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A Midsummer Night's Dream: Relating Ethics to Mutuality

~ WILLIAM M. HAWLEY ~

ABSTRACT Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows ethical conflicts to be resolved relationally. Quarreling lovers divide Duke Theseus's Athenian court in advance of his own nuptial celebration, forcing the Duke to decide moral questions based on their ethical consequences. King Oberon's conflicted fairy world meddles in human affairs, adding to the ethical confusion. Athenian workmen vie for roles in a court performance that becomes both a theatrical travesty and a triumph of relational ethics owing to Bottom, the character most within relation itself. Paradoxically, the "dream" elevates relating per se to self-consciousness. Hegel's dialectical, Jean-Luc Nancy's transfiguring, and Martin Buber's relational perspectives take up Shakespeare's premise of treating ontology and ethics as facets of the same movement. Just as the play enacts Hegel's assertion that all (inevitable) alienation must be overcome, so it also shows Nancy's and Buber's symbolic consecration of ethical being as mutuality.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows ethical conflicts to be resolved relationally. Hegel's dialectical, Jean-Luc Nancy's transfiguring, and Martin Buber's relational perspectives on being as mutuality with the Other take up Shakespeare's premise of treating ethics and ontology as facets of the same movement. The self and the Other relate interdependently: the singular being becomes plural. There is no dramatic action outside of mutuality, which rises to the level of an ethical imperative. As a result, the moral commandment is modified by ethical consequences in the temporal realm. Paradoxically, the "dream" elevates relating per se to self-consciousness. Hegel, Buber, and Nancy help us to reconcile the play's correlated social, spiritual, and symbolic realms with mutuality.

The characters become united within relational ethics that transcends social hierarchies. In descending order of authority, these strata include, first, a fairy world divided between King Oberon and Queen Titania; second, politicized nuptials at court joining Theseus, Duke of Athens, with his betrothed, the conquered Hippolyta, Queen



of the Amazons; third, a (de)socialized patrician class with quarreling pairs of young lovers and a father (Egeus) who demands the obedience or death of his daughter (Hermia); and, fourth, a common arena in which Athenian workmen celebrate with extraordinary decency, however inappositely, their courtly audience's nuptials with a performance based on Ovid's tragic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. Eccentric language and a lack of requisite skills make their production both a theatrical travesty and a triumph of relational ethics owing to Bottom, the character most *within* relation itself. These strata are unified to the extent that diverse ethical foibles arising from lovers' conflicts cross hierarchical boundaries. In advocating on behalf of mutuality, Bottom interacts on every level to become Theseus's superior with respect to relational ethics.

Symbolic infidelity tests prospective marital unions so that possessiveness of the other melts in the spiritual glow of a newly realized ontology of plural being. Social relations obtain in nuptial celebrations as well as by apparently less sophisticated means. Bottom is unwittingly "translated" upon being fitted with an ass's head by Puck, Oberon's fairy assistant, as part of the King's plan to humiliate Titania.¹ As a conjoined man and beast, Bottom appears to be the comic inversion of mutuality, although he translates his experience into moral self-consciousness through his dialogic relations with others.

Oberon reduces love to the economics of exchange in his struggle with Titania over possession of a changeling. She refuses to part with the boy, the son of a devotee. Oberon wishes to retain the youth as one of his mischievous deputies. The King unscrupulously places his wife under his spell with the result that she is allied with Bottom in his manifestation as an ass. In her reverie, she is induced by her husband to relinquish the boy. The fairy rulers' ethical indiscretions go unchecked initially because of the partisan nature of their relations with mortals. Titania refuses to release Bottom from her embrace in her state of enchantment. Although Bottom willingly accedes to her wishes, their mutuality falls somewhere between consent and coercion. Still, relating as such remains the play's defining ontology. Oberon reconciles himself with Titania upon feeling a tincture of remorse over her doting on the translated Athenian workman. While Oberon keeps the changeling for himself, the fairy rulers' reunion is so harmonious as to render them surreptitious partners in the marriage celebrations at court. Shakespeare's dramatic action is reflected in Buber's aphorism, "In the beginning is relation," for ethics and ontology depend upon mutuality.² The social dimension of relational ethics confirms being as pluralized being(s).

