

The Cupid Element in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Abstract

Central to plot and theme development in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the ever-present figure of Cupid. This paper suggests that the current conception of Cupid as a one-dimensional Valentine icon has resulted in a simplification of the arguments presented within the performance text. As a result, Shakespeare's challenging exposition of the contradictions inherent to human sexual attraction contained within the play faces translation into a comfortable and less demanding performance poem on love's ability to harmonise with societal structures. Through assessing the play's employment of the Cupid myth within a layering of carnivalesque episodes this paper seeks to highlight the radical dialogue on human sexuality that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains.

A pragmatic calculation of family interest was the accepted viewpoint of the sixteenth century, and the one upon which the approach to marriage in real life was normally based. The

elite, however, were also subjected by the poets and playwrights to propaganda for an entirely antithetical ideal of romantic love, as expressed for example in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and plays. Until romanticism temporarily triumphed in the late eighteenth century, there was thus a clear conflict of values between the idealization of love by some poets, playwrights and the authors of romances on the one hand, and its rejection as a form of imprudent folly and even madness by all theologians, moralists, authors of manuals of conduct, and parents and adults in general. Everyone knew about it, some experienced it, but only a minority of young courtiers made it a way of life, and even they did not necessarily regard it as a suitable basis for life-long marriage.¹

The modern reader may consider Lawrence Stone's assessment of the sixteenth-century relationship between marriage and romance to have serious implications for Cupid: Venus's child is translated into nothing more than a bringer of distracting frenzy which needs to be quashed before entering into the serious business of marriage for family interest.² Mary Beth Rose supports this analysis of sixteenth-century matrimony and notes that 'marriage as a property-based arrangement had long been a traditional value' for the population of Renaissance England.³

1 See Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977; repr. London: Penguin, 1990), p. 128.

2 Ibid.

3 See Rose, Mary Beth, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 49.

Pre-marital romance is, therefore, rendered madness and, consequently, Cupid's arrows are deemed to be nothing more than a troublesome blight which should, if possible, be dodged.

The key problematic element found within this argument lies with popular culture's simplification of the identity of Cupid. The charming, plump, naked archer now associated with Valentine's Day has perhaps been the victim of Victorian marketing. The suggestion is that developments in the printing press in the mid-nineteenth century, coupled with the introduction of penny postage, led to an upsurge in the sending of Valentine's Day greetings; many of which would have been decorated with images of Cupid. Victorian developments of Valentine's Day festivities have, therefore, translated Cupid into a simple Valentine cherub and it is this version of the figure that has become embedded in our cultural consciousness. An investigation into the complexities of the Cupid figure, however, uncovers a contradictory and far richer cultural reference point.

Previous to being branded as a mischievous, if welcome, instigator of romance, Cupid was a Janus-like figure as menacing and unwelcome as he was charming. The curious denial or deletion of what moralists might term the less wholesome aspect of Cupid's identity is highlighted by the art historian Edward Lucie-Smith in his introduction to Bronzino's circa 1540-1545 painting entitled *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*:⁴

4 Bronzino, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (c.1540-1545). This painting can currently be viewed at the National Gallery, London.

This is the famous *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* by Bronzino. And I sometimes wonder what those people who lead school parties around the National Gallery actually have to say about this picture. What, what do they tell the kids? Here you have a female nude, Venus, who is about to be French-kissed by an adolescent who is in fact, if you know the legend, her son. So they are in the process of committing a little incest. Cupid's bottom is stuck out in the most provocative way, as if he is offering himself for a sexual act. But this is a picture which everybody is quite cool about. Nobody is bothered. They leave their five-year-old kids, or worse still, their twelve-and thirteen-year-old kids in front of it and, it's a masterpiece, dear.⁵

Cupid's erotic, subversive, devilish nature is, thus, commonly overlooked and, consequently, the works of art that incorporate this mythological figure are, to a greater or lesser degree, misinterpreted. Of interest is how this relates to interpretations of the Cupid figure in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Apposite here is Martin Wiggins's suggestion that Puck is something of a variation on the theme of Cupid:

⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, in *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilisation*, dir. by Chris Rodley, Dev Varma, and Kate Williams (III) (KCOH Entertainment: 1999).

