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Marriage as Philosophy

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Are You Thinking About Marriage?

‘There is something ridiculous about a married philosopher.’

Kathleen Nott, ‘Is Rationalism Sterile?’

Writing about marriage wasn’t my idea – someone eligible proposed it to me and I said yes. It wasn’t long afterwards, however, that I started fretting over the wisdom of my decision. Is marriage really a suitable subject to get myself tied up with? Can it truly sustain my interest over a long engagement? And hasn’t it been around so long anyway that it’s already been done to death? Certainly, marriage is something you’re supposed to *do* unto death. Maybe my cold feet were a sign of this; a sign that I feared losing myself in marriage, or feared getting buried in it. Yet the more time I spent thinking about marriage, the more wedded to the idea I became. Okay, okay, I hear you . . . I won’t keep on making these marital puns, *I do* (ahem) recognize they’re annoying – although the fact that marital puns should offer themselves up this readily is also one of the curiosities *about* marriage. Marriage is so fundamental to shaping our ideas about what it means to get attached that one often finds it invoked when thinking about all manner of other attachments as well.

All manner of attachments besides marriage itself, that is, which seems to be much harder to think about. Since committing (sorry) to this project, I’ve even found that raising marriage as a topic of consideration in polite company tends to provoke a wide range of

emoji-type facial reactions, and often a few expletives, but hardly any interesting reflections. War may be less contentious. And yet writing about marriage not only isn't hard to find, it's a veritable industry; one that, from Mills & Boon to self-help, fills countless bookshelves and endless column inches. Nor has there been any shortage of critics ready and willing to make vociferous cases for or against marriage. But since most of us descend from a history of marriages made or unmade, and most of us get married or attend, when invited, the weddings of others, we do seem to take marriage, as a concept, for granted. Whatever it is we think about it, we already know what we think. That, or we just don't think about it at all.

In my own case, for example, before getting married, I only ever questioned *who* I would marry not *if* I would marry. I knew and cared little that there were reasons to distrust an institution responsible for perpetrating and perpetuating a surfeit of historical abuses. Marriage was what I wanted. Not that it felt like a want exactly. Neither marrying nor having children felt like a want or even a need at first. If anything, these seemed more like necessary developments: if not this, if not marriage and children, then what? It's as though I saw marriage, a bit like death, as something coming for me, not I for it.

Besides, I was raised on a literature comprised almost entirely of marriage plots, and in a world that was, so far as I knew, full of happily married people. I had no call, therefore, to question the institution in the way children of divorced parents do. Children like my husband, who was much more wary of the contract than I. Nor was it clear to him, since we'd been living together for years beforehand, what possible difference, if any, marrying could make. We knew we were in love, he said, so what did we need marriage for? Wouldn't marriage imply that we didn't quite trust our love to sustain us? Wouldn't marriage even insinuate that we *weren't* really in love? Many a romantic has said the same. It's an argument that's created real headaches, in fact, for those who wish to see love and marriage as wedded terms.

Yet, once upon quite another time, the argument that love is

incompatible with marriage held water for altogether different reasons. Before romance claimed its rightful ownership over marriage (which was the winning argument, according to the historian Stephanie Coontz, by the end of the eighteenth century), if you fell in love, not only was that *not* a good reason to get married, it was a sign that you probably shouldn't. Marriage was a matter of convenience – convenient for your family and the wider community. Love was the whim of individuals who had lost all reason in the throes of their passions. Love was selfish, individualist, insubordinate. Marriage, meanwhile, as the foremost instrument of social reproduction, was too important to be left to lovers whose unruliness could only threaten it. So, if you wanted to marry someone with whom you'd fallen in love, you'd better make it look like a marriage of convenience.

Making their way through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, were new ideas about what's sacred. Where love once threatened the sanctity of marriage, now marriage was what threatened the sanctity of love. And yet love, by virtue of now *being* sacred, had become the only possible justification *for* marriage. So if you want a marriage of convenience today, you'd best make it look as though you're in love.