Titania is restored to one relation by negating another. Once released from Oberon's spell, she recalls her interlude with such distaste as utterly to reject Bottom. The comic disjunction in their appearance has the effect of making us subtly complicit with her in equating Bottom's value with his asinine visage and, to be frank, his name. Having witnessed Bottom's translation, we may conclude tentatively that he is nothing but an ass. From Titania's perspective, he enters into what Buber calls an "*I-It*" relation in which one party lacks the sacred component of humanity *vis-à-vis* the other.³ When Bottom awakens from his transformation, he believes that he is still in rehearsal, his sojourn with Titania seeming to fade into the atemporal realm of fantasy: "Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream" (4.1.201–2). Notwithstanding his protestations of disbelief in the fortunate encounter, he regards his experience as being sufficiently real to warrant an ethical renewal. He resolves to memorialize the event in song, although prospects for an elevated paean are jeopardized by his syntax, which regularly yields such

discontinuities as obscene courage, gentle roaring, and “monstrous little” voices (1.2.43). Even so, his apparently disjointed prose is relational if not logical. His highly nuanced reaction to the “dream” instills in him an *ethos* of mutuality. Where he formerly wished to make every role his own, he now values relations without possessiveness: “Methought I was—and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had” (4.1.203–5). While Titania recalls their meeting as an abhorrent inconsequentiality, the lowly mortal interprets it as an expansive mutuality that “hath no bottom” (4.1.209). Neither his translated being, nor the episode per se, is other than relational even if one partner has retrospectively negated her participation in the encounter. Thanks to Bottom, the play remains within mutuality so long as he exists self-knowingly within relation.

Hippolyta’s appreciation for love’s power to transform relations outside the narrative of heroic conquest is not shared by Theseus, who is portrayed as an effective and genial political realist but no dreamer. A prize in Theseus’s martial exploits, Hippolyta becomes conscious of a shared relation with the disenfranchised lovers and even the impassioned workmen, which the Duke notes rather uncomprehendingly. Yet Theseus allows for mutuality even while denying that such relations obtain in assessing the lovers’ account of their reformation in the forest. Still, he dismisses their mutuality as simple derealization with his claim that the “lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1.7–8). It is true, as he states, that the lunatic sees things that do not exist. We call this psychosis. It is also true that lovers convert every quality of the beloved into a virtue. We call this partiality. It is strictly speaking untrue that a poet’s idea is an “airy nothing” given shape by quill and ink even though art may not imitate reality (5.1.16). We discuss such differences in literary theory. Theseus is wrong, however, to argue that the young lovers’ apprehension of joy is not related to an essential truth of mutuality. The joy that he cannot attribute to any agency is for the play the result of the quintessential interrelation Buber calls “*I-Thou*,” or Being as being dependent upon recognition by the other.⁴ The lovers’ elation is no less relational than Theseus’s impatience in awaiting his wedding night. Theseus rejects Hippolyta’s defense of the couples’ testimony, but the symbolism of penitent young lovers “fortunately met” in the forest convinces him to unify their distinct nuptials into one celebration (4.1.174). All negated social relations become in turn negated within mutuality.

With typically self-deprecating humor, Theseus acknowledges the effects of time’s slow passage on his desires. He is by his own admission time’s fool. But time joins with relation in Bottom’s absolute mutuality, a theoretical construct that is beyond Theseus, given his political and emotional distractions. Nevertheless, the Duke’s decision to pair the young lovers according to their wishes sanctions the concept of mutuality, “Three and three, / We’ll hold a feast in great solemnity” (4.1.181–82). Always adept at balancing outcomes, Theseus implicitly weighs the commandment prohibiting killing alongside Egeus’s moral imperative to honor the father (Egeus himself), a position backed by Athenian law. Theseus wisely overrules Egeus’s “will” because the father’s claim to determine Hermia’s marital prospects is demonstrated to be merely partial (4.1.176). Theseus’s reinterpretation of the law shows that morality is to be understood to exist within mutuality, with the result that both law and morality are transformed. The Duke has observed the ethical consequences of a moral decision by modifying Athenian law to accommodate the lovers’ choices. In view of his successful mediation of a civic dispute,

he acts within ethical bounds even if he fails to comprehend the higher standard of conscience attained by Bottom.

