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“Another Key” to Act Five of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

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Among the many choices facing an editor of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is whether to assign the Act Five speeches of Theseus’s Master of the Revels to Philostrate, as the Quartos do, or to Egeus, following the Folio. This may seem an insignificant decision: the lines themselves are not in dispute; the contending characters are minor figures; and between the two, there seems little reason to prefer Egeus, for the attendant lord whom Theseus calls his “usual manager of mirth” in Act Five ought to be the same courtier whom he asks in Act One to “Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth”—that is, Philostrate (5.1.35, 1.1.13).¹ Indeed, among modern editors, only Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, in the Oxford *Complete Works*, and Peter Holland, in the Oxford World’s Classics edition, attribute the lines to Egeus; all others appear to agree with Harold Brooks, editor of the New Arden edition, that the Folio’s replacement of Philostrate by Egeus “is a change Shakespeare cannot have wished for, though he might acquiesce in it as an expedient.”²

This is understandable, for no one has yet made the case for Egeus very persuasively. Editors who follow the Quarto generally dismiss the Folio’s line distribution as an awkward attempt to minimize actors, turning Philostrate into a non-speaking part or doubling him with the actor who plays Egeus. The Folio supporters counter the doubling explanation by arguing that one actor would have difficulty exiting

¹ All parenthetical citations refer to William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

² Harold F. Brooks, “Introduction,” *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by William Shakespeare (London: New Arden, 1979), xxxii.

as Philostrate in the play's opening scene and returning as Egeus only four lines later, as the script demands, and Peter Holland even claims that no doubling scheme would reduce the number of speaking parts by replacing Philostrate with Egeus. Instead of a casting rationale, Holland and others have argued for the necessity of representing Egeus in the scene of the play's comic resolution, perhaps as a father belatedly blessing his daughter's union, or standing apart from the festive pairs as a reminder of the severed relationships that are their cost, just as Antonio might distance himself from Bassanio and Portia at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*.³ These are imaginative suggestions, but they are staging recommendations in lieu of textual interpretations, stemming from the possibilities of theatrical blocking rather than from any lines in the Quarto or Folio text. Egeus need not speak Philostrate's lines to be present, happily or not, in the final scene (he could just as well be included among the other "attendant lords" who enter with Theseus and Hippolyta), nor do his lines in the Folio have any direct bearing on his attitude toward Hermia and Lysander's marriage—certainly not enough bearing to justify the incongruity of Theseus's call for his "usual manager of mirth" being answered by the man who has done his best to banish mirth from the play. These scholars neglect the important role the Folio's Egeus actually plays in Act Five, which has little to do with the Hermia-Lysander plot, resolved in the previous act, but has everything to do with the Theseus-Hippolyta plot, which has not yet achieved closure.

Egeus provides as great an obstacle to Theseus and Hippolyta's union as he does to the marriages of Hermia and Lysander and Helena and Demetrius. Although the shifting fortunes of the young lovers occupy much of the play's space and the audience's

³ Barbara Hodgdon, "Gaining a Father: the Role of Egeus in the Quarto and Folio," *Review of English Studies* 37 (1986): 534-42; Peter Holland, "Appendix," *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 266.

attention, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with the tension between Theseus and Hippolyta, who present the challenge that the play must resolve: how, in Theseus's metaphor, to shift to "another key" (1.1.18), from the violent mode in which he wooed Hippolyta with his sword to the joyous mood in which he hopes to wed her, from male aggression to mutual love, from—in generic terms—tragedy to comedy. A melancholy note prevails in the opening lines as the reluctant bride and eager groom squabble over the nature of time: while Theseus bemoans "how slow / This old moon wanes" that keeps him from his "nuptial hour," Hippolyta fears the rapid pace that will transform the moon into a companion weapon for Theseus's sword, "a silver bow," and force her into his bed (1.1.1-11).⁴ Theseus's solution to this discord is to order a festive performance in the new key: he dispatches Philostrate to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments" and calls for a wedding celebration "With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.12-20). But instead of a trumpet fanfare from the court, a sportive dance choreographed by Philostrate, or even a mild whoop of assent from Hippolyta, Theseus gets a performance in the old sword-key of masculine tyranny from a surprise stage manager, Egeus. The tragic situation he presents, straight out of *Romeo and Juliet*, of a daughter who defies her father's will in marriage and faces the threat of death, upsets the possibility of reaching harmony between Theseus and Hippolyta. She says nothing for the rest of the scene, and their prospects for concord must be deferred until the young lovers' conflict can be resolved. Egeus has spoiled the show.