In early modern literature (by which I mostly mean Shakespeare) we already meet the insurrectionary force of modern love and its ideological takeover of marriage. The rise of the love match had its way paved by religious reformations, and specifically by the new Protestant emphasis on the importance of companionability and consent, and the subsequent effort to recapture civic duty by turning marriage, in the mid-sixteenth century, into one of the sacraments. This was under the auspices of a Church whose familiar wedding ceremony has barely changed its wording since. Romeo, named after a pilgrim to Rome, embodies some of these contradictions. After marrying, he does briefly show a Christ-like compassion for his fellow man and a strengthened awareness of his wider social responsibilities. But if Romeo and Juliet have remained literature's archetypal young,

passionate and impulsive lovers, that's also because they appear to us as modern people; as people who disobey their elders to pursue their own desires; and people who find the justification for marriage only in what comes from their own hearts and imaginations. Juliet demands this explicitly of her Romeo. Whatever vows he makes her, she insists, should rest on no external point of authority. Which is how love becomes a social menace. For if love, to prove itself true, cannot afford to anchor itself to anything outside the beating heart of the lover, then love must be, in the purest sense, antisocial. In *Romeo and Juliet's* case, this is why their play ends in tragedy. The couple do marry in secret, but their marriage can't work without social sanction. Death comes for those who cannot go outside with their love. The most emblematic moment of the play is therefore not for nothing the balcony scene, that ideally romantic space between interior and exterior, where the lover yearns not only for unification with the beloved, but for a marriage between their private desires and public roles.

Yet nor does love elude crisis in Shakespeare's romantic comedies either. Comedy's affairs of the heart are indeed the playground of precisely the sort of fools who rush in where angels fear to tread. Although what we do at least get, with comedy, is a version of the happy ending that marriage is said to promise. Where fools rush in, after all, angels presumably have to at some point venture, even if they have a clearer sense of the risks involved. Both fools and angels are actors, doers. It's intellectuals who prefer to contemplate and consider before committing to act.

So, what do intellectuals think of marriage? Very little, from what I can gather. Writing at the start of the nineteenth century in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, William Godwin lamented the 'evil of marriage' as practised by a 'thoughtless and romantic youth' deluding themselves into a 'vow of eternal attachment', surmising that the 'abolition of the present system of marriage appears to involve no evils'. Somewhat embarrassingly, he then went on to marry

Mary Wollstonecraft. Although, fair play: Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* had already identified marriage as an area where sexual oppression had a habit of destroying that which, in her view, marriage ought to be – an ideal form of friendship based on equality.

Nor were Godwin and Wollstonecraft as unusual as they perhaps imagined. This pattern of denouncing marriage while also marrying is one that, if you look out for it, you can find everywhere repeated among the intellectual classes. The rule of intellectuals who marry is that they do so as exceptions to the rule. Later in the nineteenth century, for example, we find John Stuart Mill's searing denunciation of the subjugation of women via marriage; which was an opinion in no way modified by his marriage to Harriet Taylor. Yet Mill's own marriage was exceptional, he believed, because he actively sought to reverse the sexual dynamics of the master–slave relation. If anyone was to be a slave in his marriage, he commanded, it would be him! Both he and Taylor, moreover, seemed to think a largely chaste marriage unvexed by Eros was the best way to ensure their marriage remained a sensible as well as righteous one.

But laying these polemics to one side, there's more than one way for thinking people not to think much of marriage. And in the case of most post-Enlightenment philosophy (the schools of thought that, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, privileged reason over tradition), there seems a remarkable dearth of engagement with the subject at all. It's a pretty strange lacuna to encounter when you consider that marriage is a formal relation that could arguably lay claim to being the world's most enduring and universal. Indeed, as far back as our history books go, we have no record of a time preceding marriage. Isn't that an extraordinary fact? On this basis alone, you'd expect marriage to have inspired more famous philosophical works. Yet when marriage does appear in the modern canon, it tends to be a subsidiary topic brought in to substantiate a thinker's wider philosophical claims; while those who've made marriage a priority

aren't generally best known for these particular writings. So, could this relative lack of philosophic interest in the question of marriage be key to understanding what marriage *means* philosophically? Is marriage – for the philosopher who hasn't written a treatise against it – what you only do when you do not ponder it too much?