The young lovers become desocialized owing to jealousy and wayward desires. Helena would transfer the world entirely to Hermia's possession provided that she might keep Demetrius for herself. Yet the young lovers' divisive passions cannot conceal the mutuality underlying their conflict. This relation is apparent in the very structure of their balanced, alternating dialogue. Hermia's stated vexation with Demetrius, "The more I hate, the more he follows me," is echoed in Helena's lament: "The more I love, the more he hateth me" (1.1.198–99). They conclude that their dispute owes to Demetrius's lack of judgment. Helena's devotion strikes a sympathetic chord in Oberon, who intervenes on her behalf to discipline Demetrius as he would Titania. Still, the elements contributing to the success or failure of mutuality exist before Puck complicates relations by dispensing Oberon's magic potion. Hermia requests that Lysander maintain a distance appropriate to a "virtuous bachelor and a maid" as they sleep during their attempted flight from Athens (2.2.65). This seemingly quaint precaution is a formality they will learn to value given the chaos that ensues. The lovers' interaction threatens to become violent not only as a consequence of the punishments demanded by Egeus and Oberon but primarily for intrinsic reasons. Savagery lurks in Demetrius's warning that Helena quit his presence: "You do impeach your modesty too much" (2.1.214). Since Puck's charms promote desire, not barbarity, the latter is Demetrius's own contribution. The Athenian youths misconstrue the ethical substance of their bond until sanity (i.e., love) is restored. Unworthy desires are subdued but not before they jeopardize the integrity of Athenian society.

Although the differences among the young lovers sometimes elude Puck, they are distinctly characterized. Demetrius impetuously shifts his affections from Helena to Hermia, thereby earning the others' enmity. Yet the ostensibly more decent Lysander changes just as profoundly. Supernatural intercession does not excuse the lovers' ethical lapses, which cannot be attributed to magic. No mystical charm provokes Helena to debase herself before Demetrius, "Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me" (2.1.205). Her passivity is scarcely more attractive than Demetrius's inconstancy. Lysander's plain-spoken affection for the willful Hermia affords him no defense against a potion that inspires him to pursue Helena beyond all reasonable bounds of restraint. Their desires become misdirected, making their relations ripe for negation. Indeed, negation is demanded. Consequently, the characters are defined less by customary social roles than by the relations circumscribing them. Puck does not change their morals. Rather, he redirects the attraction felt by each for the other. Lysander insults Demetrius as being "spotted and inconstant," but the elixir Puck administers merely instills a longing for love (1.1.110). The potion contains no formula forcing Lysander to employ sophistical justifications for leaving Hermia in favor of Helena.

Buber describes mutuality as a temporal bond authenticating human values: "Men's relations with their true *Thou*, the radial lines that proceed from all the points of the *I* to the Centre, form a circle."⁵ The image recalls Hegel's analysis of self-knowing as the dialectical movement of a "circle that returns into itself" in its "consummation as *self-conscious Spirit*."⁶ The play coheres at first in the relation *qua* relation, not in the characters' ethics per se, for the latter to begin with are determined provisionally. Meaningful relations develop in so-called dreams that symbolize shifts in consciousness.

Titania, who recalls perfectly her interlude with Bottom translated into an ass, much to her regret, resolves to reunite herself immediately with Oberon. Bottom's remembrance is somewhat opaque, preserving Titania's dignity while indicating the mutability of relational ethics. Hermia's dream grants her the gift of premonition. Still half-asleep, she implicitly casts Lysander in the role of the primordial betrayer: "Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best / To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!" (2.2.151–52). Her attribution of satanic evil to Demetrius is quite misplaced, for the offender she seeks is Lysander himself, who has departed to woo Helena. Hermia's divinations, in contrast with Helena's attitude of resignation, strain the bonds of relation between the two young women as effectively as the young men's amorous peregrinations. However, the lovers' negation of mutuality only promotes the development of deeper relational bonds.

