Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: 
The Case of A Midsummer Night’s Dream

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To speak of the aesthetic in the early twenty-first century in Shakespeare studies is to risk multiple misunderstandings. The word has been in bad odor for the last twenty years or so, serving as the subordinated member of key binary opposites of contemporary critical practice. In an era dominated by French poststructuralist theory, the aesthetic has been the opposite of the political. It identified the passé critical practice of Northrop Frye and the New Critics before him; it meant discussing literature decontextualized from its larger social milieu, purposes, and intertextuality.\(^1\) As John J. Joughin wrote, “For most radical critics, aesthetics still tends to be discarded as part of the ‘problem’ rather than the ‘solution.’”\(^2\)

There have been, however, a number of critics—Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Stephen Greenblatt among them—who have resisted this reductive thinking.\(^3\) All of these critics know that many radical political traditions, including more than one version of Marxism—not to mention German post-Kantian philosophy generally—contained an extensive, appreciative archive of writings on the aesthetic, which valued art as a highly significant human practice in itself and, in the case of Marxist aesthetics, specifically refused to reduce

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art to ideology. This is especially true of the Frankfurt School theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, whose work draws on Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud, as well as Marx. They are at once both developers and critics of Marxism and major sources for what I am calling “impure aesthetics”—aesthetics conceived as creative of an imagined realm separate from empirical reality, but one that draws its materials from that reality.

Where aesthetics has not been marginalized in Shakespeare studies, it has instead been removed from the work of art and applied to cultures as a whole, effacing the distance between art itself and the society which produced it and thus threatening to rob the artwork of its critical stance. The new historicism set the terms for this trend, but perhaps Patricia Fumerton’s Cultural Aesthetics, which developed from Greenblatt’s writing and in turn helped to give birth to “the new materialism,” is the pioneering work. Replacing “cultural poetics” with “cultural aesthetics”—traditionally, the distinction has differentiated a theory of artistic production called “poetics” and a theory of artistic reception called “aesthetics”—Fumerton used “aesthetics” to refer to the semiology of aristocratic ornamentation displayed in clothing, food, jewelry, household furnishings, and other articles of daily life, investigating their kinship with and reproduction within literary works, particularly allegorical ones. Although brilliantly argued and suggestive, Cultural Aesthetics never fully theorized itself or the category of the aesthetic. At several points, Fumerton comes close to Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory as an aesthetic space of disunified fragments in which any object can mean anything else because the world is assumed to be valueless and emptied. But the anthropological lure of turning society into an aesthetic space leads Fumerton to abandon aesthetic form as what separates art from society proper and to see commodities and commodity trade paradoxically as empty and dehumanizing, yet at the same time meaningful and intimately tied to selfhood and identity. While premodern societies always look “aesthetic”


to participants in disenchanted modern and/or postmodern cultures, there is a crucial case for maintaining the distinction between the artwork and the society which produced it.

In what follows, the term "aesthetic" will be a polysemous one, but its main meanings devolve from an expansion beyond its traditional attributes, the purely beautiful and the organically unified. In fact, one way to think about impure aesthetics is to understand it to be possible only in our postmodernist present, when new critical methodologies have permitted us to think of the artwork as disunified, constituted by internal clashes and by the insubordination of repressed materials. Thus, the aesthetic can and does have political effects and intentions; indeed, a major line of aesthetic practice from the Romantics to contemporary writers and artists takes many of its central concepts and much of its justification from political ideals of several, often revolutionary, socialist ones. Adorno’s argument for detached rather than committed art is a variation within this larger political tradition, inasmuch as it affirms a broad, socially critical role for all art worthy of the name while warning against artists’ falling into oversimplifying ideologies based on short-sighted commitments.7

**Impure Aesthetics in Today’s Critical Context**

Despite criticism’s nearly three-decades-long experiment in nonaesthetic interpretation of texts, aesthetics has not simply disappeared. Rather, many aesthetic themes have entered into contemporary cultural and literary theory obliquely and invisibly. Discussed through other concepts (ideology, cultural poetics, artifact, or theatricality, for example), aesthetic themes have inhabited the margins of discourses that declared the aesthetic either a retrograde conception or a construct of bourgeois ideology. One result has been that art’s utopian potential—its ability to create visions of the nonexisting, to embody desire and not just received ideas—has become virtually unthinkable.

Precisely because the previous aesthetic criticism of the New Critics and Northrop Frye made political and ideological issues taboo subjects within mainstream English studies, the assumptions and practices of the critical revolution of the 1980s filled a gaping hole and defined the agenda for a generation. Three decades later, however, this kind of political criticism is in danger of becoming domesticated and academicized. Speaking generally, the outcome of new historicism and cultural materialism has been the gradual evolution of a new, nontheoretical “materialism” harder and harder to distinguish from old-

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fashioned positivist historical criticism. In the current period of “post-theory,” there has occurred a blunting of the theoretical and political edges of these approaches. New materialism seems to have abandoned both the political and the aesthetic simultaneously, in favor of “fact” fetishism.⁸ We have seen studies solely concerned with uncovering lost historical contexts and material practices in the absence of any larger political or aesthetic purposes. We have learned about mirrors, beards, codpieces, writing tablets, fruits, condiments, clothing, stage props, and other commodities and artifacts in early modern daily life—sometimes in the vain belief that such detail will deliver us reality sandwiches, more often because such studies have become fashionable and therefore publishable.⁹ There is often a hidden aesthetic dimension in many of these studies—the fascination with objects embodying meaning evidences a pleasurable, aesthetic experience—and many of these works provide useful information about the social contexts of early modern texts. But for most such critics, the aesthetic has simply not been thought through.