⁴ Although Hippolyta's lines could accommodate a more enthusiastic reading than I have given, Philip C. McGuire diminishes that possibility in "Hippolyta's Silence and the Poet's Pen," *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 1-18, by comparing Theseus and Hippolyta's contrasting perceptions of time to Rosalind's observation in *As You Like It* that "time travels in divers paces with divers persons." Following Rosalind's model, Theseus's desire for time to speed up casts him as a young maid eagerly awaiting her marriage solemnities, whereas Hippolyta's sense of rapidly passing time resembles that of a thief going to the gallows, for whom time cannot move slowly enough. In this reading, dread, not excitement, must lie behind Hippolyta's speech.

When we next see the betrothed couple, in Act Four, their squabble has yet to cease and their revelry has yet to come. While Hippolyta extols the music of the hounds that bayed for her in Crete, Theseus boasts that the tune of his hounds will surpass any Hippolyta could have encountered. As in Act One, Theseus calls for a jubilant performance to heal the breach with his bride, but before the triumphal chords can sound, Egeus interrupts once again with his discordant drama. Spotting his daughter and her lover asleep on the ground, he calls for Theseus to enforce his will by law, and although Theseus overbears his will this time, Egeus has for the second time deferred the revelry that could reconcile Hippolyta to the duke: the “musical...discord” of the hounds is “set aside” so that the “gentle concord” of the young couples can be legally ratified (4.1.117, 182, 142).

By Theseus and Hippolyta’s third appearance, therefore, when Egeus or Philostrate’s disputed lines come at the start of Act Five, the audience might begin to suspect that Egeus has already displaced Philostrate as Master of the Revels. It is Egeus, not Philostrate, who stirs the Athenian youth to merriment, if inadvertently, by forcing them to run away to a love-tryst in the woods. And it is Egeus, not Philostrate, who supplies the performance that Theseus orders, for although it sounds the wrong key, it is a pageant nonetheless, complete with actors playing assigned parts. Just as Peter Quince introduces his *dramatis personae* to the court with a series of demonstrative adjectives and deferential phrases—“This man is Pyramus, if you would know; / This beauteous lady Thisbe is, certain” (5.1.128-29)—so Egeus, as self-appointed Prologue, twice presents his cast to Theseus and Hippolyta, first in Act One:

Stand forth Demetrius.—My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry [Hermia].—

Stand forth Lysander.—And, my gracious Duke,
This hath bewitched the bosom of my child” (1.1.24-27)

and again in Act Four:

My lord, this is my daughter here asleep,
And this Lysander; this Demetrius is;
This Helena, old Nedar’s Helena.
I wonder of their being here together (4.1.127-30).

By the second iteration, Egeus has lost his confident imperative mood and ability to cordon off Lysander and Demetrius into neatly contrasting parallel constructions; the rival lovers have slipped into the same line, where they nestle ambiguously between Hermia and Helena, leaving the disempowered father to wonder at their relationship. But he is Prologue still, and we might well see the young lovers’ drama as a play-within-the-play, ineptly directed by Egeus, which “Pyramus and Thisbe” must somehow overcome to bring the royal couple together.

Even after their wedding, at the start of Act Five, Hippolyta and Theseus are still disagreeing over whether the lovers’ dreams could be true, and their promised pomp remains deferred. Although the action of the play may seem to have concluded now that the young couples are sorted out and married (and Oberon and Titania’s relationship has been restored), the royal drama lacks resolution. The scene is the same as the play’s opening: Theseus and Hippolyta contest each other’s perceptions in court, with time to kill before the nuptial hour arrives. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare returns to the street skirmishes of the play’s opening scene at the start of Act Three to signal a generic shift: instead of the comic marriage plot that ensued from the first feud, murder and tragedy will flow from the second. The audience of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is prepared to see the reverse shift: scenic repetition with a difference will finally silence the sword note

and sound the long-awaited comic concord. When Theseus repeats his opening request for “the pert and nimble spirit of mirth” in his call for “our usual manager of mirth,” we can guess who will come forward. If Philostrate appears to offer an entertainment program, then the carefully developed sequence of Egeus disrupting Theseus’s promise of harmonious performance, be it the pomp of Act One or the hound music of Act Four, will never be resolved. Just as Theseus overrides Egeus’s proposal for the closure to his tragic drama in Act Four, so he must now override Egeus’s choice of genre itself in order to pave the way for the key change that Egeus has twice obstructed before. A disagreement with Philostrate over the proper performance before bedtime, as the Quarto assigns the lines, has less resonance with the previous four acts, whereas contesting Egeus’s mode of theatricality, as the Folio allows, brings the play’s generic development into focus. Once we recognize the role that Egeus plays in hindering Theseus and Hippolyta’s comic resolution, we can appreciate the importance of his speeches in Act Five.

