PSYCHOTERAPIA 4 (211) 2024
PAGES: 29–40
DOI: 10.12740/PT/200642

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DREAMING MARRIAGE. "A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM" AS A MAP FOR THE COUPLE'S THERAPIST

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Shakespeare
couple's therapy
psychoanalytic couples therapy

Summary

The article invites us to look at Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as a specific map of "disorders of love" — of various kinds of obstacles to the formation of close relationships based on the recognition of both dependence and separateness of two people. To read this map, the author uses two key concepts drawn from the work of psychoanalysts.
The first is James Fisher's definition of marriage as the opposite of narcissism. The second is Thomas Ogden's concept of dreaming, understood as access to the multidimensionality of phenomena in the real world, as opposed to confinement to the inner world of magical thinking. In Shakespeare's comedy, the author finds allegories of the most common deviations from Fisher's defined model of a mature relationship — love dominated by the need for control, or on the contrary, being a blind expression of rebellion, a relationship centered on sacrifice, revenge for wrongs, or constant struggle. Based on psychoanalytic concepts, the article proposes to define the primary task of the couples therapist — as helping to maintain, strengthen or renew the "marriage" — understood, however, not as a marital status or religious ritual, but as a deep recognition of the dependence, bonding and separateness of "the intimate other".

Introduction

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of William Shakespeare's [1] best-known works. Its charm lies, among other things, in its ambiguity. It can be read in an infinite number of ways, and even if one is deeply attached to their own interpretation, it's hard to seriously impose it as the "right" or definitive one. For me, as a psychotherapist who has worked in couples therapy for many years, this play serves as a kind of map illustrating different models of romantic relationships. It reveals the twists and turns of the paths to intimacy and closeness, as well as the various traps we encounter along the way.

To help interpret this map, I will draw on two works by psychoanalysts: James Fisher's *The Uninvited Guest* [2], which boldly redefines the essence of marriage, and Thomas

Ogden's *Reclaiming Unlived Life: Experiences in Psychoanalysis* [3], in which the author distinguishes between three types of thinking — magical, dream, and transformative. These two texts serve as a legend for Shakespeare's map.

So please, bear with me, and let's begin with the legend.

Marriage

"Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon: but, oh, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
Like to a step-dame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man's revenue" [1, p. 415].

Shakespeare opens his play with the words of Theseus, who, impatient for his upcoming wedding, compares marriage to a long awaited inheritance being slowly consumed by a stepmother. It's hard to imagine a starker contrast to James Fisher's understanding of marriage:

"By marriage, I mean a passionate attachment to a close other, and dependence upon that person. Narcissism, however, I do not understand as mere self-absorption or a form of self-love. Rather, I see it as a relationship with another in which there is no tolerance for the other's reality or separate existence. In this sense, narcissism is actually a longing for the other — but one who is perfectly attuned to us and fulfills all our needs, thus not truly being the other" [2, p. 29].

Fisher defines marriage through contrast with narcissism, giving both concepts new meaning. Especially the understanding of marriage is radically shifted – freed from the cultural forms built up over millennia.

Initially, Theseus presents a narcissistic vision of marriage, in which there is no tolerance for reality and separate existence of the other. He desires marriage that is a kind of "inherited property" — a relationship in which love, "won by sword" and "gained by arms," will mean perfect attunement, "with pomp, with triumph and with reveling." [1, p. 415].

On one hand, Fisher proposes a new and fresh understanding of the familiar phenomenon of marriage; on the other hand, his definition uncovers something that has characterized this phenomenon for a very long time but often gets hidden under layers of sociocultural constructs. He highlights this fundamental aspect of this phenomenon that has been variously codified and modified throughout history and incorporated into social and legal frameworks. These sociocultural processes are inevitable. A couple does not exist in a social vacuum – it is made up of people embedded in a wider community: daughters, sons, granddaughters, grandsons, sisters, brothers, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, mothers and fathers, employees, citizens. In polygamous systems, this includes co-wives or co-husbands. Legal and cultural norms related to marriage allow us to navigate the relationships with people surrounding the couple. However, understanding marriage only as a social contract can mean losing

touch with what Fisher beautifully captured as “a passionate attachment to a close other, and dependence upon that person” [2, p. 29].

