

Jessica's and Lorenzo's Night Game

The night game played out by Jessica and Lorenzo—during the time they are alone, under the beautiful moonlight of Belmont—does not reveal the blissful union of lovers but an inner turmoil which belies the peaceful outward setting. The two lovers are together, in a beautiful garden, under the moonlight, yet all that is evoked from their subconscious free associations are stories relating to betrayal and tragedy. All of the stories conjured up on this moonlit night are tragedies where one or both of the lovers end up dead. So, outwardly, the two lovers are together but inwardly there is a sense of severe conflicts and doubt—especially as it relates to Jessica's betrayal of her father. (Jessica, for her own self-serving ends, harmed and betrayed own father, while Portia honored her father and remained true to his will).

We assume that Jessica was already embroiled in some emotional turmoil and doubt (and perhaps feeling pangs of guilt) but she glossed it over with a Christian smile. She may have been too timid (or too isolated) to be able to express her true feelings. Indeed, the only time she tries to express her feelings, Lorenzo dismisses them with a long-winded philosophical reply. [5.1.69-88]. But here, in the unguarded expression of her subconscious, we see her deep division and sense of doom arising. Jessica, it seems, can no longer move with impunity in some fantasy of being a Christian and how such a neat and painless conversion will relieve her of all doubt and suffering. It will not. She has betrayed her father, stolen from him, wasted his hard-earned money, and dishonored his dead wife. She can neither escape nor dismiss this fact. Perhaps she has tried to keep this at bay on a conscious level—by occupying herself with “unthrift love”—but it seems that her own subconscious, her own sense of what is right, has caught up with her. Perhaps her own subconscious is exerting itself, arising, prompting her to rectify her relationship with her father. Perhaps it is trying to tell her that she cannot live a fulfilling life, a Christian life, any kind of life, which is based upon a festering lie and one which has caused others to suffer.

Jessica never talks about any kind of inner conflict; and though we can assume she is racked by regret and guilt, it is never expressed. It is only during this “night game” that we see Jessica as being more than a one-dimensional character; she possesses an inner life; she is not just a starry-eyed Christian convert, who is wholly concerned with how she will fit in with Christian society (and with her outer appearance) than with her own moral being. Here is where we see her Jewishness exerting itself. Here we see her as a woman who has an active and conscious inner life, who is in turmoil, who is isolated, and who—behind the veneer of her new-won Christian smile—is taken over by unexpressed doubt and regret.

Even after her conversion, Jessica remains an outsider. The only one whom she knows truly accepts her, with all her flaws, is her father. She also feels, that even after her foolish and cruel strike at his heart—her betrayal, her stealing his wealth, her conversion, and the trading of his ring for a monkey—that her father will forgive her, and accept her back. In the court, Portia, when talking to Shylock refers to Jessica as “your daughter.” We do not hear any protest as we might expect from Shylock, such as “she is no longer my daughter.” All we hear silence, which is Shylock's admission that indeed Jessica is still his daughter.

Perhaps of no real consequence in this “night game” is that the first reference cited by Lorenzo

includes both partners of the tragic pair (Troilus and Cressida), while Jessica's next reference (and the two that follow) only refer to the woman of the story (Thisbe, Dido, and Medea). Moreover, none of the stories, as cited, reference the actual tragedy but only focus on a tangential romantic (moonlit) aspect of the story. Troilus looks down at the Grecian tents, which are camped outside the city walls. He is still hopeful. His love may be returned, as promised. Only later comes the betrayal when he learns that Cressida left him and gave herself to Diomedes. Thisbe runs from the lion's shadow (cast by the full moon). She and Pyramus are still alive. Only later, when Pyramus, upon seeing her blood-stained shawl, believes she is dead, does he kill himself. Then, after seeing that Pyramus is dead, Thisbe kills herself. (This is the same storyline as *Romeo and Juliet*). Dido stands on the shore of the ocean, calling Aeneas to return to Carthage—only after he sails away does she curse him and kill herself. Medea helps Jason win the golden fleece; then she gathers enchanted herbs, and with her sorceress powers, brings Jason's father, Aeson, back to life. This is the time when the couple is in love and the time when they are celebrating. Only later does Jason leave Medea (to marry the king's daughter), and after that does she kill her own children. All the story lines cited come before the actual tragedy, thus invoking highly inauspicious events. All of which suggest a future doom. When the legend-citing is over, Lorenzo brings the game to the present; in the same arch as these tragic stories he cites Jessica's having left her father and running off with him to Belmont. Thus, the inclusion of Jessica's storyline in this fell constellation of legends, suggests a tragic ending. In a surprising assault—and no longer in line with the playfulness of the game—Jessica cites that Lorenzo swore that he loved her (which may have also included the assurance that he would take care of her and that everything would be alright), and that he stole her soul with many vows, yet none of them were true. He did not deliver on his promise. Recall, at this time, that the “unthrift” lovers are broke: they have wasted all the wealth they stole from Shylock, (they are “starving”), and we do not see any real means by which they can now support themselves.