'Those engaged in the life of the mind have never seemed to think excessively highly of the institution of marriage', observes the humanist philosopher Kathleen Nott. And there's no denying that some of the main thinkers to have broached the subject – thinkers such as Kant, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard – never themselves married. In Nietzsche's case, whatever his other iconoclasm, he was broadly in sympathy with the traditionalists' view that marriage is a good that stands at risk of modern love's toxic influence. Meanwhile Hegel, though sharing these reservations, came to the conclusion that one *can* be married and a philosopher, but only so long as one's marriage is arranged for the sake of higher principles, leaving romantic follies for extramarital affairs. (A solution that seems to have been happily adopted by a number of other married philosophers as well.)

Well, perhaps that stands to reason. If it's only fools who fall in love, then philosophy can't afford to get mixed up with it. But nor is philosophy unrelated to love. Love, in the Western tradition, is both a part of philosophy's name (*philo/love-sophy/wisdom*), and the subject of Plato's *Symposium*, one of its foundational texts. Read today, the *Symposium* presents unusually as a philosophical work. Not only does it contain as much of what we would now consider literature as it does reasoning, but its ideas about love are formed in dialogue with others. In these dialogues, Eros does go through some rigorous questioning, finding itself considered from various angles – including the sexual and (as we would now say) the platonic. Ultimately, however, what appears as true love for the Western philosopher – as in a love worthy of a lifetime's commitment – is the love of knowledge.

And it's this love of knowledge that, according to the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, puts the Western philosopher

directly at odds with another character – a character that Levinas calls angel. For ‘the secret of angels’, he says, is to upend the order of philosophical priority – think first, act later. The angel is someone who agrees, in the first place, ‘yes’, and only after that fact do they then begin to reflect on their decision. So it’s not that the angel *doesn’t* think, it’s just that the angel thinks things over a little later than the philosopher, i.e. after a decision has already been made. To the rationalist, this can only sound like madness. And yet anything else, argues Levinas, leaves one hanging in a state of sublime distraction, tempted by all the temptations, but never really entering into the world in all its murk, muck and confusion. Which is why the philosopher has often appeared as someone who rarely, if ever, gets moved *into* action. Like the serial seducer, the philosopher generally prefers to keep their options open. To determine upon any course of action, after all, one must accept beforehand that every decision (*de-caedere*, from the Latin, to cut off) murders all other possibilities.

So is this – the spectre of violence inherent in the madness of decision-making – what haunts the ‘man of reason’? For that, surely, must be the lesson to be learned via Romeo’s tragic example: that acting without thinking risks consequences that are unpredictable and potentially fatal. To which lesson, how should the angel respond?

The angel, being no fool, must recognize these risks. Likewise, the covenant entered into must recognize that a certain propensity to violence lurks within its original institution. Indeed, if not monitored carefully, this constitutive violence risks certain ripple effects; ones that could cause its symbolic violence to morph into actual violence. As such, the violence within the vow, if it’s to avoid transforming into more than merely a propensity, ought never to be disavowed. As its history unfolds, the foundational violence will have to be processed rather than denied. But then, isn’t inaction an equally perilous course? And doesn’t the temptation towards inaction that Levinas considers the great temptation of Western philosophy risk its *own* propensity

for violence? If every decision murders all other possibilities, surely indecision murders *all* possibilities.

The marriage contract is, unquestionably, a fearsome one that commits its parties ‘unto death’. Marriage, in fact, may be one of the only things most people do that they vow, on point of entry, not to get out of alive. More than merely offending against the priority of thought ahead of action, therefore, marriage could also be viewed as a direct competition *for* philosophy. For philosophy too, particularly in its existentialist modes, has represented itself as a commitment unto death. To philosophize, said Montaigne, is to learn how to die. The life of the mind, agreed Heidegger, is one of being-towards-death. The only real decision we have to make, Camus cheerfully counselled, is whether or not to commit suicide. To be or not to be – that *is* the question of philosophy.

So much, you want to say, for reason. Indeed, rationalists, Kathleen Nott remarks of her colleagues, can express ‘a great deal of the obsessional anxiety which we nowadays describe as neurotic’. She mentions the philosophers Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer as cases in point (all, incidentally, unmarried). But what’s perhaps *more* to the point is one of the directions such reasoning out of all reason can sometimes take. ‘This need for certainty or finality’, ventures Nott, ‘might partly account for the suicidal wishes of many neurotics. Death is inevitable – so let us have done with it.’