Such a definition of marriage – the opposite of a narcissistic relationship in which the other is not allowed to truly be other – could just as easily be called love. Mary Morgan writes about a very similar thing as a challenge for a forming couple:

“Another issue is how the couple copes with the reality – the very fact – of being in a relationship with “other” who is separate and different, yet close. Being in a relationship (unless it’s completely fused) every day confronts the individual with the fact that there is a different point of view, different experience — which at times may be hard to accept or understand (…) For some people, the existence of a separate other is unbearable, and they resort to various defenses in an attempt to manage this reality. One of the most common strategies is an attempt to force the other into one’s own vision, which leads either to never-ending conflict or a sadomasochistic dynamic of domination and submission” [4, p. 43].

So why doesn’t Fisher simply contrast narcissism with love? That would be less controversial, and easier to apply across all types of romantic relationships – within and outside of the family. It would likely be true as well. Fisher, however, is writing from the perspective of a couple therapist. In that context, his definition of marriage serves as a guiding star – pointing north even during the toughest emotional storms. Whether a couple is just beginning, continuing, or ending a formal marriage, the therapist can work with them on recognizing mutual dependence, commitment, and separateness of the “close other.”

From this perspective, the couples therapist can always work for the preservation of marriage – or even the emergence of a remarriage: not in a legal or religious sense, but as a mature form of love between people.

Couples starting therapy would rarely explicitly express a need to explore the idea of remarriage – though some do describe the therapeutic process as a search for answers: is remarriage desirable, or even possible? By doing so, they express what I believe applies to every couple undertaking psychoanalytic work: that they are in search of a “remarriage.” This holds true regardless of whether the couple is legally married, engaged or living apart after many years spent together. It even applies to therapy aimed at separation. There is no such thing as a “good divorce” if the couple is not married in the relational sense – that is, if their bond has been completely distorted by the narcissism of both partners, especially when children are involved [2, p. 30].

What’s remarkable about this idea is that it provides a clear universal direction for therapeutic work and allows to hold in mind (contain) a great variety of couples — same-sex or different-sex, monogamous or polyamorous, cisgender or trans, legally married, engaged, lovers, long-term partners, those not interested in marriage, or even those bonded in shared rebellion against the institution of marriage itself.

Dreaming

Now that I've described, following Fisher, how I understand the essence of marriage, I'll move on to presenting the three types of thinking distinguished by Ogden. It won't be hard to see that all three are present in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

The first type is magical thinking — a kind of thinking "based on omnipotent fantasies and aimed at creating a psychic reality which the person experiences as more real than the external one" [3, p. 31].

We can recognize this form of thinking in many characters in A Midsummer Night's Dream, who cling to their beliefs in a way that disconnects them from reality. It dominates in characters for whom reality interferes with continuing their "omnipotent fantasies" — such as Egeus, who wishes to be a god to his daughter and treats her as his property. Even more deeply immersed in magical thinking is Titania, infatuated with the ass-headed Bottom.

Perhaps to the reader's surprise, the opposite of magical thinking is not rational thinking (since apparent rationality can serve the magical demand for omnipotence quite effectively), but dream thinking — which brings us back to the very title of Shakespeare's play.

"Dream thinking allows us to ascribe meanings to experiences from multiple perspectives at once: for example, from the perspective of the primary and secondary process, the containing and the contained, the child-self and the mature self, and so on" [3, p. 31]. Dream thinking is the basis of the process of dreaming — present, according to Ogden, both during sleep and while awake. Although primarily unconscious, it resonates with preconscious and conscious thinking. "Just as the light of the sun obscures the brightness of the stars by day, so too dreaming continues in waking life, dimmed by the light of life on the surface" [3, p. 40].

This is why the lovers need the dreaming of the summer night — so that they can move toward a mature form of love, in which many layers, many aspects of the relationship can be held by dream thinking, undimmed by the harsh lights of day-to-day reality. Dream thinking leads them to psychic development — both as individuals and as couples. The moon, which at first seems like an extravagant stepmother, becomes the patron of good, growthful dreaming.