In one of those Hegelian ironies so common in intellectual history, it is of course possible that the hegemony of an absolutizing, aesthetics-blind criticism will give birth to a politics-blind “new aestheticism.” Jameson, who sees precisely such a process in France and Germany, fears that a new aestheticism will amount to a return of the most scholastic and socially isolated components of the philosophical aesthetic tradition.¹⁰ Rather, I believe that a reinvigoration of impure aesthetics is a step toward a new appreciation of the specifically aesthetic content of Shakespearean drama and a deeper understanding of the imbrication of Shakespearean aesthetics with the social, the political, and the historical, in its original context and in our own.

It is possible, then, to bring the aesthetic to the fore again, but with a different content from that of Kant, the New Critics, and Northrop Frye. In the United States and the United Kingdom, interest in aesthetics has arisen within the last decade, often by critics determined not to lose criticism’s engagement with the political since the 1980s. And this new engagement with the aesthetic comes in part through a perception that nonaesthetic criticism has largely exhausted itself or led to disconcerting dead ends. There are many theoretical

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sources for this developing movement—the late works of Derrida and Levinas, for example—but the great theorists of impure aesthetics are Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.\footnote{11} Benjamin was most notable for charting the intricate choreography enacted by the work of art and the commodity, while Adorno explored issues of art’s utopian and truth-asserting functions in an increasingly bleak world of almost-complete domination by commodities. Both of these philosopher-critics were influenced by the utopian theory of Marxist theorist Ernst Bloch, whose utopia is generated from desire and has a certain affinity with Northrop Frye’s myth criticism—except that Frye’s method lacked a historicizing dimension.\footnote{12} Bloch situates utopias in sociomaterial situations, reading utopias as responses to the inability of societies to meet human needs, both innate and historically generated. The fairy realm of A Midsummer Night’s Dream—momentarily disturbed by Oberon and Titania’s quarrel, but otherwise a domain of nature’s harmony with human society—is an excellent example, structured for a rapidly urbanizing society haunted by the memory of a rural, feudalistic past and by the actual power of a female monarch.

I will focus here on the utopian aspects of the aesthetic, on art’s ability to create a vision of a world which does not exist but which we find desirable and beautiful, so that it defines what is lacking in our experience. Contrary to Kant but in agreement with Adorno, I believe it is an aesthetic suffused with, rather than unsullied by, eros, even when it is remembered that eros is by no means an entirely beneficent force.

The Meta-Aesthetics of A Midsummer Night’s Dream

A Midsummer Night’s Dream is one of Shakespeare’s fullest explorations of aesthetic ideas. It is thus a meta-aesthetic drama, as well as a development of the comic genre to new levels of complexity and self-reflection. For any post-


Enlightenment reader or viewer, it has much to say about the aesthetic avant la lettre. Such modern interpretations raise the question, always, as to whether original audiences could have had similar interpretations, even without benefit of the term aesthetic. As I have argued elsewhere, all our perceptions of the past are presentist, in the sense that we are always immersed in our own ideologies and aesthetics as we work to reconstruct the past; the past reveals new facets to us as our own understanding of it changes and develops.\textsuperscript{13} In this case, presentism is inevitable in my use of a concept that was not named and crystallized until 1750.\textsuperscript{14} But the hindsight involved in this renegotiation with the past allows us to interpret texts like A Midsummer Night's Dream in ways that bring new focus, but not necessarily completely anachronistic perception, into our reading. An interpretation of Dream as a play about the aesthetic is both presentist and historicist because the play implies such a concept. The first critics to appreciate Dream as something more than a hodgepodge were specifically influenced by late Enlightenment, early Romantic ideas of the aesthetic, first in German thought and then in other international philosophy and literature. Schlegel, whose writings provided Coleridge with his basic ideas, first defined an overarching structural unity for the play,\textsuperscript{15} unity being a privileged category in classical aesthetics. The aesthetic idea of organic unity in turn influenced innumerable mid-twentieth-century critics who attempted to find a harmony in the play's myriad materials and styles.\textsuperscript{16}

This classical emphasis on unity tends to create an Apollonian aesthetic, one that imposes order by suppressing or marginalizing the Dionysian, "dangerous" content of art.\textsuperscript{17} A distressing number of such Apollonian critics have found that an Elizabethan ideology of male chauvinism provides the aesthetic


\textsuperscript{14} The word aesthetic was coined by German Enlightenment philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in his 1750 work Aesthetica.


\textsuperscript{17} This point is argued eloquently by Jonathan Dollimore, "Art in Time of War: Towards a Contemporary Aesthetic," in New Aestheticism, 36–50, esp. 42–49.
linchpin of the play, and most of their New Critical readings achieved unity in a hierarchical arrangement of the play's elements that almost inevitably supported aristocratic and male privilege. Jonathan Dollimore has argued that it is precisely the relatively recent development of a hermeneutics which celebrates disunity that has revealed the text's fissures, its fault lines, its Other—a change that amounts to a shift from one kind of aesthetic to another. In that sense, the new critical approaches of the last thirty years have been based on a shift in aesthetic perception.