It’s Hamlet, literature’s foremost man of inaction (diagnosed by Freud as a ‘neurasthenic’), who made the fundamental thing we have no choice over such a decisive matter. To be or not to be is *his* question. Perhaps because, as life’s one certainty, death can also sometimes appear as a source of mastery. A prince, to be fully possessed of his sovereignty, must wield the power of life *and* death. Although this can feel no less true for those without such worldly power as kings, but who still wish to be able to lay claim to having such power over themselves. It isn’t his death, Freud intimated, that man necessarily dreads or resists. It’s the idea of somebody else interfering with it. What man

wants above all is to die in his own fashion. Which might help to explain the strangeness of the death drive; if to choose one's own death is also a means of becoming the hero of one's own life or the author of one's own story. Despite the indecisiveness upon which his reputation hangs, after all, Prince Hamlet ultimately dies in a bloodbath of his own making. Though what leads him unto his premature death is the maddening uncertainty aroused by a social world organized by marriage; and his strong but unproven suspicion that his mother may have committed adultery. Is there then, with all these philosophy bros, something of a pattern emerging?

Ophelia dies by her own hand too of course, when the marriage that was to be her future is denied her. And her tragedy foreshadows the numerous later narratives featuring female protagonists for whom the marriage plot is no less decisive than the death plot, and no less determining of the meaning of their lives. That isn't only true, though, for the heroines of tragedies. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once railed against the comic novels of Jane Austen precisely on account of their narrow obsession with 'marriageableness'. He'd rather die, he protested, than submit to such vistaless horizons. But what Emerson misses in his critique of Austen is how, for the female characters in such novels, that really *is* the choice they face: marry or (you may as well) die. The response of many of these female protagonists isn't necessarily to deny or avoid the marriage that dominates their life choices, however. Rather, like Freud's man facing death, what they seem to want is to get there in their own fashion. Or better to say, what they want is a share in their own life stories. Unlike the lonely and heroic Thanatos (Freud's Greek name for the death instinct), driven to destruction in a bid for mastery, the story of Eros centres on a subject who is dependent and may *have* dependants, but who reveals that it is no less difficult nor any less heroic to live with love than it is with death.

So it's hardly surprising, then, that the most sustained reflections on marriage within modern philosophy come to us from one of its

more literary corners. In the second part of *Either/Or*, the major work of the Danish nineteenth-century thinker Søren Kierkegaard, marriage is very much a matter to be taken seriously. Taken seriously, that is, not by Kierkegaard himself, but by Judge Wilhelm, one of Kierkegaard's fictional personae. The fact that Kierkegaard mostly avoided stating positions in his own name tells us that Prince Hamlet wasn't the only Danish philosopher plagued by such doubts as to render him afeared of commitment. But where Hamlet asked to be or not to be, Kierkegaard had another existential question: to marry or not to marry. In *Either*, this question is said to be unresolvable since neither choice – neither marrying and forgoing all others nor embracing all others and forgoing marriage – leaves one without regret.

But in the end, of course, indecision does become a form of decision. And in Kierkegaard's case, having been engaged to Regina Olsen, he failed to make the leap of faith into an actual marriage with her. For that reason, he must have suffered his regrets. Whereas, approaching the marriage question from a different axis entirely, it's the curious claim of Kierkegaard's Judge Wilhelm that 'I have never passed myself off as a philosopher . . . I usually appear as a married man'. Kierkegaard and his judge would thus appear to be foils for each other: Kierkegaard couldn't marry because he was a philosopher, the Judge can't philosophize because he's married.

In what sense, though, is the Judge unable to philosophize? Well, for one thing, what he claims for marriage is a testament not to logic but to conviction. Yet this conviction is one he nevertheless pitches as a resolution to the problem my husband alluded to before we got married: the problem for erotic love once it's been commandeered into a form of legally enshrined obedience. For what the Judge believes is that the marital vow is the *realization* of erotic love. The decision to marry, he charges, made in the flush of 'first love', is the decision of someone who knows, just as a visionary knows, that their love is eternal. Their faith is that the fullness of their love as experienced in its first manifestation will not degrade or lessen over time.

First love is assumed, on the contrary, to initiate a history that works to conjure the future – a position in no way palatable to the type of thinker seeking to settle a case rather than allowing it to generate new horizons of possibility.