This process also requires many characters, for while one can dream alone, "thinking/dreaming through the most difficult emotional experiences requires the support of another person" [3, p. 31].

This brings us to the third and, according to Ogden, most valuable type of thinking: transformative thinking — "a kind of thinking that involves the radical reorganization of the structure of one's experience" [3, p. 31].

This type of thinking recalls, on one hand, the therapeutic notion of insight, and on the other, the religious descriptions of conversion or enlightenment. It is the kind of thinking that requires "rising above existing categories of meaning, which were previously seen as the only possible ones" [3, p. 31].

It enables the emergence of "new modes of organizing experience" [3, p. 31], and is what the best forms of both art and psychotherapy allow us to achieve.

A good example of transformative thinking is viewing marriage from the perspective described by Fisher — it allows us to transcend previously dominant categories of meaning and to create new modes of organizing experience.

From the perspective adopted in this article, this is precisely the point of maturing into a marriage that stands as the opposite of narcissism, and also the point of couples therapy — to create a relationship in which transformative thinking becomes possible. The kind of thinking that can free a couple from destructive loops of blaming one another, rejection, and attack, and allow them to create “not only new meanings but also new types of feelings, forms of relating to others, and kinds of emotional and bodily vitality” [3, p. 31].

Although it is deeply desired, this is not an easy achievement — for it requires letting go of the old ways of structuring experience, which we have often lived with for many years, and which once protected us from our greatest pains and fears. My patients frequently remind me of the difficulty of this process — those who, in the course of therapy, abandon their long-held frameworks for perceiving themselves. Even though they understand that this leads to liberation, they experience strong anxiety associated with losing the familiar reference points that once gave them security.

That’s why such thinking “always requires the engagement of at least two minds, because without the presence of others, a person cannot radically transform the fundamental categories of meaning through which they structure their experience” [3, p. 59].

Such transformative engagement between at least two minds is — or at least can and should be — what happens in a meeting with art in the theatre, in a session with a therapist in the consulting room, and in a loving encounter with one’s partner-spouse in life.

Opening the map

Knowing the legend, we can now move on to studying the map.

At first, it may seem that the obstacles to happiness in Shakespeare’s play are external — a father’s prohibition, a spell cast by a mischievous elf, the slow passage of time measured by the appearance of the moon. However, if we take the title seriously — and accept that the whole story is one grand, rich, colorful dream — then we can see all the characters’ adventures as Ogdenian dreaming: the dream’s work, consisting of unconscious, multidimensional, and multilayered thinking about love, relationships, and marriage.

In this case, we can see the play as Shakespeare’s map of couples’ dramas — revealing various disturbances in romantic relationships. Below, I’ll present my reading of it. For the sake of clarity, I will write about different types of love as if they were distinct, although I want to emphasize that since we are interpreting a dream map, these separate types are rather different dimensions of threats or temptations present to some degree in every romantic relationship. Seeing them in the characters on stage may give us a fleeting pleasure of feeling wiser, better than them, but the real value of such a reading appears only when we remind ourselves that this comedy is about each one of us. So let us dream with Shakespeare, Fisher, and Ogden — with the hope of awakening.

Theseus — the love of the conqueror

"I wooed thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" [1, p. 415].

The first version of love we encounter upon entering A Midsummer Night's Dream is trophy love — presented as a glorious reward for courage and persistence. The fanfares, hymns, and celebrations, however, may not so much express joy as signal the celebration of a victory. It is worth pausing to ask: who has been defeated?

Seemingly, it is the rivals — other suitors who longed for the prince's beloved. At the same time, however, what is defeated is the autonomy of the "intimate other" and dependence on that other [2, p. 29]. The fanfares drown out any thought that the true challenges might only be beginning — the struggle of bringing together a desire for closeness with the need for separateness. One could listen to the dissonances and pauses in the melody of love in order to mature within the relationship. One could feel the fear of loss, betrayal, death — and the fear of being overtaken, hurt, owned by the beloved. But now, the hymns conceal the otherness of the intimate other by glorifying their closeness; they muffle dependence by announcing the defeat of enemies.

