Editorial Emendation and the Opening of A Midsummer Night's Dream

ERNE, Lukas Christian

Abstract

Argues against the usual emendation of "Now bent" to "New bent" in Midsummer Night's Dream, 1.1.10.

Reference

One

Editorial Emendation and the Opening of

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Lukas Erne

**Theseus**

Now faire Hippolita, our nuptiall hower
Draws on apase: fower happy daies bring in
An other Moone: but oh, me thinks, how slow
This old Moone waues. She lingers my desires,
Like to a Stepdame, or a dowager,
Long withering out a yong mans reuenewe.

**Hippolita**

Fower daies will quickly steepe themselues in night:
Fower nights will quickly dreame away the time:
And then the Moone, like to a siluer bowe,
Now bent in heauen, shall beholde the night
Of our solemnities.


Some time ago, I distributed a photocopy of the beginning of the first quarto of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1600) to a group of advanced students and asked them to think about differences to the text in modern editions. We discussed what modern editors do when preparing an edition such as the Arden, the Oxford, or the New Cambridge: the modernisation of spelling and punctuation, the expansion and regularisation of speech headings, collation, annotation. And emendation. In the first eleven lines, editors usually emend two words: ‘waues’ to ‘wanes’, in line 4; and ‘Now bent’ to ‘New bent’, or ‘New-bent’, in line 10. My students saw good reasons for the first emendation but – in good Genevan iconoclast tradition – were totally unpersuaded by the second. I remembered that all the modern editions I had consulted read
\textit{New bent in heaven}, a reading that had firmly engraved itself in my memory when I performed in a student production of the play as an undergraduate. So I tried to defend the traditional emendation (a reflex I lament in other editors but am clearly not above myself). Yet I found it hard to do so and may well have left most students unconvinced.

A few days later, I investigated the editorial history of the passage. The emendation in line 4, ‘waues’ to ‘wanes’, goes back to the second quarto of 1619 and was adopted in all later seventeenth-century editions — and by all modern editors too. ‘Now bent’ in line 10, however, remained the accepted reading throughout the seventeenth century. In 1709, Nicholas Rowe was the first to change the passage to ‘New bent’, and, with the exception of the little noted Everyman Shakespeare, all modern editions agree with Rowe. The only eighteenth-century editor who did not follow Rowe’s emendation is Samuel Johnson, whose text unaccountably reads ‘Never bent’, presumably a misprint, as H. H. Furness pointed out. A nineteenth-century critic objected to what had long become a standard emendation: ‘however pleasing these lines may be, they exhibit proof that Shakespeare, like Homer, may sometimes slumber; for, as the old moon had still four nights to run, it is quite clear that at the time Hippolyta speaks of there would be no moon, either full-orbed or “like to a silver bow”, to beam on their solemnities’. John Payne Collier agreed and thought the problem could be fixed with the original reading, ‘whereof the meaning is that “then the moon, which is new bent in heaven like a silver bow, shall behold the night of our solemnities”’. Collier’s edition thus restored Q1’s ‘Now’, but later editors returned to Rowe’s emendation. So with only three exceptions, all editors from Rowe in 1709 to Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen in 2007 seem to have agreed that ‘Now’ should be emended to ‘New’.

Before discussing the emendation from ‘Now’ to ‘New’, let us look at the two speeches. They clearly form a dramatic whole, Hippolyta’s speech answering Theseus’s. Both are concerned with the period of time between the present and the planned wedding in four days. As it turns out, the time \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} dramatises until the end of the play is only two and a half days, an inconsistency of which readers and spectators can easily remain unaware. Theseus’s ‘our nuptiall hower’ in the first and Hippolyta’s ‘our solemnities’ in the last line frame the passage, ‘nuptiall hower’ and ‘solemnities’ referring to the event that will unite them and the first-person plural pronoun ‘our’, not used elsewhere in this passage, expressing that union. In between, both characters dwell on the period of time leading up to the wedding — ‘fower … daies’ (2), ‘Fower daies’ (7) — during which the ‘Moone’ (3, 4, 9) wanes. Both characters mention the speed with which they think the four days will go by. Theseus is remarkably inconsistent: the ‘nuptiall hower / Draws on apase’ (1–2), but the old moon wanes slowly: ‘She lingers ny desires’ (4). Hippolyta, by contrast, is consistent, saying twice in two consecutive lines that the remaining time ‘will quickly’ (7, 8) elapse. While Theseus’s tone appears to be one of impatience, that of Hippolyta is more elusive. Is she reassuring Theseus that their wedding day will come soon, or is she complaining that it will come all too soon? Does she think the quick passage of the four days leading up to their wedding is a good or a bad thing?