The negation of ethical relations bores into the play's "centre" like the moon Hermia describes passing errantly through the earth's core (3.2.54). Her metaphysical image for the scant likelihood that Lysander would leave her has already become actualized. Mutuality reoccupies the play's center in its dialectic with supposed dreams that complicate the characters' understanding of their proper relation to others. Although Bottom flourishes upon evaluating his "dream," the young lovers persist in testing mutuality at the breaking point. Helena spurns Demetrius after her exhausting and desperate search for him. Lysander pursues alliances with both Hermia and Helena before returning to Hermia. Demetrius seeks alliances with both Helena and Hermia before being restored to Helena. Their perambulations may seem as random as Puck's impetuous and irresponsible acts. Yet Puck misleads a closed set of participants, while Bottom's relational imagination is potentially unbounded in its influence. Relations between the young women are negated to such an extent that the harshest insults obtain between them, paralleling the young men's ineffectual swordplay. These extremes of negation ensure that the lovers' mutuality retains its utmost ethical dynamism.

Nascent moral relations restrain the lovers' unethical acquisitiveness. Helena notes the paradox of being most herself in self-abnegation by calling Demetrius, "Mine own, and not mine own" (4.1.189). A tension is expressed by the pause, or caesura, balancing the phrases in her wise observation that assigns an equally positive and negative value to her reformed relation with Demetrius. The brief silence affirms symbolically her growing consciousness of self as involving mutuality. The other is no longer a commodity to be exchanged because no ownership obtains in being recognized by the other. While the lovers do not resolve all of the ethical dilemmas raised by the play's economic, political, and social conflicts, their renewed vows extend relational ethics within the world of the play as well as to audiences down to our own day.

Were it not for their trials in the Athenian forest, the young lovers would seem indistinguishable, apart from a few physical differences and the shifting rationales they offer for their preferences in a mate. Tensions arise within their divergent relations: Demetrius becomes threatening, Helena fawning, Lysander aloof, and Hermia "fierce" (3.2.325). The lovers learn to subordinate their differences to their common goal of entering into alliances given spiritual value by relational ethics. Now chastened, they strive to unite morals and ardor in equal measure. Demetrius attributes his conversion to an unknown higher power. He speaks for his compatriots in promising to direct his "natural" impulses toward his beloved (4.1.171).

The workmen exceed the lovers in developing relational ethics because they have not been consumed by desire. The paradox of the play-within-the-play is that the workmen are most in relation *qua* relation while inhabiting the roles they play. No missed cue, cutting remark, or shifting narrative can dislodge their sense of identity with their parts. Their translation of plural being through their interaction is perfect. Compensating for their lack of professional skill is their deep appreciation for the solemnity of the occasion, a sobriety temporarily misplaced by the courtiers in the hilarity surrounding the performance. The workers pay a price for their ethical investment. Yet following Quince's missteps in delivering the prologue, their fears of self-preservation evaporate owing to their relational ties. Their unstinting devotion to their craft should serve as a reminder to the lovers of their obligations toward one another. Fissures in the workmen's conception of "A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe, very tragical mirth" are repaired by their identification with the symbolism informing the event (5.1.56–57). Only within a real if dreamlike sense of security would a character break off the action to inquire how the play might be made more to the audience's liking, as Bottom does in asking whether the court would prefer the players to conclude with an epilogue or a dance. Bottom occupies the dream's (non)border between imagination and discursive reason where compassion is instituted as social, economic, political, and artistic mutuality. Together with his fellow actors, Bottom observes high ethical standards while creating an experience of dialectical relations through his interaction with the audience.