Recent criticism has tended instead to deconstruct the play's hierarchies of domination and to become overwhelmingly political and/or historicist. Dehierarchization and a subsequent awareness of political subtexts are both essential to impure aesthetics, precisely by bringing out what has been an occulted aesthetic dimension within the newer criticism. "Art is related to its other as is a magnet to a field of iron filings," wrote Theodor Adorno. By respecting the separation of the artwork from society (while also seeing that what is "in" the artwork comes "from" that society), it becomes possible to analyze aesthetic qualities of Shakespeare's plays while retaining a suspicion of hierarchical unity and the imprint of ideology. Indeed, it becomes possible to see the suspension of hierarchy and the resistance to ideology as integral to the work's aesthetics. Interestingly, an "aesthetic" reading of the play is often assumed and alluded to, but not actually performed, in much recent criticism. In her brilliant study of the words and puns in Midsummer Night's Dream, which extends into surrounding cultural and social contexts, for example, Patricia Parker wrote, "Apprehension of this play's famous metadramatic aspect would lead in this regard not to the purely formalist or self-reflexive, but rather to its linkages with the partitions and joints of other early modern structures, social and political as well as rhetorical, logical, and grammatical." Thus, the "formalist or self-reflexive" reading remains a road not taken in a work which describes itself as self-consciously historicist.


20 Dollimore, in New Aestheticism, 43—49.

21 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 7.

But it is precisely the interplay between the enclosed work of art and the larger world from which it draws its material that constitutes the aesthetic situation conceptualized in what I am calling impure aesthetics, where it is still perfectly possible to pursue ideology critique and aesthetic analysis simultaneously. Within the complex fictive space of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we can see antagonistic discourses at work—most centrally for my purposes here, an antagonism between two different representations of nature and the relation of humanity to nature, creating a dialogue of differing “visions” or perceptions of reality. In part, it is a matter of the dynamic described in Northrop Frye’s concept of green-world comedies. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a canonical example of the form, beginning in a recognizable setting, undertaking a withdrawal into the green wood to a kind of freedom from many of the oppressive social norms that had created the play’s comic dilemma, and concluding with a return to the normal world after a resolution to the conflict in the green world. The idea of the aesthetic as a separate, idealizing, and self-reflecting space of imagination works itself out within this interaction in a paradoxical, mirrors-within-mirrors fashion.

Of course, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is an aesthetic object from beginning to end; it is a shaped semblance of reality in a complex relation of similarity to and difference from the world from which it draws its materials—but clearly distanced from that world through its defining forms and idealizations. But some parts of it, as George Orwell might say, are more aesthetic than others. The play recreates in its fictionality the very relationship of the artwork to the world in which it participates. In this way, the play shares a self-reflective “baroque” nature with such plays as Calderón’s 1635 *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*) or Corneille’s 1636 *L’Illusion*—and has an affinity to the complex metadramatic and meta-aesthetic effects of the inset plays within *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. Not only does the play’s own inset play “Pyramus and Thisbe” produce this effect; so too do the highly charged lyric language and the charming images of the harmony between humankind and the natural world in the fairy segments of the play.

In relation to the privileged or heightened material of the fairy plot in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the young-lovers plot represents the familiar world of human experience in an idealized form and language, but clearly in a more realist mode than the fairy realm. The play models in its own aesthetic space an implied theory about the relation of the aesthetic to the larger social world.

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23 Freedman provides a lucid and insightful analysis of contrasting viewpoints and slippery textuality in the play; see 195–98, 202–8.

That it is a mirror within a mirror is the key to its meta-aesthetic quality. And although the difference between these two realms is clear, the barrier between them, like Wall in the inset play, has chinks in it, and within each separate domain there are traces of its excluded Other. This interrelationship is the main enabling frame in which the play produces an implicit theory of the aesthetic within itself.

That the world of Oberon and Titania is disrupted by a lovers’ quarrel of course links the fairy world with the human world—desire is disruptive in both realms, and an ideology of patriarchy rules in both as well. At the same time, however, the humanized Oberon and Titania control the forces of nature and live in a fairy paradise of rare beauty distinct from the human world and with its own poetic stylization. They are personifications of the natural world even as they display human foibles. This is not an unfamiliar combination. Shakespeare (and all educated Elizabethans) had seen something very similar in Ovid and other sources of Greco-Roman mythology. The Greek and Roman gods had exactly this combination of qualities—embodying and controlling powerful natural forces but still subject to human emotions and weaknesses, desire and jealousy prominent among them. At one level, the fairy realm is thus a mirror of human society, but at another level it is far superior to it. It is neither heaven nor Eden; it is more like Olympus. Shakespeare puts this mythological-poetic frame to work especially through the allegorical figures of Titania and Oberon, aestheticizing them as emblems of a potentially harmonious relation between the human and the natural, but at the same time displaying them as at odds with this potentiality.

In short, while much recent criticism has seen the fairy realm as mirroring the human world, it has neglected to show how that realm is also utopian and aesthetic.25 Despite the fairies’ quarreling, we find here an “as-if” structure in which the human and the natural are permeable to each other—a harmony expressed allegorically by the humanized spirits themselves. This quality is not really ideological, because it does not imply belief.26 Rather, it is utopian

25 A notable exception from a previous critical generation is C. L. Barber, Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom (1959; repr., Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1963). Barber states, “Part of the delight of this poetry is that we can enjoy without agitation imaginative action of the highest order. It is like gazing in a crystal: what you see is clear and vivid, but on the other side of the glass” (147). More recently, Kathleen McLuskie, “‘Your Imagination and not 'Theirs': Reception and Artistic Form in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” in Autour du “Songe d'une nuit d'ete” de William Shakespeare, ed. Claire Gheeraert-Grafeuille and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen, 2003), 31–43, has argued for more attention to the aesthetic and utopian in the play.

