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English 3306

23 April 2007

Stylistic Analysis of a Passage from A Midsummer Night's Dream

Shakespeare wrote much of the verse in A Midsummer Night's Dream 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 immediate repetition of the word “content” enhances the emphasis by making the rhyme pair content/repent sound twice to our ears, as an end rhyme and as an internal rhyme.

Lysander insists that, far from feeling content with Hermia, he repents the time he wasted with her. Lysander uses “repent” to mean 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 tends to emphasize the formal likeness between content and repent, suggesting that the two young women are not just simple opposites. 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 of raven/dove present two small examples of a general strategy in the play in which apparent opposites—from Reason/Passion to Bottom/Titania—get yoked together to reveal their similarities.