on to explain how best to read incompetent performances where the actors stumble over their lines and fall silent, overawed by the grandeur of their audience. 'Trust me, sweet,' he tells Titania,

Out of this silence yet I picked a welcome,
And in the modesty of fearful duty
I read as much as from the rattling tongue
Of saucy and audacious eloquence.
Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity

In least speak most, to my capacity (5.1.99-105).

For Theseus, a courteous audience participates in a performance, reading into it the good will they would hope to find in all the works of the imagination. A little later he characterizes this process of generous reading as a kind of amendment or emendation: 'The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them' (5.1.210-1). It's the word 'amend' that Puck takes up in his epilogue; a word that had long been associated with readerly generosity by Elizabethan readers. Presenting their books to a potentially hostile public, some authors prefaced them with a gnomic challenge to their critics: 'commend it, or amend it'; speak well of a work of art if you can't improve on it. Robin Goodfellow presents his audience with a more genial offer from the playwright and actors who have entertained them. 'If we shadows have offended,' he begins, 'Think but this, and all is mended: / That you have but slumbered here, / While these visions did appear' (5.1.414-7). For Nashe, visions seen in sleep, like Robin, are mostly harmless; they seldom have prophetic significance, and in most cases signify little more than the quality or otherwise of the last meal you have eaten (*Terrors of the Night*, 233). Robin's dream, too, is no more than a 'weak and idle theme', and its idleness is not threatening (5.1.418). If it is pardoned, the players will 'mend' or improve their performance next time; if they escape the hissing of envious serpents among their spectators they 'will make *amends* ere long'; and finally, generosity from their audience will strengthen the bond of imaginative friendship or amity among the citizens and their entertainers: 'Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore *amends*' (5.1.421-9, my emphasis). The theatre-haters insisted that the playwrights had failed to amend or reform their plays despite endless promises of amendment. Robin makes the process of amendment a general one, healing rifts and bridging gaps between friendly co-habitants of the linked spaces of playhouse and city, and exorcising the demons that had been introduced into those spaces by the serpentine hissing of ungenerous prudes.

Robin Goodfellow and Bottom's Dream

It is perhaps worth mentioning one more way in which Shakespeare's Robin both evokes and counters the anti-theatrical prejudice through interference with sleep. His decision to replace Bottom's head with the head of an ass, then obtrude him into the presence of the sleeping Titania, in whose arms he is afterwards lulled asleep to the strains of seductive music, is another knowing reference to the Tudor controversy over the beneficence or devilishness of drama. As early as the 1540s, the schoolmaster-playwright John Redford introduced a scene into his moral interlude *Wit and Science* in which the schoolboy-hero Wit is danced into a state of exhaustion by a seductive female Vice, then lulled to drowsiness in her arms. As he dozes, the Vice's son Ignorance places his fool's cap on Wit's shoulders: a cap no doubt endowed with the usual pair of ass's ears. On waking, it is some time before

Wit becomes aware of his transformation; and if ever Shakespeare saw a performance of *Wit and Science* or one of its variants, it seems unlikely he would have forgotten the peals of laughter that greeted Wit's puzzlement at the reaction of those around him to his changed appearance.

The Vice who seduced Wit into this compromising somnolence was called Idleness, a term often used by the theatre-haters to designate the unproductive activities of players. Her rival in the play is a Virtue called Honest Recreation – and again, this is the virtue defenders of the theatre liked to champion, insisting on the necessity for relaxing and instructive entertainment in the midst of one's daily labour, and claiming that the theatre could provide such entertainment more fully than any other art-form. Redford's Honest Recreation has nothing but contempt for Idleness; but any attack of hers on the Vice is pre-empted by the Vice herself, who launches a devastating verbal assault on Honest Recreation that anticipates in its wording the polemic of the theatre-haters in the 1570s and 80s. Honest Recreation, says Idleness, is nothing but a fake, a common player or mummer who uses the mask of virtue to cover her vices:

The dyvyll and hys dam can not devyse
More devlyshnes then by the doth ryse
Under the name of Honest Recreacion:
She, lo, bryngth in her abhominacion!
Mark her dawnsyng, her masking and mummyng.
Where more concupiscence then ther cummyng?