26 The groundbreaking work defining the play’s ideological investments was that of Louis Adrian Montrose, “‘Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Cul-

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in Ernst Bloch’s sense: it defines an ideal space, clearly designated as such, in which it is possible to represent and contemplate determinate human wants and desires in various stages of satisfaction, to reflect on human needs and their impediments, and to imagine alternatives to the world as it currently exists.27 “In art,” Adorno wrote, “ideology and truth cannot be neatly distinguished from one another. Art cannot have one without the other.”28 Thus, here as elsewhere in Shakespeare, the utopian space is itself open to interrogation and qualification within the play’s dialogic structure. But it is an important locus within a more complex framework. This utopian aspect of the play expresses one of the crucial components of the idea of the aesthetic that informs it.

In one of its most important functions, the aesthetic models a relation of humanity to the cosmos, exploring human meaning and in its utopian mode figuring an immediate meaningfulness unavailable in societies dominated by commodity exchange and capital accumulation. In postreligious sectors of modernity, aesthetics thus takes on many of the functions that religion once fulfilled, especially in providing patterns of ideality against which to measure empirical experience. Even where religion is a continuing force, art has established enough prestige to act as a supplement to religion proper and share in its idealizing tasks. Precisely because the idea of the aesthetic developed in relation to the increasing instrumentalization of nature implicit in capitalism, the aesthetic becomes both the means for enacting noninstrumental orientations to the natural and the enclave in which they are preserved. This was an idea, as Andrew Bowie has shown, central to the concerns of post-Kantian German aesthetic theory,29 and it has been preserved and reinserted by Theodore Adorno and his followers within a more sober estimate of the potentials for disaster, as well as liberation, inherent within modernity. In this, art always coquettes perilously with ideology, and the attempt to separate the aesthetic from the ideological is always a major issue for critical interpretation.

The artwork’s construction of a specific relation of the human to the natural is a quality connected to Kant’s idea that in aesthetic experience it is as if there were a perfect epistemological fit between subject and object, one that the author of Critique of Pure Reason knows contradicts his central doctrine

28 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 234.
29 Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity, 102–13.
of the inaccessibility to human perception of the thing-in-itself. Nevertheless, for Kant, this aesthetic intuition of the porous boundary between subject and object is not the least part of aesthetic pleasure, forever uncertain as it is. Benjamin and Adorno both emphasized art’s depiction of the nonexistent, including what never was, what has ceased to be, and what perhaps will be. There is a larger context for what can sometimes seem trivial—that the aesthetic is a site for fantasies of all kinds, social as well as sexual. Adorno put it this way: “The iridescence that emanates from artworks . . . is the appearance of the affirmative ineffable, the emergence of the nonexistent as if it did exist. Its claim to existence flickers out in aesthetic semblance; yet what does not exist, by appearing, is promised. The constellation of the existing and nonexistent is the utopic figure of art. Although it is compelled toward absolute negativity, it is precisely by virtue of this negativity that it is not absolutely negative.”

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we see this quality of the artwork in one of its consummate forms.

**Utopian Vision and the Fairy Realm**

Oberon and Titania live in an enchanted, aestheticized world that occupies the same space as the one mere mortals inhabit but that operates according to a different kind of reality. Or we could say that they possess a different form of perception—one that is utopian and aestheticizing. This is an ability which the play presents as lacking in humans—and lacking as well in common fairies. Oberon tells Robin Goodfellow of the origin of the magic flower whose drops induce a state of amorous madness.

> My gentle puck, come hither. Thou rememb'rest
> Since once I sat upon a promontory
> And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
> Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
> That the rude sea grew civil at her song

30 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 98–99, famously noted,“(Independent) natural beauty carries with it a purposiveness in its form, by which the object seems as it were pre-determined for our power of judgment, so that this beauty constitutes in itself an object of our liking” (emphasis added). That is, the beautiful creates a premonition that reason cannot confirm, of the permeability of nature to human perception, as if the world had achieved its end in being apprehended as beautiful by us.


32 The interaction of vision and imagination as conceptualized by Renaissance writers, who generally thought that imagination, because it was influenced by desire, tended to corrupt vision, is the subject of the classic essay by R. W. Dent, "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (1964): 115–29; reprinted in "A Midsummer Night’s Dream": Critical Essays, 85–106.
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And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music? . . .
That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth
Cupid, all armed.

(2.1.148–57)33

These are lines which historicist critics since the eighteenth century have identified as performing local and power-accommodating work in deference to Queen Elizabeth,34 said to be the western vestal (1.158) or "imperial vor'tess" (1.163) who is Cupid's target—but who is untouched by the love-inducing dart. Such a reference would help immunize the play from an undesired infernal interpretation of Titania—the Fairy Queen of this play—who might easily be seen, thanks to Spenser, as an allusion to Elizabeth.35

A reader in our own day, however, is likely not to notice this brief local moment because of the lush lyric intensity of the verses. If Titania and Oberon constitute Shakespeare's homage to Spenser, the story of Cupid's shaft attests his homage to Ovid.36 As in the Metamorphoses, nature is populated by humanized gods serving as intermediaries between natural objects and human society. Dympna Callaghan has argued that of the many Elizabethan poets who made use of Ovidian motifs and allusions, it was Shakespeare who best reproduced


34 Stephen Greenblatt, with Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 47–53, is another in a long line of historicist critics discussing these connections. Unlike many of them, however, he also discusses the considerable aesthetic qualities of these lines as well. My thanks to Terence Hawkes for pointing out this passage from Greenblatt's work to me.

