

Jean Dough

Professor Womack

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The Lovers' Verse: A Stylistic Analysis

Much of the verse in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is written in rhymed couplets. At one point in the dialogue between Lysander and Helena, however, the couplet form expands to a triplet, three rhymes in a row, before returning to couplets:

HELENA. Yet Hermia still loves you. Then be content.

LYSANDER. Content with Hermia? No! I do repent

The tedious minutes I with her have spent.

Not Hermia, but Helena I love.

Who will not change a raven for a dove? (2.2.110–14)

This variation in the form draws special attention to these rhyming words. The emphasis is enhanced because of the immediate repetition of the word “content” which makes the rhyme pair *content/repent* sound twice to our ears, as an end rhyme and as an internal rhyme.

Lysander insists that, far from being *content* with Hermia, he *repents* the time he wasted with her. Lysander means “repent” to be the opposite of Helena’s word “content,” for in his mind Hermia and Helena are opposites, respectively a “raven” and a “dove.” But the rhyme emphasizes the formal likeness between *content* and *repent*, suggesting that the two young women are not simple opposites either. The couplet following the triplet presents another overt opposition complicated by an underlying similarity. The antithesis of “raven” and “dove” presents a pair of stark opposites — one black, the other white — that are also undeniably alike, both are birds.

The pairing of *content/repent* and *raven/dove* are two small examples of a general strategy in the play in which apparent opposites — from Reason/Passion to Bottom/Titania — are yoked together to reveal their similarities.