The ‘Moone’ is compared by both characters to that which ‘She’ is ‘like to’ (5, 9). Theseus’ ‘Moone’ ‘lingers [his] desires, / Like to a Stepdame, or a dowager, / Long withering out a yong mans reuenewe’ (4–6), which equates postponed marriage and consummation with delayed inheritance and diminished economic potency. No less charmingly, the comparison makes Theseus cast himself in the role of the young male, in opposition to the female, who is old and withering. Hippolyta compares the ‘Moone’ to ‘a siluer bowe … in heauen’ (9–10), reminding us of the virgin warrior’s reputed skill in archery. The moon and bow are associated with Diana, the goddess of chastity, who ‘shall beholde the night / Of [Theseus and Hippolyta’s] solemnities’ (10–11).

The two opening speeches further gain in meaning if we recall other parts of the play. Theseus’s ‘dowager, / Long withering out a yong mans reuenewe’ (5–6), who obstructs the fulfilment of love, contrasts with Lysander’s ‘widowe aunt, a dowager, / Of great reuenew’ (1.1.157–8; I quote from Q1 but line references
are to the Arden 2 edition), who enables it. Theseus's description of the old moon as a female who is 'withering' (6) looks ahead to his admonition to Hermia to agree to marry Demetrius, as her father commands: 'But earthy' happy is the rose distild, / Then that, which, withering on the virgin thorne, / Grows, liues, and dies in single blessedness' (1.1.76–8). In both passages, it is delayed or refused marital consummation which, according to Theseus, causes the 'withering'. Theseus and Hippolyta's different perspectives on the speed with which the old moon will be replaced by the new is also revisited later in the play, when they are watching the mechanicals' performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, more specifically, Starveling's performance as Moonshine. To Hippolyta's 'I am aweary of this Moone. Would hee woulde change', Theseus replies: 'It appeares, by his small light of discretion, that hee is in the wane: but yet, in curtesie, in all reason, wee must stay the time' (5.1.242–5). As at the beginning of the play, the moon is said by Theseus to wane, the only two passages in which the word refers to the moon. In act 1, scene 1, Theseus is impatiently awaiting the change of the moon; in act 5, scene 1, when they are watching Moonshine, Hippolyta is Theseus's opening lines contain in fact the first of many references to the moon in the play, the 'recurrent, incidental references to the moon' being one of the 'patterning elements' of A Midsummer Night's Dream, as Stephen Booth has rightly pointed out.7

The moment of time to which Theseus and Hippolyta are looking forward without quite naming it is that of the 'new moon'. Theseus mentions the 'old Moone' (4), but the new moon, although referred to twice in lines 3 and 9, is not actually called 'new'—or at least not until quite a bit later in the scene, when Theseus says: 'Take time to paws'; and, by the next newe moone, / ... prepare to dye, / ... Or else to wed Demetrius' (1.1.83–8). One reason why the emendation from 'Now' to 'New' may be appealing is that the word 'new' is otherwise conspicuously absent from the passage—unless we consider that it is hiding in 'reuenewe' (6), just as 'old' is hiding in 'behelde' (10). The passage makes explicit several temporal oppositions: between 'slow' and 'quickly', 'old' and 'yong', and 'daies' and 'nights' (even, more specifically, 'Fower daies' and 'Fower nights'). Given this pattern of oppositions, we expect 'old Moone' in line 4 to be followed by 'new Moone', but it is not, although the moon, if we accept the traditional emendation, is at least 'New bent in heaven'.