35 Montrose, Purpose of Playing, finds Elizabeth's cultural presence as a female authority central to the play, but he adds that the play, for all its anxiety about female power, is not directly about Elizabeth and depends for its complex effects on her exclusion (160, 176). Lisa Hopkins, Writing Renaissance Queens: Texts by and about Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002), 104–7, suggests that Shakespeare, here and elsewhere in his work, is employing a "strategy of avoidance" vis-à-vis the queen. Maurice Hunt, "A Speculative Political Allegory in A Midsummer Night's Dream," Comparative Drama 34 (2000–2001): 423–53, suggests that a reading of Titania as Elizabeth may exist in the play for a small coterie (probably from the Essex faction) who may even have asked for such an episode. But Hunt emphasizes that if this were the case, Shakespeare disguised this level of meaning to give it "deniability."

Ovid's subversive eroticism. "Totally unlike his predecessors in eschewing didacticism," she writes of Venus and Adonis, "this new, more aesthetic and pagan conception of Ovid represents a breach with orthodox allegorical Christian interpretation of classical authors." 37

The same is true of A Midsummer Night's Dream. Mermaids, nymphs, fairies—all, at one level, personifications of natural places—inhabit an intermediate zone in harmony and intimate connection with the nonhuman. The mermaid on a dolphin's back might serve as a reference to Mary Stuart, but far more to the point here is that this "sea-maid" (1.154) is said to be singing in so lovely a manner that nature is moved at her song and responds sympathetically. The aesthetic act of singing allows mutual communication between the natural and the human, and this mythical figure personifies that harmony and links it to the art of music. Lines 148 to 157 are a microcosm of the aesthetic ambitions of the play as a whole, which represents to us an idealized aesthetic realm in complex relations to a realistic, human one. Even more unambiguously in Shakespeare than in Ovid, the gods and goddesses are figural, imaginary, aesthetic images evoking and standing for a certain privileged, desired, but nonexistent harmony between the human and natural worlds. 38

The very essence of the play's aestheticizing strategy can be seen in its treatment of these mythological figures. In a classic move of the dialectic of enlightenment, supernatural beings are reconfigured as aesthetic, fictional ones, "emancipat[ing] themselves from mythical images," Adorno writes, "by subordinating themselves to their own unreality." 39 The aesthetic arises in this process of enlightenment precisely in a refusal to annihilate objects of the pagan past; instead, the aesthetic attempts to recuperate their truth value by refunctining them as art, preserving something that had lurked in the mythology in mystified form. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, the something involves the connection of the human and the natural as it might be and perhaps one time was. This connection is the very essence of the Kantian moment when aesthetic perception gives us a world attuned to human sensibility in order to produce the mysterious power of a noncognitive aesthetic pleasure—although of course Kant would have insisted that any erotic component of the charm is simply incidental.

The charm of both Ovid and Shakespeare is so delicately balanced and evocative that one is tempted to acquiesce to this Kantian claim. We would be mistaken to do so, however, not only because of the poetry's pronounced erotic aura, but also because of a clear intellectual component to this aesthetic

39 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 86.
experience: the presentation for our delight of a world of our desires, a world of reconciliation and harmony between the sexes, between humanity and nature, between imagination and reality. And as we will see shortly, it is a conception that the play itself reflects on and holds up for our scrutiny, especially in Theseus’s triple comparison between love, madness, and poetry—and in the inset play that concludes the action after all the other dramatic conflicts have apparently been resolved.

The Aesthetic and the Ideological

Part of Shakespeare’s hommage to Spenser is his use of an allegorical method—a poetic strategy unusual for him—in his treatment of Oberon and especially of Titania. 40 To be sure, Louis Montrose and others have shown us in great detail how patriarchal anxiety in the face of female power permeates the play. 41 But Titania is much more than an object of displacement for anxieties aroused by the real Queen Elizabeth; she exists in A Midsummer Night’s Dream as more than a marker in a power struggle. She is a personification of natural fertility and its associated properties of sexuality and maternity; she is a kind of fertility and love goddess, 42 and these qualities constitute a profound, and not merely ideological, connection of humanity and the natural. These significations become apparent in her famous speech to Oberon explaining why she refuses to give up the human boy to be Oberon’s “henchman” (2.1.121):

Her mother was a vot’ress of my order,  
And in the spiced Indian air by night  
Full often hath she gossiped by my side,  
And sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands,  
Marking themarkéd traders on the flood,  
When we have laughed to see the sails conceive  
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind.  
(ll. 123–29)

The fertility attributes here are not all focused on Titania herself; they are distributed, some to her votaress, some to the big-bellied sails, some to the boy himself, but they all create a poetic interconnectedness that colors the theme

40 Barber thinks the method is more indebted to Ovid and that the fairies generally are “embodiments of the May-game experience of eros in men and women and trees and flowers, while any superstitious tendency to believe in their literal reality is blocked” (122–24, esp. 124).
41 Montrose, Purpose of Playing, 144–50, 151–78; esp. 160.
42 Barber, 137–39; Shirley Nelson Garner, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream: ‘Jack Shall Have Jill; / Naught Shall Go Ill,’” in A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Critical Essays, 127–43, agrees with Barber on this diagnosis and rightly emphasizes the way in which Titania is also implicated in an ideology of male supremacy; however, Garner largely ignores the aesthetic implications.
of sexual reproduction with a surface beauty not unlike what Spenser gives us in his erotic landscapes, but more concentrated, more enabled by the imagery’s affect and less by one-to-one correspondences between the details of the poetic surface and the abstract signified. Indeed, one is tempted to say that there is no allegory at all here, that all is poetic aura. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the larger context, the parallel with Spenser is clear, and the allegorical effect created for Titania not hard to see. She “stands for” and focuses the dispersed erotic aura which surrounds her in this passage, not unlike Spenser’s Amoret, who grows up and learns “true feminitee” in the Garden of Adonis, absorbing the dispersed qualities of the eroticized and ideologized landscape. The references to India constitute a subtext connecting to the era’s colonializing mentality, and the charged affect surrounding the boy is also suggestive of homoerotic components of the poetic aura. But these allusions are translated into the play’s aesthetic space and made to serve atmospheric, erotic, and aesthetic functions, as well as ideological ones.