Theseus, in a modern-day therapy room, might appear as the stereotypical man of success who, though he deftly outmaneuvers his business rivals, still feels unappreciated by his wife and "her" children. The contrast between the satisfaction he feels in his professional role and the frustration and confusion caused by emotional dependency prompts him to withdraw from family life, to become a guest in his own home — which only reinforces his loved ones' conviction that they don't matter to him, triggering in them all sorts of strategies for drawing attention and testing the importance of the relationship. Often, these strategies backfire — when Theseus feels afraid, he retreats even further. His wife and children might then resort to more drastic measures: complaints become insults and screaming, poor grades become oppositional-defiant disorders, good grades become eating disorders, direct aggression turns into self-harm.

The escalation may lead either to the breakdown of the family or to the creation of a stable status quo of illusory closeness — for instance, double standards, where the existence of a lover is an open secret, a child replaces the partner, a symptom of illness halts divorce — or, in better case scenarios, it may activate corrective mechanisms that lead to repair.

Sometimes, Theseus appears as a prisoner of his role as conqueror. He is the one who can handle everything, and therefore, his own needs are never taken into account. Murray Bowen referred to a person trapped in this dynamic as the overfunctioning person [5]. The more competent he is, the more he can achieve, the greater the demands placed on him by the family — and the more invisible become the signs of his finitude.

His wife, meanwhile, trapped in the role of the underfunctioning person, is perpetually exhausted, often on the verge of depression, and unable to meet the demands of adult life.

A therapist, concerned by her apparent “low self-worth,” may prematurely try to highlight her hidden strengths and resources. What follows is often a wave of outrage, aimed at preventing the loss of power that comes from the declared weakness.

During this time, Theseus becomes the iron knight, who can carry everything — until a heart attack or some other crisis frees them both from the trap and, if they’re lucky, allows them to go on living, enjoying the recovery of the part of themselves they had previously lost.

If Theseus is a woman — her drama is even more painful. In addition to battling imagined, magical adversaries, she also overcomes very real patriarchal fortresses. She may be a true heroine. But if she only knows how to fight — and that is the only way she soothes her fear of dependency — she must continuously start wars. She becomes the victim of her own victories.

Egeus — the love of the possessor

“Full of vexation come I, with complaint
Against my child, my daughter Hermia.
Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord,
This man hath my consent to marry her.
Stand forth, Lysander: and, my gracious duke,
This man hath bewitch’d the bosom of my child…” [1, p. 416].

The second model of immature love, embodied by Egeus, reveals a relationship built on ownership, possession of another person. He doesn’t even need to win love. He already has it — by virtue of law and family rules. As a father, as the one who “provides for the family,” as “he who gave life” and therefore “should be like a god,” he grants himself the right of ownership over his loved ones. Although in the scenes depicted by Shakespeare, Egeus claims ownership over his daughter, it’s hard to imagine that he wouldn’t apply this same model of relationship to his wife as well.

Today, Egeus might show up as a desperate father, bewildered that the violence “sanctified” by family tradition — which once seemed to guarantee him power and lifelong love from his child — has now left him helpless and alone, unable to talk with his adolescent or fully grown daughter.

He still believes he can make decisions — about his child’s sexual orientation, marriage, divorce, and other life choices. He tries to use his money and influence. He intimidates, threatens, disinherits. He is entirely consumed by magical thinking. Incapable of dreaming, he ends up with a short end of a golden stick.

Egeus sometimes appears as a husband several years older than his wife, confused that the age difference that once made him attractive to a young fiancée now becomes the cause of rejection and betrayal. He has aged, and she has matured. The wife-daughter of Egeus discovers her own strength and autonomy. She realizes she has married a surrogate father and now directs toward her husband the fury she never expressed toward her real father. If they are lucky and willing — if their relationship “has not been entirely distorted by

the narcissism of both partners" [2, p. 30] — they might rediscover each other and form a renewed bond.

But Egeus isn't always a man. Sometimes, he appears as a mother who sees the obedience of her adult children as rightful payment — a substitute for the love absent in her marriage. Sometimes, he appears as a wife, controlling her husband by various means. The essential dynamic is the same: defending against dependency and the difference between oneself and one's loved ones through the illusion of possession.