In the last two citations, there is a reference to Jessica's “stealing” [“Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew?”] which implies both the stealing of his wealth and her stealing away (as in leaving). Jessica, picking up on this reference, talks of Lorenzo “stealing” her heart. There could be a triple reference here: A) The common reference of a lover *stealing* another's heart, which may imply that one did not give it willingly, that one could not resist, and that one's heart was taken. Note that Jessica refers to her heart being stolen—not by love, nor her love for Lorenzo—but as a result of all the vows he made to her. It would be considered ‘stolen’—gotten by illicit means—only if Lorenzo's vows were not true. B) That Lorenzo broke his vows of faith, and left her soul with these empty vows—read, “Stealing [leaving behind] her soul with many vows of faith [but not with the actual fulfillment of those vows.] C) The steeling or hardening of her soul: “Stealing [steeling / hardening] of her soul with many vows of faith | And ne'er a true one.]

This notion of stealing is rather inauspicious: it implies actions that bring about temporary gain, but which go against the natural course of life, and are therefore likely to bring with them future and inhospitable consequences.

In sum, this “night game” reveals the divided and doubtful position of the lovers (especially Jessica), and it suggests that both lovers are unconsciously aware that their unethical and immoral (and wasteful) actions point to some consequence, some future doom or undoing.

Troilus and Cressida (Criseyde)

In such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents
Where Cressida lay that night. (Lorenzo)

The Trojan prince, Troilus, is struck by the god of love and falls in love with the beautiful yet fickle, Cressida, daughter of a Trojan sage, Calchas. Troilus's uncle, Pandarus, arranges for the couple to exchange letters and, finally, for them to share a night together in his house. Cressida's father leaves Troy and aligns himself with Greeks whose army is camped outside the city. As a reward for his services, Calchas convinces the Greeks to release a Trojan prisoner in exchange for his daughter, who is still within the walls of Troy. When Troilus and Cressida hear of this offer, the young lovers are distraught but Cressida, promising she will be true to her heart, tells Troilus that she will return to him within ten days.

The Greek prince, Diomedes, soon appears in Troy to take Cressida back to the Greeks. Troilus and Cressida, having had only one night of love together, sadly depart. Cressida is soon reunited with her father, who waits for her in the Greek camp:

Her father has her in his arms at once,
and twenty times he kissed his daughter sweet,
and said: 'O my dear daughter, welcome.'
She said she was glad with him to meet,
and stood, mute, mild and meek him to greet.
But here I leave her with her father to dwell,
and straight I will to you of Troilus tell. [iv.28]

Troilus awaits Cressida's return. He walks upon the walls of Troy looking out at the Greek tents below. On the tenth night Troilus (and his uncle Pandarus) go up on to the walls of the city to watch for her return, but in vain. She does not return, having given herself to Diomedes on that very night.

Also fast along the walls he'd walk,
and the Greek host he would see,
and to himself like this he would talk:
'Lo, yonder is my own lady free,
or else yonder where those tents be,
and thence comes this air that is so sweet,
that in my soul I feel it's good complete. [iv.96]

Chaucer, *Troilus and Cressida*, trans., A. S. Kline

Through dreams and premonitions (given to him by his sister) Troilus suspects Cressida's

betrayal. Aeneas [the same character who leaves Dido, in the next legend cited by Lorenzo] goes to the Greek camp to meet with Achilles, and Troilus goes with him. While in the camp, Troilus makes his way to Calchas's tent where he sees Cressida conversing tenderly with Diomedes. She gives Diomedes Troilus's token which was given to her in pledge of his love—and Diomedes decides to wear it as a token on his helmet. She agrees that Diomedes may come to her later in the night. After Diomedes leaves, talking to herself, she bids goodbye to Troilus. Troilus, hearing all this, is crestfallen and curses her falseness and promises to avenge himself in battle. In the war that follows, Troilus enters the battle in a rage, fighting Diomedes at every turn. In the end he is killed by the great warrior, Achilles.