Oberon is less well developed as an allegorical figure, but he shares some of Titania’s functions. When Titania identifies their quarrel as the cause of the disordered seasons, she thus clearly links Oberon to her own signification of nature and eros, designating both of them as personifications of a natural world grown out of kilter:

The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard.
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrain flock.
The nine men’s morris is filled up with mud,
And the quaint maze in the wanton green
For lack of tread are undistinguishable.

(ll. 93–100)

Their reconciliation is allegorized as the restoration of natural order to the seasons. And their disunion takes a specifically sexual form. Titania says of Oberon, “I have forsworn his bed and company” (l. 62). Natural harmony, it seems, is a matter of frequent conjugal relations between the fairy King and Queen. And this sexual symbolism is clearly connected to the agricultural human world in Titania’s speech.


SHAKESPEARE AND IMPURE AESTHETICS

The emphasis is on recestablishing boundaries and distinctions and reimposing order so that the land’s fertility can be renewed—although it should be noted that order, in this case, conspicuously includes May games and country dancing. The connection between the human and the natural is virtually seamless, and we are invited to imagine ourselves within it. Read from a distance of four hundred years, in our own dehumanized and denaturalized world, the poignancy is deep and the poetry compelling. We could call such a reading green criticism, but to the extent that the idea of the aesthetic is centrally concerned with the relation between human perception and the natural world, it is a crucial aesthetic notion as well. But it seems clear, as recent feminist criticism has underlined, that “natural” sexuality in this play involves female submission.45 “Do you amend it, then,” Oberon tells Titania, “It lies in you” (l. 118). Nor, of course, is the motif of female submission confined to this plot. Hippolyta was an Amazon queen conquered and woed with Theseus’s sword. Hermia is made to undergo comic humiliation in the woods, and her humiliation continues even when she is the object of her beloved’s ardent desire rather than his scorn. Lysander, Demetrius, and especially Bottom have their moments of abasement, so that domination is not always a case of male over female. But male superiority is the only form coded as being natural. From a twenty-first-century point of view, then, the aesthetic harmony achieved in such satisfyingly comedic knitting together of the plots at the end of Act 4 is tinged with the ideology of male supremacy.

Sexuality and Hierarchy

The play’s sexual politics have been discussed many times, but its aesthetic properties and thematics are understudied while older aesthetic treatments are badly in need of updating. One of the central political-aesthetic issues of the play, as I have suggested, involves the complicated linkage of the fairies, the natural world, sexuality, and human attempts to govern sex. As mentioned, Titania is a key link in this chain, as is her consort Oberon—he is never called her husband, although he claims to be her lord and she his lady. And these offhand references give us insight into the family life of the fairy world which creates a

dissonant subtext beneath the ideological affirmations of male supremacy. A marriage between Titania and Oberon is almost taken for granted, but never explicitly confirmed. And this uncertainty, I would argue, creates an ambiguous place for marriage in the ideal natural order conceived by this play, and this is a difference that marks the distance of the play's utopian fairyland from the human world under the aegis of the law. In the fairy realm, those figures of a fecund nature and natural sexuality are not monogamous:

TITANIA

Why art thou here
Come from the farthest step of India,
But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskined mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity?

OBERON

How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?

(2.1.68–76)

Although there is a level of accusation in such assertions, these amorous indiscretions are not the source of the discord: the disposition of the boy is. What occurs to Oberon as a punishment for his estranged beloved is to set her up in a sexual liaison with a plebeian mortal. We are meant to understand that in the fairy realm, there is no give and take in marriage. As nonhumans, the fairies are as exempt from traditional moral injunctions to marital fidelity as the animals of the woods—or, for that matter, the Greco-Roman gods. Or we could see fairyland as an Olympian world where the gods marry but are not bound to marital fidelity. In either case, the fairy realm remains a sexually open, preternatural place—a quality which undermines that institutional keystone of the Elizabethan ideology of gender relations, marriage. The four lovers, in contrast, live in an all-too-human place where marriage is a necessity. Thus, where Spenser attempts to distinguish the wanton, alluring, but shameful lust of the Bower of Bliss from the allowed joys of sex with reproduction (presumably in marriage) of the Garden of Adonis, Shakespeare makes a distinction between a utopian or aesthetic sexuality unrestrained by marriage and a social, "human" world where marriage is the only solution to desire in unconstrained circulation. The result is one of the fundamental possibilities of aesthetic representation: to disavow us from the familiar human world, to lead us into imagining other modes of living and loving, to look critically into received ideologies of love and marriage.

The implied allegorization of Oberon and Titania, then, works in two related domains. Both of them evoke the forces of nature, especially the rhythms and
order of the growing seasons, with their impact on the land’s fertility and hence on the human world. And they evoke human sexuality—its power of attraction, its fertility, its pleasures, its involvement in sexual difference displaced to the love drops released by Oberon’s orders on the unsuspecting young lovers. And these two levels, of course, function as mutually mirroring metaphors through a figure with an ancient lineage: the fertility of the land, the fertility of human sexuality. Oberon and Titania are a sexual couple—but also allegorical figures whose (familiar, “human”) quarreling and mutual estrangement tropically constitute and cause a violation of the natural order.