The workmen's performance releases any lingering pre-nuptial tensions over relational failures at court. The young men reward their benefactors by jeering at them as perceived inferiors. However, the courtiers' judgment of others reflects back on them simultaneously. The young women gain in our estimation by withholding any criticism. Theseus sees no harm in the court's rude critique because, for him, the performance is merely a diversion from reality. The connection between the young lovers' extreme emotions and those of Pyramus and Thisbe cannot be obscured by Theseus's disingenuous praise and witty barbs, "This passion, and the death of a dear friend, would go near to make a man look sad" (5.1.272–73). The workmen negate such criticism in inverse proportion to the courtly audience's level of self-knowledge. For us, the performers and the onstage audience are two sides of the same coin. The performers lack style but know how to relate ethically, while those in attendance have style but lack a full understanding of relational ethics.

Differences in degrees of ethical awareness distinguish Hippolyta from Theseus, making their union a work in progress befitting a play about unfolding mutuality. Unlike Theseus, she finds Bottom's portrayal of Pyramus to be effective, "Beshrew my heart, but I pity the man" (5.1.274). The distinction between Hippolyta and Theseus does not concern feelings versus thought but rather a relative depth of ethical analysis. Bottom's creation of Pyramus may be laughable by professional standards, but that is not the bar by which we judge him, as Hippolyta concedes. Bottom and Flute convey the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe adequately, given the courtly audiences' developing ethical consciousness. Hippolyta's deeper moral perspective aligns her more closely with us, while Theseus falls short of her by attending to the formal outlines of ethical relations. Ultimately, Shakespeare confirms the mutual dependency of ontology and ethics in the theatrical interplay between the workmen and the play's broader audience.

The writings of Hegel, Buber, and Nancy encourage us to see the play's synthesis of ethics and ontology in terms of spiritual fulfillment. As Hegel might remark of the play's action, our inevitable alienation from the Other must be overcome by Spirit. Puck is a facilitator and Bottom the foremost self-knowing agent of this change. For Hegel, ethics achieves fruition in the process of mutual self-recognition, "Ethics are the completion of the objective Spirit."⁷ We see such unity emerge in the mutuality surrounding the lovers' nuptials. In Hegel's dialectic, customary ethics must assume a new form as "universal self-consciousness."⁸ Hegel's absolute Spirit is the culmination of historical, artistic, and religious processes in a self-knowing subject such that the concept and substance of self-reflexive Spirit relate in identity. Shakespeare has ethics and ontology relate provisionally in less than fully self-knowing subjects. Yet given the development of complete self-consciousness in the play's broader audience, Shakespeare achieves an Hegelian synthesis of Spirit in the performance as a whole. Buber and Nancy prefer to treat synthesis as a concert of harmonious elements rather than as a resolution of conflict, although they assess discordant forces. Nancy takes a somewhat different position from Buber regarding Hegel's dialectical development of Spirit. Nancy dismisses preemptively any notion of a separation between morals and plural being on the grounds that we are always among others. Buber holds that we may elect foolishly to turn away from relations with the eternal *Thou*. Still, for all of these thinkers, moral laws cannot exist apart from temporal relations in the final analysis.

Synthesis obtains for Hegel in the certainty of Spirit that knows itself as Spirit. Nancy discounts this dialectic to the extent that, as he sees it, Hegel's immanent Spirit preexists existence in its temporal development. Nancy is wrong, I believe, to locate Hegel's Spirit outside of history, for Hegel holds that consciousness of true being arises in temporal relations. Nancy's minor objection to Hegel is that mutuality can exist without relentless negation even though suffering and self-denial are prerequisites of synthesis. Nevertheless, Hegel's dialectic retains its core spiritual significance for Nancy and Buber because Being contains the Other in any *I-Thou* relation. In the play, the lovers reach no final consensus in evaluating their development, although they know that their relations have changed radically. Bottom may be unsure of the facts surrounding his encounter with Titania, but his firm grasp on mutuality is based on his assessment of the entirety of his experiences. Our understanding of Hegel's dialectical movement, Nancy's plural being, and Buber's *I-Thou* relation permits us to treat the emergence of self-consciousness in the performance of Shakespeare's play as a synthesis of its constituent parts. Consequently, the play achieves aesthetic unity as an outcome of our resolving all lingering ethical inequalities.