Background

The story was first told (in its present form) by Benoît de Sainte-Maure (12th Century), and amplified into a longer poem by Boccaccio in *Il Filostrato* (14th Century) and then by Chaucer in *Troilus and Creseyde*, (14th Century). The story was used by Robert Henryson in *The Testament of Crisseid* and retold by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, around 1601. Chaucer depicts the story with a certain sympathy for Cressida, while Shakespeare portrays her as a woman who is faithless and “false in love.”

Pyramus and Thisbe

In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew,
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
And ran dismayed away. (Jessica)

From Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

Bk IV:55-92 Arsippe tells the story of Pyramus and Thisbe

‘Pyramus and Thisbe, he the loveliest youth, and she the most sought after girl, the East held, lived in neighbouring houses, in the towering city of Babylon, that Semiramis is said to have enclosed with walls of brick. Their nearness and their first childhood steps made them acquainted and in time love appeared. They would have agreed to swear the marriage oath as well, but their parents prevented it. They were both on fire, with hearts equally captivated, something no parent can prevent. They had no one to confide all this to: nods and signs were their speech, and the more they kept the fire hidden, the more it burned.

There was a fissure, a thin split, in the shared wall between their houses, which traced back to when it was built. No one had discovered the flaw in all those years – but what can love not detect? – You lovers saw it first, and made it a path for your voices. Your endearments passed that way, in safety, in the gentlest of murmurs. Often, when they were in place, Thisbe here, and Pyramus there, and they had each caught the sound of the other's breath, they said “Unfriendly wall, why do you hinder lovers? How hard would it be for you to let our whole

bodies meet, or if that is too much perhaps, to open to the kisses we give each other? Not that we are not grateful. We confess that we owe it to you that words are allowed to pass to loving ears.” So they talked, hopelessly, sitting opposite, saying, as night fell, “Farewell”, each touching the wall with kisses that could not reach the other side.

One morning when Aurora had quenched the fires of night, and the sun’s rays had thawed the frosty grass, they came to their usual places. Then they decided, first with a little murmur of their great sorrows, to try, in the silence of night, to deceive the guards, and vanish outside. Once out of the house they would leave the city as well, and they agreed, in case they went astray crossing the open country, to meet by the grave of Ninus, and hide in the shelter of a tree. There was a tall mulberry tree there, dense with white berries, bordering a cool fountain. They were satisfied with their plan, and the light, slow to lose its strength, was drowned in the waters, and out of the same waters the night emerged.’

Bk IV:93-127 The death of Pyramus

‘Carefully opening the door, Thisbe, slipped out, deceiving her people, and came to the tomb, her face veiled, and seated herself under the tree they had agreed on. Love made her brave. But a lioness fresh from the kill, her jaws foaming, smeared with the blood of cattle, came to slake her thirst at the nearby spring. In the moonlight, Babylonian Thisbe sees her some way off, and flees in fear to a dark cave, and as she flees, she leaves behind her fallen veil. When the fierce lioness has drunk deeply, returning towards the trees, she chances to find the flimsy fabric, without its owner, and rips it in her bloodstained jaws. Leaving the city a little later, Pyramus sees the creature’s tracks in the thick dust, and his face is drained of colour. When he also discovers the veil stained with blood, he cries, “Two lovers will be lost in one night. She was the more deserving of a long life. I am the guilty spirit. I have killed you, poor girl, who told you to come by night to this place filled with danger, and did not reach it first. O, all you lions, that live amongst these rocks, tear my body to pieces, and devour my sinful flesh in your fierce jaws! Though it is cowardly to ask for death”

He picks up Thisbe’s veil, and carries it with him to the shadow of the tree they had chosen. Kissing the token, and wetting it with tears, he cries, “Now, be soaked in my blood too.” Having spoken he drove the sword he had been wearing into his side, and, dying, pulled it, warm, from the wound. As he lay back again on the ground, the blood spurted out, like a pipe fracturing at a weak spot in the lead, and sending long bursts of water hissing through the split, cutting through the air, beat by beat. Sprinkled with blood, the tree’s fruit turned a deep blackish-red, and the roots, soaked through, also imbued the same overhanging mulberries with the dark purplish colour.’