In older, Apollonian aesthetics, male domination is part of the idealized natural world represented allegorically in this play—and a previous generation of critics reflected this tendency in many variations. In light of the new aesthetics of disunity and fragmentation, however, we are able to see this idea contested by the various forms of resistance to male domination throughout the play—the formidable, autonomous figure of Titania especially, as well as the independent Helena and Hermia. In reconstituting the play for our own era, we can and should critique the ideology of male domination connected to the play’s idea of the natural. With that done, the aesthetic implication of the Titania and Oberon allegory of the play is still clear: the force that through the green fuse drives the flower also drives the human heart and genitalia. This is the same force of nature, the play is at pains to show us, that can generate sexual violence, domination, and subordination. But it is also the force that makes possible sexual generation, in a more harmonious linking of the human and the natural worlds.46

In this play, sexuality is a kind of “nature within”; a utopian vision of such a connection constitutes one of the chief aesthetic characteristics of the play, one that starkly contrasts an aestheticized, utopian vision of potential harmony with a familiar world of law and ideology.

The allegorization of Titania and Oberon thus constitutes the presentation of an aesthetic, harmonious continuity between the natural and the human worlds—one subject to (comic) disruptions and unruliness, one with a continually visible subtext of potential violence, and one with a possibly disturbing linkage of the human and animal. But for all that, the play continually alludes to an Ovidian harmony between the human and the natural—a possibility, of course, that is an artifact of desire rather than the real. Lacanians would ground this harmony in Lacan’s prelinguistic Imaginary, labeling with which I

46 Two critics from an earlier generation strongly emphasized the insight that the play celebrates human sexuality as an impersonal power of nature. See Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 207–28; and Barber, 132–39. Barber argues that this aspect of the play is influenced by the surviving pagan associations of the rites of May and midsummer’s night, which are evoked several times in the play.
have no argument, so long as such a diagnosis does not reduce the richness of this motif to mere psychologism. A key point of this continuity, we will see, is the production of children—a fundamental part of human life at once natural and ideological. The play ends with the fairies’ blessing of the newlyweds’ beds specifically against birth defects or abnormalities.

This play is clearly implicated in Elizabethan ideologies of love as a prelude to patriarchal marriage, but its aesthetic richness surpasses these ideological investments—without, however, erasing them. In the intensely imagined fairy world, in the rich, lyric language of the play, in its complex dramatic interactions, A Midsummer Night’s Dream discloses that promesse de bonheur—an image of a life beyond our present constraints—that is a crucial function of the aesthetic. And it embodies an Adornoan mimesis of sexuality and desire that is far from being merely ideological.

Nature as Other

There is, as I have tried to emphasize, another nature in the play, one not so idealized, aesthetic, or harmonious: the nature perceived by the four lovers and by Robin Goodfellow. A rustic, plebeian fairy, Robin is unable to see Cupid between earth and the cold moon, as Oberon did (2.1.155–57). Robin both perceives and is a figure for a nature in which sexual desire is troublesome and disruptive and where sexual violence is never very far away.47 For this mode of perception, the woods outside Athens constitute a wilderness, not an enchanted forest. Demetrius warns Helena against this wilderness:

You do impeach your modesty too much,
To leave the city and commit yourself
Into the hands of one that loves you not;
To trust the opportunity of night,
And the ill counsel of a desert place,
With the rich worth of your virginity.

(II. 214–19)

As the argument builds, Demetrius threatens to leave Helena “to the mercy of wild beasts” (l. 228). If we missed the contrast. Oberon soon appears to remind us of his quite different view of the green woods, with the celebrated,

47 A number of studies have emphasized the play’s subtext of sexual violence coexisting with comic lightness—Theseus’s conquest of Hippolyta, Demetrius’s veiled threat of rape against Helena, Titania’s coercion of Bottom, and the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, as well as several details in the sources used. See Kott, 212–22; Laura Levine, “Rape, Repetition, and the Politics of Closure in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” in Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects, ed. Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dympna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 210–28; Callaghan, “What Is an Audience?” 146–60; and Orgel, 87–97.
lyrical set piece that begins, "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows" (ll. 249–56). This is a vision of the forest as a haven of beauty and as a safe refuge for sleeping and dreams, where, in contrast to Hermia's disturbing dream, snakes—those traditional signifiers of sexuality—are aestheticized as supplying "enamelled skin" (l. 255) to make fairy garments and where everything is tranquil. But it is the human, fear-inducing nature (a nature of the Other, in the Lacanian sense of the Other as the unconscious, the repository for repressed psychic materials) that is the site for the play's depiction of sexual desire among the four young lovers. When we think about how desire is represented in this segment of A Midsummer Night's Dream, we have to say that it is shown to be an urgent problem in need of solution, a menace unleashed into the world. We see it at work first in a purely realistic world, in the confines of the familiar space of Latin comedy when Egeus appears before Theseus demanding enforcement of the law against Hermia.