In what sense, then, is Judge Wilhelm able to judge? In the sense, it would seem, that he can make positive decisions even in the absence of reasons. Reasons, on the other hand, are by no means hard to arrive at for those seeking to oppose his decisions. You don't need to spend too long reading his purple prose, for instance, to find him alternately conceited, buffoonish, smug, sentimental, moralistic, petit bourgeois. Most intellectuals would surely consider the Judge a clown, if not a fool. Wilhelm is the sort of guy you find abundantly depicted in comic novels, cartoons, sitcoms, adverts – the very image of the hapless husband. And yet despite all his preening, isn't he also akin to Levinas's angel?

It was Levinas's contention that the Western tradition of philosophy may have its priorities the wrong way round. Rather than ontology (the nature of being), the philosopher's primary concern ought, in Levinas's view, to be ethics, the nature of human relations. While philosophy's true translation, he suggested, isn't the love of knowledge, but the knowledge of love. Although this knowledge, to really be considered as knowledge, would have to be more than merely theoretical. It would have to begin – as the *Symposium* begins – with an invitation to others to enter into a relation whose meaning can then only be discovered intersubjectively. Treatises cannot easily play host to such a knowledge. If you take the book currently in your hands, for example, you'll notice how the knowledge it aims at is forced to begin its journey rather abstractly, as an idea, or as a series of ideas, but over time you'll find that the journey gets much more up close and personal, and hopefully, too, with experience, it should get easier as well. A bit like a marriage. Or like some marriages, at any rate. So if it's knowledge of love you're after, you may, having read your fill of treatises, be better advised to move on to literature

as a tradition largely organized and dominated by the marriage plot. For marriage – as the quintessential philosophical novelist George Eliot once claimed with regard to her major marriage epic, *Middlemarch* – is nothing if not a practical way of finding out what love is. Or as Taffy Brodesser-Akner puts it in a more recent novel, *Fleishman is in Trouble*, ‘only when you’re actually married, once this need is fulfilled, you can for the first time wonder if you even want to be married or not.’

And it’s in literature too that we can follow the sentimental arc of thinkers such as Hamlet, whose crippling uncertainties made him a poor lover to his fiancée. Literature allows for this immersion in the subjective character of experience precisely because what literature doesn’t compel us to jump to, necessarily, are conclusions. As Freud noted of dreams, literature isn’t a field of either/or. If not always in reality, then in its very idea, literature permits itself the freedom to conjugate disparate and even contradictory elements. Just this, in fact, is the conjugal freedom whose significance the Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida once described in relation to the most subtly subversive of all words, at least from the vantage of rationalist philosophy: ‘the conjunction “and” brings together words, concepts, perhaps things that don’t belong to the same category. A conjunction such as “and” dares to defy order, taxonomy, classificatory logic, no matter how it works: by analogy, distinction or opposition.’

The word ‘and’ makes a real mess of philosophy. Whereas, via literature, we can observe how, if Hamlet and Ophelia are dead by the end of their play, so are Romeo and Juliet by the end of theirs. And yet Romeo appears as the very antitype of Hamlet – no less the passionate adolescent, but driven by impulse, decisiveness and a distinct lack of reflection. Romeo, by not thinking before acting, exhibits the fatality of recklessness. Hamlet, by overthinking, exhibits the fatality attending the philosophical lust for certainty. Nevertheless, for all they differ, Romeo and Hamlet are both alike in being tragic heroes in whose fates we can see that *the course of true love never did*

run smooth – although that’s a line not from tragedy, but from comedy.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream is the comedy, and it’s very much a conjugating play: a play about coupling and the question of who gets together with whom. And it’s a play as well that puzzles whether or not the lover’s eyes are seeing clearly, and what seeing clearly, when it comes to love and marriage, even means. Love is variously described in the play as folly and madness. While the idea of ‘true love’ is often invoked, with different theories competing no less than they do in Plato’s *Symposium*, what love seems to lead to, primarily, is the quarrelling itself. In *Dream* we again encounter the same historical tensions regarding arranged marriage versus modern romance that led Romeo and Juliet to their tragic ends – the consequence of young people disregarding what fathers and rulers want, to pursue their own desires. And we see again too how choosing for oneself whom to marry threatens, even in the world of comedy, generational conflict, social unrest, and women taking on a role they feel ill befits them – that of the wooer, not the wooed. Meanwhile, everybody gets soiled in the process; including, in the middle of the play, the Queen of the Fairies, who gets loved up with a human ass. Since this *is* a comedy, however, it ends with a (triple) wedding wherein social stability has been restored as the lovers have all conveniently married within their class.