(Redford 1972: 196)

Honest Recreation retaliates with an eloquent humanistic defence of leisure-time activities as a source of intellectual refreshment; but her thunder has been stolen, her name forever muddied, and she retires defeated as soon as she has said her piece, leaving Wit firmly entwined in the embrace of her demonic counterpart Idleness. And here he was to be found, again and again, throughout the rest of the sixteenth century. Two more versions of the story of Wit and Science were staged in the 1560s and 70s (*The Marriage of Wit and Science* and Francis Merbury's *The Marriage Between Wit and Wisdom*), each of which replayed the scene where Wit gets saddled with a fool's cap in his sleep. In the early 1580s a version of the play was acted called *The Play of Plays and Pastimes*, which responded to Stephen Gosson's attack on the theatre by depicting Life lulled asleep by Honest Recreation herself – not by her vicious substitute – then entertained with Comedy when she wakes (Kinney 1974: 181-3). And Redford's play was reworked at least three more times in the following decade: once in *The Cobbler's Prophecy* (c. 1590), a comedy by the celebrated clown Robert Wilson, where the god Mars is lulled asleep by Venus until startled into action by a comic cobbler; once in Anthony Munday's *Sir Thomas More* (c. 1593), where More takes part in a

performance of *The Marriage Between Wit and Wisdom*; and once in the Inns of Court entertainment *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus*, whose entire plot is ultimately derived from Redford's. Shakespeare helped to revise *Sir Thomas More* for performance, perhaps in the early 1600s. It seems beyond the bounds of possibility that he should not have known the plot, at least, of *Wit and Science*, and its affiliation with the theatrical controversy. And read as another reworking of this plot, Bottom's transformation tells us a good deal about his creator's attitude to the theatre at this stage in his career.

Bottom the weaver is an actor – albeit a very bad one. His designation as one of the 'rude mechanicals' – the phrase Robin applies to them (3.2.9) – associates him with the standard insult levelled at actors and non-university playwrights by two of the so-called University Wits of the 1580s, Greene and Nashe, both of whom saw acting as a 'mechanical' art, a non-intellectual exercise well suited to the offspring of craftsmen and tradesmen who practised it. So when Puck invests Bottom with the head of an ass it seems no more than he deserves, as an upstart crow who plans to raise his presumptuous voice in the presence of royalty against all the principles of classical decorum.

Yet the weaver responds to his predicament with astonishing dignity. He refuses to be frightened by the insults levelled at him (he tells his fellow craftsmen that in accusing him of monstrosity they are merely exposing themselves as 'ass-heads' or fools, 3.1.111), and sings to keep up his courage. His song acts like that of a mermaid or Siren on Titania's senses; she becomes 'enamoured of his note' (3.1.131), much as audiences were said by the theatre-haters to be roused to lustful paroxysms by the melodic blandishments of the stage. Yet when she declares her love for him he remains both rational and scrupulously courteous. 'Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that', he tells her, and later denies her statement that he is 'as wise as he is beautiful' – he lays claim only to the pragmatic 'wit' he needs to 'get out of this wood' (3.1.135-42). This practical or mechanical intelligence manifests itself, too, in his philosophy: 'reason and love,' he says, 'keep little company together nowadays – the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends' (3.1.136-9). For him, the love that matters is the love that binds communities, the love between neighbours which he has clearly provoked among his own neighbours, the fellow craftsmen and actors who mourn his absence at the end of Act Four, just before he is miraculously restored to them. Bottom is a fool only in that he voices popular wisdom, fails to take advantage of Titania's infatuation for selfish ends, and refuses to modify his behaviour in the presence of power, as a sycophantic courtier would have done. His deportment to Titania's fairy servants is impeccable; and when Titania tells them to 'Tie up my love's tongue; bring him silently' (3.1.191), it is not an injunction to restrain the ribaldry of an unruly clown, as it would have been in a Redfordian moral interlude, nor yet an act of ritual humiliation, as it would have been in a play by the Elizabethan satirist Robert Wilson, but a means of subduing him to her desire – a

desire that is ultimately harmless, to herself, to him, and to their Elizabethan audience.