The only equivalent to Cupid in any of his [Shakespeare's] comedies is Puck, the bungling sprite in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) who puts the love-juice on the wrong boy's eyes to produce another 'cross-wooing' and then enjoys the resultant complications; but unlike Cupid he has simply made a mistake in carrying out his master's more benevolent plan to square the play's love triangle.⁶

Wiggins's intimation that Puck is both like and unlike the Cupid depicted in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is correct: Puck's distributing of the magical love juice undoubtedly parallels Cupid's firing of those famous arrows of love. Unlike Cupid, however, Puck's instigating of love might be deemed error-ridden rather than random. This diversion from parallelism between the two related figures might intimate towards a post-Shakespearian simplification in understanding of the Cupid figure. The rather innocent Valentine cherub of modern times might have previously been regarded as being able to represent complex and contradictory aspects of human sexuality. This is to suggest that innocence and randomness may not be compatible in the spectrum of procreative and non-procreative human sexual activity. This in turn hints at the ability of Cupid to tear at the established social fabric; a reason why, as mentioned earlier, 'romance' tended to be excluded from the marriage equation during the Renaissance. Whilst propagating the apparently comforting notion that romance may strike at anytime, Cupid, then,

⁶ See Wiggins, Martin, *Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 59.

could also represent the possibility of falling into tragedy as a result of sexual interaction. Every one of the eight direct references to Cupid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, seems to oppose this theory of the duality of Cupid. Each renders Cupid a constant, unchanging figure whose identity is stable enough to allow its employment as an emblematic, or iconic, point of reference:⁷

HERMIA

My good Lysander,
I swear to thee by **Cupid's** strongest bow,
By his best arrow with the golden head,
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,
And by that fire which burned the Carthage queen
When the false Trojan under sail was seen;
By all the vows that ever men have broke-
In number more than ever women spoke-
In that same place thou hast appointed me
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee. (1.1.168-178)

⁷ Quotes are taken from Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). My emphasis.

HELENA

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,
And therefore is winged **Cupid** painted blind. (1.1.234-5)

OBERON

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all arm'd. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
But I might see young **Cupid's** fiery shaft
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passèd on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet marked I where the bolt of **Cupid** fell. (2.1.155-165)

OBERON

Flower of this purple dye,
Hit with **Cupid's** archery,
Sink in apple of his eye. (3.2.102-4)

PUCK

Cupid is a knavish lad,
Thus to make poor females mad. (3.3.28-9)

OBERON

Be as thou wast wont to be,
See as thou wast wont to see.
Dian's bud o'er **Cupid's** flower
Hath such force and blessed power. (70-73)

Cupid is, within the dialogue of the play, thus presented as the charmingly mischievous young, male archer figure that we are still familiar with today. (He 'is a knavish lad' as incontrovertibly as Iago 'is what he is'. Identity, here, is not negotiable.)⁸ The iconic understanding of Cupid as held by the dramatis personae of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, therefore, far separated from the multi-faceted innocent/sinful/son/lover/familial/erotic figure of Bronzino's painting. The Cupid-related Puck figure, however, is, in essence, a shape-changing devilish sprite. As Jan Kott proposes, 'Puck, the household Brownie, suddenly takes the form of the Evil one':⁹

Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire,
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn. (3.1.103-6)

8 'I am not what I am.' Spoken by Iago. *Othello*, 1.1.65.

9 See Kott, Jan, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, trans. by Boleslaw Taborski (London: Doubleday and Company, 1965; repr. London: Routledge, 1994), p.172.