Still, despite its concluding revelry, we end the play not necessarily any more conclusive about what constitutes true love; nor has every social relation been repaired. The failure of Hermia to honour her father’s wishes as announced at the start of the play when he drags his daughter before the sovereign of Athens, asserting that ‘she is mine, I may dispose of her; Which shall be either to this gentleman, or to her death’, haunts the finale. The fact that this father makes no appearance at his own daughter’s wedding shows how a happy ending can nonetheless hint at a social order coming unstuck, even as it tries to marry its various parts back together. Nor, for all its mirth, does the comic mode save us from having witnessed patriarchy’s merciless

power. When, at the start of the play, both father and sovereign are at one in dictating to Hermia whom she must marry, those scenes would be hard to play for laughs. And if you want to know how that looks in the tragic version, you need only consult the brutal threats made to Juliet by *her* father.

Romeo and Juliet's conjugal tragedy, in fact, casts a subtle shadow over *Dream's* conjugal comedy. We sense this particularly in the final wedding party where the just-married couples watch amateur actors perform scenes from *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a romantic tragedy whose lovers, like Romeo and Juliet, are driven to early deaths by a world that won't sanction their love. But while Shakespeare's major handling of that tragedy produces pathos, in *Dream* the tragic play within the comic play provokes only ridicule. Is *Dream*, then, less besotted with love and marriage than its audiences are wont to imagine? How otherwise should we interpret the three couples laughing on their shared wedding day at the spectacle of a play about a couple loving each other unto death – when that's precisely what they've just contracted for themselves?

Dream is at once a romantic comedy, a satire and a proto-bedroom farce – one in which liberated youths, seeking to defy patriarchal authorities, find themselves the playthings of woodland spirits instead. The mythic idea of the soulmate derived from the philosophers' *Symposium* has in this play a kind of ridiculous farcical fungibility whereby the lovers pursue with the same passion and conviction a new lover much as they had a completely different one just moments before. Nor is it clear to the play's audience why each lover prefers whoever it is they prefer – to the outsider, all the young lovers appear much the same. (Even in his tragic rendering, Shakespeare was hardly inconsistent in this view: Romeo was head over heels in love with Rosalind before Juliet crossed his path.) So it is that, in *Dream's* woodlands, reason comes undone as we're led to discover that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

But now I'm back to quoting *Hamlet* again. And indeed, the existential question for Hamlet, tortured as he was by his suspicions and doubts, was never purely philosophical either. For it isn't simply a choice between living with outrageous fortune or taking up arms in a fight until death. What Hamlet finds tantalizing in death, after all, isn't death as such, but the opportunity 'perchance to dream'. His dream of dreaming, in other words, is the dream of an alternately comic sphere of fantasy and play; a sphere where ends can appear as new beginnings and nobody need fear being taken for a fool. Or a sphere of lovers rather than fighters where *everyone* is taken for a fool.

And nowhere is this clearer than in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* whose standout fool is Nick Bottom. Yet Bottom is also, it might be argued, the play's image of the true lover. Albeit he clearly isn't one of the highborn whose aristocratic conjugations are celebrated at the end of the final act. He's a mere weaver, in fact, there at the wedding party to entertain the newly-weds with his real passion – acting (which passion Hamlet, a fellow thespian, could surely appreciate). As an *amateur*, Bottom is therefore a lover by very definition. And if you were to ask Bottom who is the romantic lead of *Dream*, he'd undoubtedly step forward. It's even he who describes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* towards the end of the play as 'Bottom's Dream'. Nor does he think himself an unworthy protagonist. Amongst the group of players to which he belongs, not only does he instantly say yes to whichever part he's given, even before he knows what part it is, but he puts himself forward for all the other parts too. It's what makes him so funny. His is the folly of the egoist: that person who doesn't seem to know their proper part. But then, isn't that true of all dreamers and all dreams – where we never do quite know our place or our part, or where every part in our dream turns out to be a part of ourselves? As with all of Shakespeare's fools, therefore, we have to wonder if Bottom is really such a fool or whether he's the character in the play who could teach us something about the nature of true love.