The harmlessness of the piece of supernatural theatre Bottom finds himself caught up in is strongly asserted by Puck in the following scene. When he describes the weaver's transformation to Oberon, Robin laughs at the unnecessary terror of Bottom's companions when faced with his metamorphosis: 'Their sense thus weak, lost with their fears thus strong, / Made senseless things begin to do them wrong' (3.2.27-8). Later, unreasoning terror is mentioned again by Theseus, whose analysis of the workings of 'strong imagination' includes the transformation of inanimate harmless objects by panic: 'in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear!' (5.1.18-22). Even the craftsmen are aware of the ease with which terror can be aroused by harmless things: they seek to defuse any fear that might be generated by their own theatrical performance by drawing attention to its theatricality, so that the lion in their play gives an elaborate and wholly unnecessary explanation of the principle of dramatic illusion to its courtly spectators. Both the craftsmen's very reasonable fear of Bottom, and their less reasonable fear that the ladies in their audience will fear them, are profoundly funny; and the implication is that the fear of the theatre evinced by its critics is not much less so.

Malice is simply absent from Robin's actions, as it is from those of the well-intentioned craftsmen. When Oberon rebukes him for administering the love-juice to the wrong lover, for instance, the goblin repeatedly insists that he 'mistook', although he is delighted by the outcome of his errors. Once his cruel but harmless 'sport' is over, it assumes the status of 'a dream and fruitless vision' (3.2.371) for the Athenian lovers who were its victims; and Titania's fleeting affair with Bottom – something mistaken on her part, not maliciously intended – also ends by being dismissed as 'the fierce vexation of a dream' (4.1.68). Like Titania and the lovers, audiences will leave the theatre without having been adversely affected by what they saw there; restored to what Robin calls 'True delight' (3.2.455) – responsible pleasure, something the theatre-haters don't seem able to imagine – in the things and people that are dear to them, they will return to waking life with nothing but an enhanced sense of its fragile beauty and comic unreasonableness. And having left the stage, they will be no more tempted to engage in any over-critical analysis of their 'most rare' theatrical 'vision' than they would to analyse a dream after a feast (4.1.202). If they sought to do so, they would show themselves to be asses, transformed to fools by the spectacle they have witnessed, just as those who take exception to satire transform themselves into satire's targets by their over-sensitive response to its gibes.

This, at least, is what Bottom implies when he wakes from the dramatic role of Titania's lover in Act 4 scene 1. 'I have had a most rare vision,' he says, and 'Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream' (4.1.202-4). But he couches this observation in the language of theology, adding a somewhat jumbled but

instantly recognizable version of Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians: 'The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was' (4.1.207-10). As we've seen, Robin Goodfellow and Dick Tarlton were not afraid to get themselves mixed up with theology, despite the bloody history of religious controversy throughout sixteenth-century Europe. At the bottom of Bottom's theatrical dream there may be a serious point about the working of the imagination at all levels of society. After all, real dreams could, Nashe tells us, be heaven-sent 'visions' containing genuine prophecies, even if the bulk of them were nothing but outlets for the superfluous matter engendered by the human digestive system (1972: 235). Prophecies could provoke social change, insurrection, maybe even revolution; visions could start religions or spark off heresies; that's why there was such careful legislation in England against men's claims to be visionaries or prophets throughout the Tudor period. Bottom awakes these controversial matters even as he dismisses them, just as Robin Goodfellow and his fairy companions evoke the demonic associations of drama even as they dismiss them. The magic of the theatre, and its status as the space where human dreams and nightmares can be realized as nowhere else, remain as potent at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as they were at the beginning. And it's partly thanks to Shakespeare's clever predecessors, with all the goblins, ghosts, and visions they invoked on stage and printed page, that this is so. The time has come to wake these spirits from their long sleep, set them loose once again, and listen carefully to what they have to tell us.

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