Bk IV:128-166 The death of Thisbe

‘Now Thisbe returns, not yet free of fear, lest she disappoint her lover, and she calls for him with her eyes and in her mind, eager to tell him about the great danger she has escaped. Though she recognises the place and the shape of the familiar tree, the colour of the berries puzzles her. She waits there: perhaps this is it. Hesitating, she sees quivering limbs writhing on the bloodstained earth, and starts back, terrified, like the sea, that trembles when the slightest breeze touches its surface, her face showing whiter than boxwood. But when, staying a moment

longer, she recognises her lover, she cries out loud with grief, striking at her innocent arms, and tearing at her hair. Cradling the beloved body, she bathes his wounds with tears, mingling their drops with blood. Planting kisses on his cold face, she cries out ‘Pyramus, what misfortune has robbed me of you? Pyramus, answer me! Your dearest Thisbe calls to you: obey me, lift your fallen head!’ At Thisbe’s name, Pyramus raised his eyes, darkening with death, and having looked at her, buried them again in darkness.’

‘When she recognised her veil and saw the ivory scabbard without its sword, she said, “Unhappy boy, your own hand, and your love, have destroyed you! I too have a firm enough hand for once, and I, too, love. It will give me strength in my misfortune. I will follow you to destruction, and they will say I was a most pitiful friend and companion to you. He, who could only be removed from me by death, death cannot remove. Nevertheless I ask this for both of us, in uttering these words, O our poor parents, mine and his, do not deny us the right to be laid in one tomb, we whom certain love, and the strangest hour have joined. And you, the tree, that now covers the one poor body with your branches, and soon will cover two, retain the emblems of our death, and always carry your fruit darkened in mourning, a remembrance of the blood of us both.”

Saying this, and placing the point under her heart, she fell forward onto the blade, still warm with his blood. Then her prayer moved the gods, and stirred her parents’ feelings, for the colour of the berry is blackish-red, when fully ripened, and what was left from the funeral pyres rests in a single urn.’

Trans., A. S. Kline

This story is presented in the form of a farcical play and performed by incompetent actors—as a play within a play—in the last act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Aeneas and Dido

In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage. (Lorenzo)

The story opens where Dido is bound by a vow (of faith) to her dead husband yet she has a rising passion for Aeneas. The god Juno gets Venus to agree to the union, and she arranges a hunt and then a storm which brings them together in a cave. They make love in the cave and live openly as lovers when they return to Carthage. Through this act, Dido considers them to be married, though the union has not yet been consecrated in ceremony. Rumors spread that Dido and Aeneas have given into their passion for each other, so much so that they have begun to neglect their duties as rulers.

When Jupiter learns of Dido and Aeneas’s affair, he dispatches Mercury to Carthage to remind

Aeneas that his destiny lies elsewhere and that he must leave for Italy. This message shocks and saddens Aeneas—yet he must obey. He does not know how to tell Dido of his immanent departure. He prepares his fleet, intending to sail away in secret, but the queen suspects his ploy and confronts him. In a rage, she insults him and accuses him of stealing her honor. [See Jessica's claim about Lorenzo's "stealing her soul" [5.1.18]] She is outraged. She had given him a place to stay, gifts, honor, and even part of the kingdom. She had given up everything for him. He had not been truthful to her; he deceived her; he led her to believe that he was with her, and never told her about his dutiful obligations which now calls him away. She then plots to stop his departure. While Aeneas pities her, he maintains that he has no choice but to follow the will of the gods. As a last effort, Dido sends Anna (her sister) to try to persuade the Trojan hero to stay, but to no avail.

Dido is caught between fierce love and bitter anger. She instructs Anna to build a great fire in the courtyard. There, Dido says, she will rid Aeneas from her mind by burning all the clothes and weapons he left behind. Aeneas, still readying his ships, does sleep well; in his dreams, Mercury visits him again to tell him that he must depart at once. Aeneas awakens and calls his men to the ships, and they set sail. Dido sees the fleet leaving and falls into despair. She curses Aeneas (and prays that he be doomed by the goddess that hates him, Juno). She then runs out to the courtyard, climbs upon the burning pyre, unsheathes a sword that Aeneas left behind, and throws herself upon the blade. Her last words are used to curse the departing lover.

*But Dido, desperate, beside herself,
with awful undertakings, eyes bloodshot ...
mounts in madness that high pyre, unsheathes
the Dardan sword, a gift not sought for such
an end. And when she saw the Trojan's clothes
and her familiar bed, she checked her thought
and tears a little, lay upon the couch
and spoke her final words: "O relics, dear
while fate and god allowed, receive my spirit
and free me from these cares; for I have lived
and journeyed through the course assigned by fortune ...
I shall die unavenged, but I shall die,"
she says. "Thus, thus, I gladly go below
to shadows. May the savage Dardan drink
with his own eyes this fire from the deep
and take with him the omen of my death."
Then Dido's words were done, and her companions
can see her fallen on the sword; the blade
is foaming with her blood, her hands are bloodstained.*

(From Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Book IV, 888-913) (19 BC)

Marlowe wrote a play based on this story, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, in 1585.