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For if Bottom is the comic inversion of Hamlet's thespianism on the one hand, we can equally see how Bottom, in performing the part of Pyramus, shows himself to be a comedic variation of Romeo on the other. Certainly Bottom, no less than Romeo, is prone to rush in passionately, without thinking. And yet however much we're invited to mock Bottom and his fellow players, it's no less the case that these are amateur actors in a dangerous situation, performing at the wedding of a sovereign who holds the power of life or death over them. If they fail to entertain the Duke, they may not live to see a new morning. Much like the fatal lovers Pyramus and Thisbe or Romeo and Juliet, these actors are risking all for what they love. And it's by so doing that they produce the play's 'happy' ending, delighting the Duke not because he's been moved to the tears warranted by their attempt at tragedy, but because he's been moved to a laughter elicited by their accidental comedy.

What, then, does this curious comic conclusion of *Dream* suggest regarding how the play views marriage? Early on, Hermia declares that it is 'hell! To choose love by another's eyes'. Since, by the final act, she has married whom her heart chose, she might well feel vindicated in her decision to rebel against arranged marriage. But what are we to make of the fact that Lysander only loves Hermia because a magic potion has altered his vision? In his case, love *has* been chosen by another's eyes, thus implicating Hermia in a new marriage already halfway into hell. The play would thus appear to mock the dreams of mastery of both the sovereign (Duke) *and* the sovereign individual (Hermia) when it comes to love and marriage. If we consider for instance the moment when the beautiful Queen of the Fairies awakens from her drugged slumber to fall in love with Bottom, a human ass, this scene is clearly obscene and ludicrous. And yet the first thing Titania asks upon sight of him, 'what Angel is this?', could equally have been posed by a Levinas scholar. Contrary to tragedy's descent into a final and fatal self-knowledge, in comedy we find characters whose ignorance of themselves deprives them of

any such self-knowledge, but may yet put them in the way of a different kind of knowledge: the knowledge of love that's proper to literature – a knowledge of love that can *only* come to us through another's eyes.

As a case in point, consider the tales that comprise *One Thousand and One Nights*. In this legendary epic of Arabic literature, it's his first wife's infidelity that provokes the King to hatch his macabre take on the marriage plot: wed a new virgin every day, deflower her at night, and behead her the following morning. His is a brutal lesson in fidelity – an uncompromising vision of marriage till death doth part. Within the strictures of this marital set-up, there's no suspense, no uncertainty, no possibility of a second betrayal. Nothing, not even death, is left to chance. The purest of marriage plots is thus the one that knows the future in advance with all action bent towards that end. As such, a spouse, to be fully determined as a spouse, must be a dead certainty. But while that might well have seemed like a good plan on paper, there remains within it a potential flaw that threatens to undermine the King's tactics: because if someone's a dead certainty, there's always the risk that you'll lose interest. So it isn't clear that 1,001 different but identically fated brides will keep eros aflame night after night after night any more than could the same returning bride.

Enter, therefore, Shahrazad (Scheherazade), with a marriage plot to rival the King's. Albeit hers is a high-wire act. For she weds her groom willingly, knowing and never doubting the gruesome terms of his contract. But though it's death she risks, it's life she wants, as she makes clear, in Hanan al-Shaykh's striking rendering of her story, in her initial proposal: 'Father, I want you to marry me to King Shahryar, so that I may either succeed in saving the girls of the kingdom, or perish and die like them.' She marries, that's to say, in order to save the girls of the future from death by marriage.

There's no doubt, then, that Shahrazad is a worthy heroine. She's courageous, she's gifted, and she has one helluva historical mission

before her. But even these talents and virtues are insufficient in themselves. She still has to pick her moment. She has to figure out when the King has been through enough virgins to be getting a vague inkling that marital bliss continues to elude him. And she has to propose marriage when she senses that her would-be groom is tiring, becoming bored, and secretly wanting, the way cynics always deep-down want, to be dazzled, disproved, surprised. So it must have been tempting for Shahrazad to suggest herself as the surprise he believes he's after: a sort of Schrödinger's wife; someone who can be both alive *and* a dead certainty at the same time. Whereas what Shahrazad does is quite the opposite. She tells stories, and her stories, which are mostly about marriages, are often erotic and frequently adulterous. They even occasionally feature storytellers who, like Shahrazad herself, tell their tales to seduce sovereigns with the power of life and death over them. Sometimes, too, her stories are of women and their mistreatment at the hands of cruel and jealous men. Although there are also stories of mistreated men and the adulteresses who wronged them. What her stories do not forecast are their own ends. In fact, they never *do* seem to end.