Relations address the characters if the characters delay in addressing relations. This relational imperative situates the play irrevocably on spiritual terrain. The characters' ethical confusion merely postpones the realization of a spiritual command. Evidence of a divine edict surfaces despite Bottom's garbled translation: "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!" (4.1.205–7). The play's evocation of *1 Corinthians* addresses mutuality on three levels. First, Bottom is absolved of his verbal errors because perfect diction means nothing to divine Spirit. Shakespeare makes good use of this allowance in his creation of Bottom. Second, purely formal disagreements are set aside in the characters' forgiveness of the others' ethical lapses. Third, those assembled must be

joined in mutuality. Bottom expresses this overriding call for unity in advance of the workmen's performance. His biblical allusion should remind us to leaven our criticisms with grace. By expanding upon the latter two principles, Hegel, Buber, and Nancy assist us in understanding the development of spiritual relations in Shakespeare's play.

As Hegel observes, Spirit must reconcile "its *self-consciousness* with its *consciousness*."⁹ Hegel could have been critiquing Theseus's initial ruling on Hermia's case—death, marriage to Demetrius, or life in a convent—when he faults "obedience to laws which are *merely* laws and not at the same time *commandments*" of divine origin.¹⁰ Nancy adopts Hegel's position by treating plural being as a moral imperative given the evils that arise from denying mutuality. As well, Buber attaches obligations to the sacred *I-Thou* relation, while he also acknowledges that to do one's duty requires uncommon inspiration. We may call to *Thou* without being explicitly commanded, or if commanded we may not hear *Thou*. Buber captures the delicate evanescence of true relations that struggle to survive human conflicts. Our fallen sense of reality is for Buber a selfish illusion negated by moments of epiphany: "That which is *is*, and nothing more."¹¹ This elevated moral-ontological perspective epitomizes Bottom's philosophy in performance. Shakespearean ethics is tested over time within relations that appear to consciousness to be as insubstantial as a dream. Yet the spiritual content enriching self-conscious reflection gives Shakespearean mutuality its substance and actuality.

We recall that Quince ran horrified from Bottom upon seeing him translated into an ass. Quince's flight suggests that, on Shakespeare's view, some relations may linger in negation. Buber's observation that damaged personalities reject mutuality raises doubts about whether Shakespeare's characters achieve reconciliation as a whole. In all probability, Buber would hold that Egeus becomes "shut" by standing apart from the nuptial festivities.¹² Hermia's father falls silent for the rest of the play upon hearing Theseus's verdict against him as if to acknowledge that his interests as a domineering parent must yield to the bonds formed between young lovers. Yet even if it is the case that Egeus refuses to accept the new order, the play subsumes his negation of relations within the synthesis of spirit as we perceive it.

Hegel, Buber, and Nancy offer different insights into how symbols might function in the play. On Hegel's view, symbolic art refers mainly to pre-classical works in which the Idea has failed to realize its objective form. Let us be clear: Shakespeare's play is not marred by the ambiguities of abstraction. However, the symbol occupies one stage in the development of Hegelian Spirit insofar as it is sustained by art, philosophy, and religion. Buber and Nancy refine Hegel's conception by viewing the symbol as a purifying bond that negates the meanness of our finite existence. The social and spiritual conflicts that comprise the play's "dream" are joined symbolically in ethical relations that extend to Puck's epilogue. Puck uses Theseus's reductive conception of art against him by stating that he and his fellow actors deserve the audience's approval if they are indeed mere "shadows" incapable of causing offense, as the Duke holds (5.1.401). With its applause, the audience grants a symbolic "pardon" renewing the compact of mutuality between actor and audience, denied by Theseus, while amending future theatrical practices for the better (5.1.408). Puck actualizes plural being by soliciting the audience's participation in a profound symbolic gesture.