Hermia — love as rebellion and liberation

"Take comfort: he no more shall see my face;
Lysander and myself will fly this place" [1, p. 422].

Hermia, possessed by her father and forced into a marriage against her will, experiences love as rebellion and liberation from paternal authority. She needs dreaming and a secret meeting with Lysander in the forest outside the city – to begin distinguishing between love for her husband and defiance of her father.

At first, her relationship with Lysander is a way of liberation – a transition from dependency ("I do this because you want me to, Father") to counter-dependency ("I will never do it, precisely because you want me to and are forcing me"). She needs the dream to mature into independence — where she will do what she wants, even if her father happens to agree. Thanks to experiencing this, by the end of the play, she can say that she sees everything "double" [1, p. 476].

This double vision allows her to maintain love for her father without confusing it with obedience, and to develop a love for Lysander as a real man, who no longer needs to be a rescuer or simply the opposite of her father.

In therapy, Hermia often appears as the victim of a massive "reaction formation." She grew up in a family where feigned expressions of love were tools for control, domination, and veiling aggression. She was locked into the armor of the "good girl," the obedient daughter who would never disappoint her parents — sometimes idealized as the opposite of her disappointing siblings. In her family, the word "love" was given a perverse, narcissistic meaning. It became synonymous with submission.

Sometimes Hermia complains that she always ends up with abusive partners. Later, she laments that a new, non-aggressive partner doesn't excite her the way the previous ones did. She learns to see double — and to free herself from the curses of transference.

When Hermia is a man, the story shifts: he is freeing himself from the tyranny of a mother, usually more veiled than the father's. He must recognize the narcissistic stepmother-like part of his mother that tries to keep him locked in a prison — one called "the only safe place in the world."

Demetrius — love for power and money

“You have bewitched the bosom of my child;
Thou hast by magic might my daughter’s heart,
And made her wither up to follow thee” [1, p. 418].

Demetrius does not distinguish Hermia from her father’s wealth. He thinks he loves her, but her feelings and needs are of no interest to him. He doesn’t even want to possess her; he wants to possess her father, who will bless him with wealth and power.

He rightly says to Helena, “I am as dull and deaf as money” — he is unable to hear love in himself or in another person. He must go through a night of dreaming in order to rediscover his taste for healthy love.

In therapy, Demetrius talks about how he abandoned his youthful desires, believing that he first needed to make a career. This “first” took most of his life, and now he feels it is too late. Sometimes, he directly expresses his disillusionment with the “marriage to a rich father-in-law”, but more often he speaks about his burnout in his professional “marriage to money”. He is also a prisoner of his wealthy parents, who have built him a golden cage, and he no longer believes he could make it through life on his own. He cannot divorce his parents in order to create an equal, adult relationship.

Lysander — love for obstacles

“True love cannot smooth a straight road” [1, p. 419].

The American sexologist Jack Morin, in his book The Erotic Mind, formulated the so-called “erotic equation”: attraction + obstacles = desire [6]. This rule can help many couples overcome challenges. It may have even inspired the saying “love conquers all.” Obstacles can give lovers wings, making the imagined fulfillment even more attractive. However, the same rule means that once the obstacles are overcome, desire may fade. As we see in the equation, sometimes desire can arise only due to the presence of obstacles. When they disappear, a crisis occurs. Lysander, under the spell of the elf’s trickery, falls into the trap of the “grass is greener on the other side” mentality and devalues the beloved Hermia, idealizing Helena instead. Fortunately, he manages to sober up and rediscover his previous attraction, independent of obstacles.

In therapy, Lysanders fear smooth roads — they only know how to cope with obstacles, and they are real masters at it. A calm, non-crisis situation fills them with anxiety — they don’t know how to navigate it. In childhood, they were the firefighters, capable of putting out family fires. As adults, they become arsonists because they can’t find their identity without extinguishing flames.

Helena — love for hurt and revenge

“I am as constant as a spaniel,
The more you feed me, the more I fawn on you.

Treat me as a dog: beat me, scorn me,
Leave me alone — unworthy,
I want only one favor: to follow you, step by step" [1, p. 434].