Given this endlessness, lots of Shahrazad's stories also begin to resemble each other. So why doesn't a man as obsessed as King Shahryar is by the concept of the virginal and the new accuse his latest wife of getting repetitive? And why doesn't he take issue with the way she so conspicuously turns her tricks – by means of the break-away, the cliffhanger, the cheap thrill, the predictable uses of suspense? Has his sensibility perhaps taken a literary turn? You could say of Shahryar that he arrives upon this conjugal scene in the mould of a philosopher-king. For he's clearly a man with a firm logic; a man who has his way of knowing things, and making sure of them. But then with Shahrazad his logic starts unravelling. He can no longer quite establish for himself what causes things to happen in the various ways they do. Indeed, for all that he, listening to her for so long, must be attuned to her literary devices, something in the energy of her

storytelling keeps him interested. He may have heard a version of a story before, he may have heard it 1,001 times before, but he still tunes in each night, wondering what will happen next. It's as if, when it comes to Shahrazad, nothing is a dead certainty. Even if it *is* the same night with her 1,001 times, a night with Shahrazad feels to him more original than would many legions of new wives.

Perhaps, therefore, we can speculate that what's in the storyteller's gift, which might not be in the logician's, is the singular power to reframe the terms of the contract – and specifically, the contract that marries unto death. For while death may be depended on as life's only certainty by a philosopher, or by a king who would like to make of his wife another instance of the same dead certainty, death becomes, in Shahrazad's telling, the existential condition of life's *uncertainty* – and thus the knife's edge upon which she can compose new worlds. And so, by the same token, she can also proffer her alternative vision of marriage – one whose erotics can only be sustained by inventiveness, liveliness, and the looming possibility of running into an unscripted silence where nobody knows what will happen next.

So it's important not to underestimate the risks Shahrazad is taking. If she ever does run out of inspiration and dare to meet her King on the grounds of her own emptiness, that's when the suspense really could kill. Yet it's also just here, in the pause of the narrative, that the King might glimpse how Shahrazad has used the open horizon of her story to overturn the closed fist of his plot. And so he might glimpse as well how this could be the means to a different kind of 'happy ending' – an experience of marriage that can only be as fulfilling as the couple are prepared to entertain doubts, and a spouse who finds that there may lurk between the lines of the marriage plot an unspeakable love story that's all his own. It's the King himself, in other words, who turns out to be the unwitting romantic lead of Shahrazad's love story. As the listener to the story, by making himself permeable he puts *himself* at risk of unexpected things happening, and of his own

character changing. Meanwhile, Shahrazad wagers, by changing the character of the King she can change the kingdom for herself, and for the girls of the future as well.

'I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me.' So begins 'Gimpel the Fool', one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's best-loved stories. Gimpel is undeniably gullible. Is there nothing or nobody he won't believe? All the townspeople mock and sneer at him. He's so easily deceived that few can resist making him the subject of their cruelties and pranks. He marries Elka, known to everyone but himself as the town prostitute; she's five months pregnant at the time, but tells her husband that the baby born prematurely is his. He certainly loves the child that way, even when, later on, he's put in the picture. By the end of the story Elka has six children via various infidelities, admitting as much on her deathbed to a husband who still loves them all as his own. It's not that Gimpel is beyond suspicion of the tall tales he's told: 'If I ever dared to say, "Ah, you're kidding!" there was trouble. People got angry. "What do you mean! You want to call everyone a liar?" What was I to do? I believed them, and I hope at least that did them some good.'

The hope that believing people might do them some good isn't far off the approach taken by psychoanalysis, not least in the interpretation of dreams. And indeed, by the end of the story, Gimpel does emerge more in the mode of the wandering sage than the fool: 'After many years I became old and white; I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamt at night. It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year.'

Gimpel is comedy's character. You're invited to laugh at him, not with him. Yet he's right, it turns out, not to think himself a fool, though he sees very clearly that he's regarded as such. Compared with his outwitting neighbours, his relationship to the truth would