By failing to observe the indicated pauses in his recitation of the prologue, Quince transforms a *pro forma* apology for the workmen's inadequacies into a misstated desire to

offend the audience: "All for your delight, / We are not here. That you should here repent you, / The actors are at hand" (5.1.114–16). Given its comic rejoinders, the audience understands Quince's intended meaning: "Our true intent is all for your delight. We are not here that you should here repent you. The actors are at hand." Lysander compares Quince's syntactical blunders to mishandling an unruly colt. Quince is wrongly assumed by those assembled to epitomize a failure of governance emblematic of the untutored class to which the workmen belong. The company is ridiculed thereafter for confounding true meanings. The courtly audience takes Quince's misplaced pauses as symbolic of a reversal of order portending ethical violations of the very same nature that the young lovers have committed in the forest. The courtiers understand meanings based on syntactical order but not the meaning of their relations with plural being.

Shakespeare actualizes spiritual relations in meaningful symbols as part of the theatrical event. Of course, all true artistic expressions involve spiritual relations, but the play's dialectic gives objective form to the realization of moral aspirations. Buber and Nancy alert us to see the play as the unfolding of such symbolic occasions. Buber sets the divine *Thou* beyond the time and space of nature but within the temporality of Spirit as history, lending all true relations an aspect of divinity. Brute realities attenuate our meaningful relation with *Thou*, which helps to explain Theseus's ethical limitations. On Nancy's view, time is contained in the moral relations among plural beings. He blames failures of relational being on deficiencies in symbolic thinking, "Society gives itself its representation in the guise of symbolism."¹³ If representation divides plural beings, the symbol transfigures our finite existence into mutuality through imaginative "(re)presentation."¹⁴ Nancy's redefinition of mutuality suggests that we see symbols as relations, not relations as symbols.

Nancy's treatment of presentational symbols as pluralized being bears crucially on the play, which accentuates relation at every important turn. The play's essential action resides in negating the non-presence of representation via symbolic relations. The premise of the onstage audience's enjoyment of the play-within-the-play is that the workmen have an inverse association with art. Theseus views the performance not as art but, rather, as an outpouring of civic duty, the ethics of which he approves heartily. He is correct about the ethics but wrong on the symbolic level. He fails to understand the court performance as a self-conscious narrative about relational Being. When Bottom, playing Pyramus, curses Wall for concealing Thisbe, his imprecation does not extend to Snout, the actor. Theseus facetiously takes Bottom's condemnation of Snout's "stones" literally: "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again" (5.1.178, 179). By correcting the Duke immediately, "No, in truth sir, he should not," Bottom establishes an equivalency between himself and Theseus on a conceptual issue concerning the interpretation of a theatrical symbol (5.1.180). Bottom is wrong to take Theseus's jocular observation seriously, but the Duke errs in making light of relations that have bedeviled him over the course of the play. Far from interrupting the dramatic action, Bottom instantiates relation *qua* relation in the performance itself.

While Theseus scarcely requires edification as to the play's narrative or the mechanics of stage management, he cannot understand the workmen's performance as a triumph of relational ethics. The Duke's constant, mistaken theme is to disabuse others, notably Hippolyta and Bottom, of their perceived fantasies in favor of reality as he understands it. Nevertheless, we may be lulled into aligning ourselves with the Duke and his counterparts by finding only broad humor in the workmen's stagecraft. Each gaffe

committed by the troupe may confirm our suspicion that the performance is simply a theatrical charade. But in thinking so we will overlook Bottom's appeal to mutuality, although the weaver would never express his position in purely philosophical terms. Demetrius joins with Theseus in suggesting that Wall, as one of three surviving characters, might serve a useful purpose in burying the lovers. Leaping relationally into the fray once again, Bottom deflects their cutting remarks with a symbolic interpretation, "No, I assure you, the wall is down that parted their fathers" (5.1.332–33). No doubt, Bottom refers to the families' belated reconciliation in Ovid's tale, although it may be that a pointed suggestion is aimed as well at Egeus, who takes the part of Philostrate, Master of the Revels, in the bad Folio version of the play. Nevertheless, Bottom is thoroughly engaged on multiple levels of interpretation vital to the play. Furthermore, he extends his understanding of symbolic relations to his interaction with the audience.