Here Puck is categorically defined as a devilish master of metamorphosis who contrasts sharply with the one-dimensional Cupid referred to by Hermia, Helena, Oberon and, indeed, Puck himself. It should not be forgotten, however, that Puck, despite mistakenly anointing Lysander with the love juice and consequently causing considerable confusion, is ultimately a benevolent figure who follows Oberon's orders and thus drives the play towards comedy rather than tragedy. Apposite here is Mary Beth Rose's observation that 'sexuality ... presents itself as a paradox: the human need for sexual relationships could lead to the mindless disruption of society, but without fulfilment of this need, there would be no ordered society at all'.¹⁰ The mythological Janus-Cupid is associated with 'generative sexuality' in that, as the son of Mercury and Venus, he is tasked with the spreading of love. His complex and contradictory mythological background also, however, suggests associations with non-generative debauchery, recalling Rose's notions of 'sexual relationships' possibly leading to 'the mindless disruption of society'.¹¹ In Aristophanes's *The Birds*, for example, Eros (Cupid's parallel within Greek mythology) is described as being a son of Nyx, the primordial goddess of night:

In the infinite bosom of Erebus, Night with black wings first produced an egg without a seed. From it, in the course of the seasons, Eros was born--the desired, whose back sparkled with

¹⁰ See Rose, p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

golden wings, Eros like swift whirlwinds.¹²

Eros, whilst being far more contradictory than is suggested by the contemporary tendency to equate this figure with the twenty-first century conception of pleasure-driven eroticism, is, indeed, partially associated with essentially destructive aspects of sexual attraction. To put it simply, Eros instigates as much jealousy as he does wholesome pleasure, as much non-procreative, orgiastic sexual interaction as he does procreative, morally-justifiable, sexual interaction. In this regard, the connection with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is obvious and direct. The love-juice, or magic, as applied by the Cupid-related Puck figure, leads to a complex cocktail of physical attraction, unbridled lust, jealousy and, contrastingly and eventually, unity, marriage and social stability. The Cupid presence within the play, a fusing of Cupid as defined by the *dramatis personae* with the depiction of the Puck figure, is far more complex than the iconic Valentine cherub of popular culture today. Of interest is the extent to which cultural conditioning heightens and restricts interpretation amidst such a wide range of possibility. This can be further explained through reference to differing interpretations of the Titania/Bottom episode which is, importantly, instigated by Puck/Cupid.

The carnivalesque interaction between Titania and Bottom (or perhaps it would be more relevant to refer to this 'rude mechanical' as the

¹² See Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 693.

Ass), mirroring the duality of Cupid, projects a lust-driven, non-generative sexual relationship alongside a contrasting pre-marital wooing. Interaction between a carnival of release and reversal and a sharply contrasting carnival of utopian ideals permits the engendering of a dialogic analysis of societal structure and, consequently, a wide spectrum of interpretation.

The carnival of release and reversal begins with the transformation of the asexual Bottom into the potently sexual Ass. (Bottom is asexual in that his sexuality is negated firstly through his desire to play the role of Pyramus as well as the role of Thisbe, and also through his membership of the group of rude mechanicals who are essentially clowns. It should be noted that clowns, in the world of Shakespeare, with the undeniable exception of Touchstone, are distanced commentators on sex rather than sexually active beings.) To clarify, whilst it is tempting simply to associate the ass with stupidity, and therefore, an animalistic embodiment of Bottom's apparent lack of intelligence, Jan Kott's suggestion that Bottom's transformation, instigated by Puck/Cupid, results in a dramatic engendering of a sexual persona should not be overlooked:

But in this nightmarish summer night, the ass does not symbolize stupidity. Since antiquity and up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among

13 See Kott, pp. 182-3.

all the quadrupeds is supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus.¹³

The notion that Puck/Cupid is directing a somewhat distasteful sexual conquest, certain to be tragically humiliating for Titania, rather than merely creating a humorous 'beauty and the beast' interlude has often been supported in modern performances of the play. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Peter Brook's renowned 1970 production in which Titania appears to be profoundly drawn to an enormous phallus.¹⁴ More recent examples of an overt sexualising of the Titania/Bottom episode include a 1994 RSC production directed by Adrian Noble in which Bottom's bottom is seen pumping up and down within Titania's umbrella-shaped bedroom and his line 'Methought I had', often an innocent reference to donkey's ears, is, through the action of staring down into his trousers, translated into astonishment at remembering sudden growth in the length of his penis. In a 1999 RSC production directed by Michael Boyd, Titania's offer to provide Bottom with 'new nuts' is delivered so as to suggest 'new testicles' and, consequently imply that a post-coital replenishing is required before further sexual activity. (In the interests of maintaining balance it should be noted, however, that the Globe's 2002 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presented no suggestion whatsoever of Titania and Bottom engaging in sexual intercourse. This production was, however, informed by a parallel production of *The Golden Ass*, which, of course, contains

14 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dir. Peter Brook, RSC, 1970.