Modern editors have defended the emendation from 'Now' to 'New' in various ways. One editor claims that 'Now' is 'probably a compositor's error, due to the confusion, a common one, of "e" and "o"'.8 Another one believes that the 'probable compositorial misreading [was] affected by "then" at i. 9'.9 Perhaps, though 'e'/o' confusion is less likely in secretary hand than minim misreadings, and while 'then' may invite 'now', the idea of the new moon calls for 'new', not 'now'. Even if secretary hand 'e' and 'o' can be confused and 'then' might have prompted 'now', the mere possibility of compositorial error does not, I would argue, justify an emendation. The question is whether the passage in Q1 makes sense. A third editor claims that "Now" can only be defended as proleptic: "then the moon" will be "new bent in heaven". But an audience would hear "Now" as in contrast with "then". A proleptic 'Now' in the given context, the editor infers, makes no sense, and so the emendation from 'Now' to 'New' is necessary.

Yet is it true that 'Now' would have to be understood as proleptic? Or can Hippolyta be understood as making one point about the moon in the future ('then the Moone ... shall beholde the night / Of our solemnities') and another point about the moon in the present (the moon is 'like to a siluer bowe, / Now bent in heaven')? In terms of the lunar cycle, 'Now' need not be proleptic: four days (or nights) before the appearance of the new moon's waxing crescent, what is left of the old moon's waning crescent is slender enough to be compared to 'a siluer bowe'. The syntax of 'like to a siluer bowe, / Now bent in heauen' is somewhat awkward, it is true, and the sentence would more naturally run: the moon is now bent in heaven like to a silver bow. The inversion of the expected order satisfies the metrical pattern, 'like to a siluer bowe' completing one pentameter and 'Now bent in heauen' starting the next, whereas the syntactically more natural order would leave
the first line one foot short and the second one foot long. So did Shakespeare slightly bend the syntax (in a way of which he is also capable elsewhere) because it suited his metrics?

It is possible that he did, although I cannot be certain. So what am I to do as editor of A Midsummer Night's Dream? As close reader, if given the choice between the two words, 'New' or 'Now', I have a preference for 'New'. Not that 'Now' is impossible. Indeed, in some ways, it fits very well: the beginning of the first speech is echoed by the ending of the second, and the similarity is underlined by the repetition of 'now': 'Now ... our nuptiall hower' (1); 'Now ... our solemnities' (10). What is more, 'Now' naturally follows from 'then' in the preceding line. 'New', however, is the word which works better syntactically, and it spells out the implied opposition between the old and the new moon. Yet as editor I do not choose on the basis of aesthetic preference. Editors need to emend passages that are clearly corrupt, but the present passage, 'Now bent in heauen', is not. The Q1 reading was followed by five other editions in the seventeenth century: the second quarto (1619), and the first (1623), second (1632), third (1663-4), and fourth (1685) folios. The people responsible for Shakespeare's seventeenth-century reprints, as Sonia Massai has fully demonstrated, were not mindless copyists who let the texts deteriorate, but were often astute editors who carefully chose to alter or preserve readings in earlier editions. They believed - and I agree with them - that 'Now bent in heauen' (contrary to 'This old Moone waues') is a defensible reading. Therefore, unless we wish to practise the kind of aesthetic editing which we now associate with Alexander Pope, who liberally 'improved' the Shakespearean text based on his poetic preferences,11 editors, I believe, have no other responsible choice than to return to 'Now'. In my text for the new Norton Shakespeare, I will thus eliminate the traditional emendation (and, incidentally, add waning and waxing parentheses):

And then the moon (like to a silver bow
Now bent in heaven) shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

TWO

The Story of O: Reading Letters in the Prologue to Henry V

TRAVIS D. WILLIAMS

O for a muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars, and at his heels,
Leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that hath dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France?
Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O pardon, since a crooked figure may
Attest in little space a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder.
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.
Into a thousand parts divide one man
And make imaginary puissance.
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them