The play treats mutuality as an alternative to the self-imposed edict that leads Pyramus to commit suicide over his mistaken impression of Thisbe's demise. In Ovid's tale, Thisbe leaves behind a request that the lovers be interred together for eternity before taking her own life alongside Pyramus. Shakespeare transforms her intimation of mutuality into an idea governing his entire play. The play's relational ethics and Nancy's ontology are "both an *ethos* and a *praxis*, identically."¹⁵ Nancy illuminates the play for us by holding that ethical relations obtain in the symbol's coexistence with plural being.

Individual creativity is recognized, not suppressed, by relational ethics. Theseus seems to argue on behalf of tolerance for the workmen, although his admirable forbearance comes at the cost of devaluing excellence in performance: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (5.1.205–6). He equates the workmen's efforts with those of panic-stricken state emissaries who "shiver and look pale" in his presence before bungling their introductions (5.1.95). In playing Moonshine, Starveling is buffeted by criticism to such an extent that Hippolyta expresses openly her desire that he exit the stage. He is thrown off his verse but holds his ground resolutely to describe his function in prose, "All that I have to say is to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon, I the man i'th'moon, this thorn bush my thorn bush, and this dog my dog" (5.1.242–44). He defends the symbolism marking his performance by holding fast to relation. Flute's Thisbe remains fully in character until she ends her life on a note of self-conscious leave-taking, "And farewell, friends. / Thus Thisbe ends— / Adieu, adieu, adieu!" (5.1.327–29). Shakespeare's vision of mutuality in performance admits of variations in the actors' creative relations.

For Shakespeare, ethics and ontology become mutually dependent through social, spiritual, and symbolic associations. These relations may be self-evident to some degree, but self-consciousness demands a differentiation of self into selves that is resolved in the movement toward identity within the absolute Idea. Relations are partly symbolic because, on Nancy's slight overstatement, the symbol is our "access to the inaccessible" co-originality of being(s).¹⁶ Our self-knowing is at once social, spiritual, and symbolic within the dialectic of mutual recognition. Nancy's suggestion that we bracket representational poetics helps us to grasp the consecration of mutuality by Oberon and Titania as they cast "field-dew" upon the stage to bless the resolution of alienation (5.1.393).

Buber and Nancy follow Hegel in rejecting ethics as eudaemonism because a feeling of well-being may not correspond to the good act. On their point, Theseus is the

embodiment of a benign form of self-satisfaction that misunderstands *I-Thou* relations. The Duke still has much to learn from his servant, Bottom. No partial perspective may be spared negation if, on Hegel's view, the self achieves "realization only in the being of other people."¹⁷ The self-interested subject is negated by another self, allowing ethical consciousness to emerge in an objective relation. This relation is negated in turn to bring about moral self-consciousness. Yet the subject becomes actual with its "return into self-consciousness."¹⁸ Buber and Nancy accept this crucial Hegelian moment as relating, recognized and acknowledged as such. Owing to the work of these philosophers, we can allow that the workmen know themselves to be relating *qua* relating in performance.

Hegel's absolute Idea unifies ethics and being within "*comprehensive knowing*."¹⁹ In light of Hegel's dialectic, we understand Hippolyta's perception of the relational ethics obtaining in the young lovers' "minds transfigured so together" (5.1.24). Buber holds that sublime human relations have a "symbolical character."²⁰ Symbolic occasions—the "dream," the workmen's performance, the audience's applause—extend social relations to the development of spirit in mutuality. The symbols that engender spiritual relations are themselves engendered by relational ethics through our enduring mutuality.

NOTES

1. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Robert A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.1.98. Subsequent citations refer to this edition.
2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 18.
3. Buber, *I and Thou*, 3.
4. Buber, *I and Thou*, 8.
5. Buber, *I and Thou*, 115.
6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 488.
7. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (New York: Continuum, 1990), 250.
8. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 471.
9. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 486.
10. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 260.
11. Buber, *I and Thou*, 112.
12. Martin Buber, *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary*, ed. Rob Anderson and Kenneth N. Cissna (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 55.
13. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," in *Being Singular Plural*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 51.
14. Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 58.
15. Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 65.
16. Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 80.
17. Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, 242.
18. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 488.
19. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 485.
20. Martin Buber, *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902–1965*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 55.