15 See Oswald, Peter, *The Golden Ass* (London: Oberon Books, 2002).

the erotic tale of Cupid and Psyche.)¹⁵

David Wiles, an advocate of the tendency to eroticise Bottom, suggests that Bottom's bird song, like his new identity, is profoundly sexual in nature.¹⁶ Wiles suggests that 'the birds in the first stanza are explicitly masculine, and implicitly phallic'.¹⁷ A close reading of this first stanza suggests that Wiles's opinion is not indefensible:

The ousel cock so black of hue,
 With orange-tawny bill;
The throstle with his note so true,
 The wren with little quill. (3.1.118-21)

The second stanza renders Bottom a 'sexually inadequate cuckoo' whilst simultaneously reasserting the sexual nature of the first stanza:¹⁸

The finch, the sparrow, and the lark,
 The plainsong cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
 And dares not answer 'Nay' - (3.3.123-126)

16 See Wiles, David, 'The Carnavalesque in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *Shakespeare and Carnival*, ed. by Ronald Knowles (London: Macmillan, 1998) pp. 61-82, pp. 69-70.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

18 *Ibid.* p.70.

If it is possible to suggest that Bottom's suggestive bird song is a musical introduction to a period of carnival of release and reversal within the surrounding carnival of the Athenian wood, (a carnival within a carnival paralleling the play-within-a-play performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*), then Puck/Cupid is here exercising his ability to engender and enjoy supra-societal, taboo-laden, orgiastic debauchery within the framework of temporary release. A further complication is added by Wiles's suggestion that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written to be performed in a carnival setting:

... although we encounter *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a text, it was historically part of an aristocratic carnival. It was written for a wedding, and part of the festive structure of the wedding night. The audience who saw the play in the public theatre in the months that followed became vicarious participants in an aristocratic festival from which they were physically excluded.¹⁹

The multitude of opportunities for interperformance comment on the human condition that stem from the placing of this debauched, taboo-laden sexual carnival within the carnival of the play which, in turn, might have been initially envisioned as being performed within

¹⁹ See Wiles, p. 67.

the moralistic carnival of matrimony may, however, be little more than the wishful thinking of overzealous academics. Gary Taylor's suggestion that 'it has often been thought that Shakespeare wrote the play for an aristocratic wedding, but there is no evidence to support this speculation', intimates that a degree of critical restraint would be appropriate when considering this multi-layering.²⁰

Undeniable, however, are the elements of carnival found within the performance text. Of key importance here are Bottom's transformation into the ass, as mentioned above, and the mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Both of these episodes can be positioned firmly within 'the essential carnival element in the organization of Shakespeare's drama'.²¹ The first, Bottom's transformation into an ass, is carnivalesque in that identity is freed or adjusted. Indeed, this 'masking' of the mechanical recalls the masked ball of *Much Ado About Nothing* where the element of disguise permits freedom of expression, which in turn leads to both unity and disunity.²² Unity is created as the mechanism of the masked ball allows participants to bypass social formalities and, therefore, bring lovers together at a heightened pace. Disunity is found in the fact that disguise allows for the communication of unwanted truths between parties — be this

20 See Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 311.

21 See Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p.275.

22 See *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.

communication intentional or unintentional. A similar duality of unity and disunity is found in the Titania/Bottom episode. Unity is, of course, found in the fact that the love-juice allows for a sudden and direct fusing of the couple. The roots of disunity, however, can be found in the blatant incompatibility between the queen and the ass. We sense the end of the relationship at its very beginning. Thus, the dichotomy of unity and disunity is presented as resting at the very heart of the carnivalesque.