Helena feels inferior to Hermia, whom she believes she will never match. At the same time, she is sure of her inferiority and full of resentment for being "less than" others. She doesn't realize that her sense of inferiority is a product of her own mind, which cannot bear the inaccessibility of the desired person without falling into generalizations and attacks. She thus harbors a desire for revenge against the world that makes her feel inferior. Rejection by Demetrius triggers her sense of inferiority, activating a pattern of hurt and revenge. Instead of making the man unattractive, his rejection only intensifies her desire. Referring to attachment theory, we could suggest that her anxious-ambivalent attachment style is activated by signals of rejection, prompting her to cling to the rejecting object like a frightened child screaming and grabbing the leg of an angry mother. Trapped in this pattern, she has no choice but to chase after the rejecting man in an attempt to soothe her panic fear of abandonment.

The other side of this pattern is her anger toward the object of her love, who in her experience enslaves her by rejecting her — hence the desire for revenge, to destroy the one she cannot possess. A substitute fulfillment for this will be witnessing the humiliation of the beloved.

"But he shall pay me back, that villain,
With a sight more precious than gold —
The sight of him running back and forth" [1, p. 423].

In therapy, Helena brings example after example of the man's atrocious behavior. She swings between contempt for all men and a feverish search for the next "perfect one," who, with the slightest deviation from the ideal pattern, becomes just like the others. She continues to struggle in the trap of unforgiven hurt, thinking her banner of grievance will bring justice. In reality, it only obscures her horizon.

If both partners have the "Helena syndrome," they display a very fiery "dance" of grievances and accusations. Each one excels in describing their own misfortunes more dramatically. In response to their partner's narrative, they must counter any impulse of guilt with an even more convincing description of their own hurt and the partner's fault. The escalation of conflict only stops when both are exhausted or when one of them realizes the scale of destruction they are causing.

Oberon and Titania — love for conflict and triangulation

"Oberon wished to keep
A grateful companion close by his side in the forest's thick foliage,
But Titania, infatuated with the page,
Dressing him in flowers and completely enamored,
Would not agree to this arrangement." [1, p. 431].

The couple of Oberon and Titania can be described as "an old, troubled marriage". They reveal many dark sides of a long-term relationship that, while called a marriage, has little

to do with true dependence on the other person. They have physically separated, but they are constantly connected by a war over the pageboy, which can be seen as a triangulated child. The child seems like a safe substitute for the partner because it is weaker, more dependent, and can be more easily controlled.

When Oberon and Titania come to therapy, the therapist might feel a chill. He feels smaller, weaker, and insufficient. They look down on him, bribing him like the next pageboy or elf. They both threaten and seduce him. The triangulated therapist experiences strong tension and needs stabilizing supervision to regain a neutral position.

If they manage to break free from their destructive dance, they might still benefit from mutual dreaming — reaching a position where they withdraw their accusatory projections and acknowledge:

“All these miseries
Are the children of our own disputes.
We, the parents, gave them life” [1, p. 431].

Summary

I allowed myself to dream of marriage, of Shakespeare, and of couples therapy. To dream in Ogden’s sense of the word, seeing phenomena from various angles, hoping to inspire readers—therapists in particular—to embark on their own dreams with patients. My journey through this map is, of course, only one possibility. Each reader of Shakespeare’s play will focus on different aspects of the characters and can take their own journey.

I am aware that I have left out many interesting aspects — including those concerning same-sex couples, the world of fairies, and the craftsmen. Each couple in the play could be the subject of a separate article. What mattered most to me was to propose a Fisherian-Ogdenian method of traveling and to give space to the readers.

I do not attach myself to connecting specific characters with particular disorders of romantic relationships. Even more so, I am not critical of them. I remember that the entire drama is one big dream, and the characters represent the distortions of love to which we are all vulnerable. Each of us may fall into the trap of the conqueror, possessor, rebel, ruler, victim, or lover of obstacles. However, the ability to dream with Shakespeare gives us a tremendous opportunity and privilege. We can help couples radically reorganize their emotional lives and find their way to marriage amidst the narcissistic demands for a partner who is perfectly tuned, yet will never be the true, authentic other.

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