Egeus bristles at the generic paradox posed by “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe” (1.2.11-12). Whereas Theseus responds to the oxymorons in the mechanicals’ playbill (“tedious brief,” “tragical mirth”) with discordant couplings of his own (“hot ice and wondrous strange black snow”), Egeus cannot speak this language; he must resolve the wondrous promise of paradox with an explanation of which parts of the play fall under which label: it is “tragical” because the hero kills himself, but generates “mirth” because the actors are incompetent (5.1.56-75). Even if we do not go so far as to endorse Cleanth Brooks’s claim that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, Shakespeare gives us ample evidence to suggest that

paradox is the language of love. From Juliet's epithets for Romeo ("Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!") to Cordelia's representation of her abundant love for Lear as "nothing," language must stretch beyond ordinary consistency to convey the "concord in discord" that is heterosexual affection. Egeus cannot accommodate this enigma; if "Pyramus and Thisbe" is to him "nothing, nothing in the world," then he can find no value in it, in contrast to Theseus, attuned to the need for concord in discord, who perceives a negative space where his relationship to Hippolyta could be worked out before bedtime (5.1.78).⁵

Hippolyta appears to agree with Egeus at first, arguing with Theseus yet again over whether to see the mechanicals' production, but during the course of "Pyramus and Thisbe," a remarkable transformation occurs. This second play-within-the-play is often read as a comically contained vision of the tragic world that might have arisen had the venture into the woods gone awry, with implications more for an interpreting audience offstage than for the court audience that mocks it.⁶ But this reading disregards the desire Theseus has expressed throughout the play to order a performance that will change the tone of his relationship with Hippolyta, which the mechanicals' can. Instead of the drama of a parentally-forbidden love affair interrupting the duke and duchess's courtship, as in Acts One and Four, the newlywed couple now interrupts the forbidden-affair drama with their own discreet flirtation. Although Hippolyta initially dismisses the production as "the silliest stuff that ever I heard," another source of disagreement with Theseus, she soon comes to sympathize with Theseus's opening lunar lament, paraphrasing his lines that

⁵ Even though the Folio gives all the rest of Philostrate's speeches to Egeus, it concurs with the Quarto in attributing the "nothing, nothing" speech to Philostrate, but I agree with Peter Holland that the Folio probably just failed to change the name when revising the other line attributions in Act Five (5.1.76n).

⁶⁶ See, for example, Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 236: "And it is a measure of their own limitation that none of the noble spectators can see any connection between the play they are watching and the one they are in."

opened the play: “I am weary of this moon. Would he would change” (5.1.209, 246). In the chief “tragical” scene, when Pyramus’s “out sword and wound” echoes Theseus’s opening acknowledgment of tragedy (“I wooed thee with my sword”), Hippolyta reverses her initial attitude: “Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man” (5.1.284-90). The stress of her main clause could fall on “pity” or “man,” either of which would be significant: that Hippolyta could experience the tragic emotion of pity, rather than comic scornful laughter, at such silly stuff, and furthermore, that instead of pitying the potentially “deflowered” woman, the most likely representation for her own impending experience, she pities the sword-wielding “man.” An actress might choose to toss off her line as a mock expression of sympathy (the OED notes that the weak curse “beshrew” is “often humorous or playful”), especially since she later hopes that Thisbe will not express much grief for “such a Pyramus,” but there should still be a note of surprise at her pivoting position. Even when Hippolyta dismisses the male lover, it is to hope that the woman’s passion will “be brief,” the same longing to truncate time that Theseus expresses in his call for entertainment to “wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bed-time” (5.1.33-34, 311). In her last line, Hippolyta finally achieves a unified perspective with her husband, the key change is resolved, and the tragic specter of Egeus is vanquished.

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