Plato suggests that carnival allows humans to 'restore their way of life by sharing feasts with gods'.²³ Bottom, as Titania's lover, is clearly offered the opportunity to enjoy a luxurious feast alongside his admiring deity. Titania demands that her fairies:

Be kind and courteous to this gentleman [Bottom].
Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes.
Feed him with apricots and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;
The honeybags steal from the humble-bees,
And for the night tapers crop their waxen thighs
And light them at the fiery glow-worms' eyes
To have my love to bed, and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.

²³ See Plato, *The Laws*, 654: translation adapted from that of T. J Saunders in *The Laws* (London, Penguin, 1970), p. 86.

Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies. (3.1.156-166)

The pre-Lent feast of Christian, and, in particular, Catholic carnivals, is also recalled here. Bottom, like the four lovers in the Athenian wood, is granted a period of time with a new identity in a society in which rules and regulations are temporarily relaxed. The pertinent question here is: To what end? What is Oberon/Puck/Cupid attempting to achieve by instigating a moment of carnival? The primary answer to this question, as directed by the text, focuses on Oberon's personal satisfaction. He is merely creating an episode through which he can satisfactorily regain possession of her page, the Indian boy:

Having once this juice
I'll watch Titania when she is asleep,
And drop the liquor of it in her eyes.
The next thing then she waking looks upon-
Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
On meddling monkey, or on busy ape-
She shall pursue it with the soul of love.
And ere I take this charm from off her sight-
I can take it with another herb-
I'll make her render up her page to me. (2.1.176-85)

For Oberon, then, carnival provides a window of opportunity for

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self-serving deceit. The carnivalesque role-reversal of donkey to worshipped king and queen to deceived ass is to be used as a tool through which the authoritative instigator of carnival – in this instance Oberon – can reclaim property or possessions in the form of the Indian page. Apparent freedom, or carnival, granted by the king is, therefore, merely disguised control. Once again, the dichotomy of unity and disunity is evoked as apparent temporary parity is actually rooted in a firm social hierarchy. Carnival, of course, ultimately serves the elite controllers. This is highlighted by Titania's reaction to being forced into and through a period of carnival:

My Oberon, what visions have I seen!
Methought I was enamoured of an ass. (4.1.75-6)

How came these things to pass?
O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now! (4.1.77-8)

Coupled with an explicit comedy of realization is a tragic, and highly disturbing, disgust at the violation of free will that has taken place, and it should not be forgotten that the instigator of this violation is the Puck/Cupid figure. An unwanted lover has been forced upon Titania, recalling Egeus's attempt to force an unwanted husband/lover, Demetrius, on his daughter, Hermia. Here, then, the consequences of carnival reflect and oppose each other in the framework of symmetry

that governs so much of the structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Through the carnival provided by escape from Athens and entrance into the magical wood, Hermia is granted the right to marry her true love, Lysander, whilst, through the carnival framing Bottom's transformation, Titania is forced to accept a monstrous lover, the Ass. At the root of this structuring is a Janus-like Cupid instigating an interlocked web of socially-accepted sexual union occurring within the context of marriage alongside an anti-social sexual union – as defined by the play itself – which is positioned exterior to the world of matrimony. Puck/Cupid should not, therefore, be reduced to an innocent Valentine cherub.

In the context of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, then, the superimposition of the current, simplified conception of Cupid onto the complex and contradictory cultural and literary figure that Cupid can be can only result in a diluting of the content of the play. The result of such simplification is that this potentially dynamic, dangerous and challenging comedy becomes a toothless, conservative, audience-friendly missed opportunity.

A further influence to consider when analysing possible disparities in the interpretation of theatre resulting from cultural change is the playgoer's reception of the play itself. Andrew Gurr emphatically suggests