Jason and Medea

In such a night
Medea gathered the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Aeson. (Jessica)

Jason and the crew of his ship, the Argo, began this story by sailing to Colchis, a city in Asia and Medea's home, in search of the legendary Golden Fleece. Medea, a sorceress and princess, fell in love with Jason, and used her magic to help him secure the Fleece. Amidst the celebration for the recovery of the Golden Fleece, Jason missed the presence of his father, who was old and sick and who could not take part in the celebrations. Jason asked Medea to use her arts and to take some years from his life and add it to his father's. She refused. Instead, when the next full moon came she issued forth alone to use her sorcery to restore Jason's father. She made incantations to the stars and the moon; to Hecate, the goddess of the underworld and to Tellus, goddess of the earth, by whose power plants gain their potency. [Note: Hecate was a divinity sometimes identified with Diana and sometimes with Prosperine. As Diana represents the splendor of moonlight and the night, Hecate represents its darkness and terror. Hecate was the goddess of sorcery and witchcraft, and said to wander at night, and seen only by dogs, whose barking told of her approach.] Medea also invoked the gods of the woods and caves, mountains and valleys, lake, rivers, wind, and rain. When she recited her incantations the stars shone brighter and a chariot, drawn by serpents, descended. She entered the chariot, which carried her to distant regions, where she selected potent and enchanted herbs. For nine nights she gathered all that she needed. Next she erected two altars, one to Hecate and the other to Hebe, the goddess of youth. She implored Pluto and his stolen bride not to hasten the old man's life. Then she directed Aeson to come forth; she charmed him into a death-like sleep and laid him on a bed of herbs. Then, with streaming hair, she moved around the altars three times, dipped flaming sticks into the blood of a black sheep (who had been sacrificed) and laid them out to burn. She prepared a cauldron in which she put magic herbs, acrid seeds and flowers, stones from the distant east, sand from the shore of an all-surrounding ocean; hoar frost, gathered by moonlight, a screech owl's head and wings, and the entrails of a wolf. She added pieces of tortoise shell, the liver of stags—animals which cling to life—and the head and beak of a crow, which outlives nine generations of men. She added other nameless items, and boiled everything in the cauldron, stirring it with a dry olive branch, which became green and covered with olives when she removed it. When all was ready, Medea cut the throat of the old man and let all his blood drip out. Then she poured the potion of her cauldron into his mouth and upon his wounds. As soon as she was done, his hair and beard assumed the dark color of his youth, his pale complexion and emaciation were gone; his veins were full of blood and limbs full of vigor. Aeson was amazed, feeling young and alive, as he had felt forty years before.

After Jason recovered the Golden Fleece, and his father had been restored, Jason and Medea moved to Corinth. There they had two children. However, when the boys were still young, Jason abandoned Medea and his own children in order to marry Glauce, the daughter of Creon, the king. By this move Jason hoped to advance his own station and perhaps even to succeed as

king.

Medea had left everything for Jason—her home, her people—and she bore him two sons. Yet Jason was aloof, making no secret of the fact that his abandonment of Medea—to marry Glauce—was for political reasons. Jason has no sympathy for the woman he was spurning and he even supported the king's decision to banish her in order to protect Glauce. Medea, having lost her husband, now pleaded that she not be banished, but her cries fell on deaf ears. Finally, Aegus, the King of Athens, promised Medea that she could find a home in his city. With a more certain future—and a place to go—Medea's thoughts turn to revenge. The method she chose was vicious—and the same use of herbs that restored Aeson to life were now used to take away life. First, under the guise of seeking forgiveness, she sent her sons to visit Glauce with a special gift of a crown and a robe, both liberally doused with poison. When Glauce put on the crown she soon died—but not only this, her father, Creon, also died when he tried to rescue her.

For fear of the revenge which might be visited upon her children, Medea comes to the torturous decision that she must kill them herself—and that is what she does. Medea acknowledged the pain her children's death brought to her, yet finds it a price worth paying to see Jason suffer. She then tells of her plans to flee to Athens and finishes by divining an “unheroic death” for Jason, who will perish by being hit over the head with a log from his famous ship, the Argo.

Lorenzo and Jessica

In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew,
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice,
As far as Belmont. (Lorenzo)

In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her souls with many vows of faith,
And ne'er a true one. (Jessica)