24 See Gurr, Andrew, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.1.

25 Ibid.

that architectural changes in theatre design from the 1500s to the present day have led to a transformation in the receptive qualities of the playgoer.²⁴ Gurr states that 'the strongest way of registering the essential difference between playgoing in Shakespeare's time and now is to register the etymological difference of an audience from a spectator'.²⁵ Gurr's argument is that 'modern playgoers are set up, by their physical and mental conditioning, to be solitary spectators, sitting comfortably in the dark watching a moving picture, eavesdroppers privileged by the camera's hidden eye.'²⁶ The modern playgoer, therefore, receives the play while he/she is, to all intents and purposes, alone. Gurr continues to suggest that 'early modern playgoers were audiences, people gathered as crowds, forming what they called assemblies, gatherings, or companies'.²⁷ If, as Gurr intimates, the playgoer used to be a member of a collective group of listeners, but has become a solitary viewer, and plays used to be more heard than seen, but are now more seen than heard (a theory perhaps supported, if not wholly consciously, by the recent profoundly visual direction of Shakespeare's plays by Yukio Ninagawa), the modern interpretation of the Puck/Cupid figure, stemming largely from visual stimuli, could be vastly different to the early modern, largely aural, interpretation of the same figure.

Interestingly, modern references to Cupid clearly focus on the visual above the aural, which perhaps suggests that this literary figure has, indeed, become little more than an iconic symbol of the possibility of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

the development of sudden and unforeseeable attraction between human beings. This is exemplified by the three extracts below:

1. In popular culture Cupid is frequently shown shooting his bow to inspire romantic love, often as an icon of Valentine's Day.²⁸

2. Our current image of Cupid as a winged cherub is primarily based on images from painters of the Renaissance. Though Cupid was often a boy in Roman myth, the images of winged, rosy-faced babies may be based more on a small group of winged infants who often accompanied Cupid called the AMORINI (or Amoretti; "the messengers of love").²⁹

3. God of Love, usually depicted as a winged male child with bow and arrow, as distinct from an unarmed Cherub or wingless putto.³⁰

It should be noted that each of these extracts is taken from the Internet and while there can no doubt that the websites referred to cannot be deemed wholly reliable as sources of information for academic research,

28 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cupid>.

29 See <http://www.lyberty.com/encyc/articles/cupid.html>.

30 See <http://www.answers.com/topic/cupid?nr=1&lsc=true>.

this form of media can, by definition, be used to analyse common public conceptions of well-known cultural figures. Of particular interest is the fact that each of these extracts clearly describes Cupid in terms of visual stimuli. This is to say that Cupid's appearance, rather than his behavioural traits, or literary and cultural roots, is paramount. This, in turn, hints at the possibility that Cupid has been subjected to a process of simplification. The complex and contradictory Janus-Cupid has been reduced to a quaint Valentine's Day 'badge', or icon, representing nothing more than the constant possibility of an unforeseen love affair. The Janus-Cupid challenges our understanding of human sexual attraction, highlighting the contradictory procreative and destructive aspects of the human sexual condition, whilst the simplified, Valentine Cupid is merely an immediately comprehensible tool providing little more than empty escapism. Is it, indeed, possible that, as Gurr suggests, the modern playgoer interprets theatre in visual terms and is, consequently, less well-armed to process aurally-received signals? If so, is it not also possible that the visual image of Cupid – and its rather simplistic connotations – could blanket the rich contradictions contained within the play's aural presentation of this figure?

To conclude, it is appropriate to consider Peter Brook's comment on forming interpretations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* :

People have often asked me "What is the theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?" There is only one answer to that question, the same as one would give regarding a cup. The quality of a cup is

its cupness. I say this by way of introduction, to show that if I lay so much stress on the dangers involved in trying to define the themes of *The Dream* it is because too many productions, too many attempts at visual interpretation are based on preconceived ideas, as if these had to be illustrated in some way. In my opinion we should first of all try to rediscover the play as a living thing; then we shall be able to analyse our discoveries. Once I have finished working on the play, I can begin to produce my theories.³¹

Of importance here is Brook's belief that 'preconceived ideas' could feasibly negate the opportunity 'to rediscover the play as a living thing'.³² This paper suggests that appreciation of the Cupid element of this play, an element which is central to the discussion on sexuality and sexual attraction broached by the text, is threatened by modern culture rendering Cupid little more than a Valentine's Day icon. A powerful preconceived idea, deeply embedded into our cultural consciousness is, thus, lessening the play's potential. If *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to be granted life, it is vital that this Valentine Cupid is reassessed and allowed to develop into the Janus-Cupid.

31 See Brook, Peter, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946-87* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 97.

32 Ibid.

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