Desire, instead of representing a glue for human sociality, is here portrayed as a potentially deadly disruption of the social order. As in so many Elizabethan works, this one seems to be preparing for what recent critics have described as the play's chief ideological work: the mobilization of heterosexual desire and its eventual containment in marriage. This ideological formation was complexly linked to Reformation redefinitions of marriage and family life and to Queen Elizabeth's specific preoccupations and her court's cultural response to them. But as Fredric Jameson argued long ago, any ideology has utopian dimensions, and aesthetic productions both incorporate and distance themselves from the (merely) ideological. 48 Sexuality is a problem for ideology precisely because it is potentially transgressive and disruptive of the social order and its property relations. And since Freud, it is clear as well that desire is a component of all aesthetic forms, including the narrative and the lyric—both memorably mobilized in this play. To see the danger of love/desire clearly, however, we have to get beyond its power of enchantment. We are led outside the charmed circle by Robin Goodfellow, the main articulator of this distanced, dispassionate view of erotic desire, as shown in his comments on the irrational absolutizing of the lovers' perceptions:

ROBIN Shall we their fond pageant see?  
Lord, what fools these mortals be!  
OBERON Stand aside. The noise they make  
Will cause Demetrius to awake.  
ROBIN Then will two at once woo one.  
That must needs by sport alone;

Robin is constructed from different cultural materials than those drawn on for Oberon and Titania, coming directly from English folklore, although considerably sanitized in the idealizing logic of this comedy. The term “puck” with which Robin is associated was commonly applied to an evil spirit and sometimes identified as a devil. However, we are warned away from that interpretation when Oberon tells the audience, “But we are spirits of a different sort” (l. 389). Robin is a “merry wanderer of the night” (2.1.43), with “merry” implying fun-loving and mischievous. We soon get a list of his antics, including frightening maidens, misleading night wanderers and laughing at them, and spilling ale on an elderly drinker (ll. 32–57). He is more plebian than aristocratic, a country spirit, a “lob” (l. 16), and he speaks in favor of the masculine world and Oberon’s desire to remove the changeling boy from the maternal world (where, from this point of view, the boy is being feminized with crowns of flowers and too much doting) to a male sphere of training for knighthood. We don’t see Robin doing anything very harmful or frightening. Instead he is a bungler, although he means to carry out his assignments. In terms of his affect, what most distinguishes him from Oberon and Titania is his apparent immunity from sexual desire. He is the anthropologist from Mars who observes the absurdities of desire and its radical impact on perception with a distanced, unempathetic, merry scorn. Although he has libidinal aspects, they are aggressive rather than oriented to sexual pleasure. Like all the fairies of the play, he seems an allegorical figure for the natural world and its powers, but he is on the “all-too-real” rather than the idealized side of the natural world. Like Titania, he personifies libido, but as an alien and aggressive force from the Other, not, as in the case of Titania, as one who shows it to us from the inside.

As the fairies observe the shifting allegiances of the four young lovers, they clearly see (as the audience does) how dangerous desire can be: breaking hearts, destroying friendships, promoting jealousy and violence, undermining family stability. But by the end of the play we see as well that, with a bit of guidance from without, it can produce harmony, beauty, reconciliation, and a stable base for raising the next generation. Just how this is managed is the matter of discussion between Theseus and Hippolyta that provides the play’s most startling and illuminating reflection on its own action and seems to reopen commerce between the two realms of the play’s green world closed before—in an aesthetic harmony that is, however, an unstable one.

In effect, the play’s structure poses the question: how do we get from a nature of the Other to a harmonized nature, from the discord of unruly desire
to the concord of a naturalized human world and a humanized natural world? The relation of the artwork to nature has been a fundamental one for aesthetics since Aristotle defined poetry as a mimesis or imitation of nature. But the problem has been reformulated by aesthetic theorists of the modern era dissatisfied with Aristotle’s relatively simple epistemology. In particular, the Romantics revolted against the notion that art was a copy of anything else, rather than a vision in its own right. But Adorno attempts a complex dialectical weaving among several of these theories, affirming that every artwork attempts and fails to enact a reconciliation with nature, that every kind of art involves a rationality of form and a mimesis of nature in a special sense of the word—as “the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposed other.” 49 That is, mimesis is the artwork’s ability to reproduce within itself aspects of nature to which conceptual thought and certainly ideology are blind. A Midsummer Night’s Dream, with its mixture of ideology and something that escapes ideology, would seem to be a prime example; the play uses the motif of the dream as its surrogate for the unnamed concept of the aesthetic.

Thus, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (and later, in As You Like It), the answer to the question of how to achieve harmony seems to be: in our dreams—that is, in a counterfactual and comic realm that can help clarify our unmet needs by conceptualizing their fulfillment in an artifactual, unreal form. This is the realm of the aesthetic, figured here in the restored world of Titania and Oberon.

The Aesthetic Space of Dreams

When Titania awakens after Oberon administers the antidote to the love drops, she exclaims, “My Oberon, what visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamoured of an ass” (4.1.73–74). Earlier, Oberon had foretold that all Bottom would remember of his experience would be “the fierce vexation of a dream” (l. 66). And on cue, Bottom gives us his account of “Bottom’s Dream.” Clearly, one of the devices that helps unify the disparate materials of this play is the motif of the dream or its synonym, vision. “Dream” is one of the many shifting placeholders for the absent term “aesthetic.” The four lovers are soon talking about dreams as well. After the early rising hunters Theseus and Hippolyta find them in the woods sleeping near each other, the lovers puzzle over their clouded memories, so oddly conjoint. Demetrius seems to speak for all when he states, “It seems to me / that yet we sleep, we dream” (ll. 189–90).

Just after this, Bottom tells the audience of his “most rare vision,” his “dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was” (ll. 199–201). Because he cannot explain it, he will transfer it to (what we would call) an aesthetic realm, involv-

49 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 54.
ing both song and drama to be inserted at the play's climactic moment. And his vision, it should be noted, involves the kind of "systematic deregulation of all the senses" that Rimbaud advocated as the necessary means for achieving poetic vision: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke." (I. 204–10). Significantly, then, Bottom's vision cannot be classified under any of the received categories of his own experience, and so it is "translated" (3.1.105)—a word applied to Bottom himself—to the aesthetic realm. A number of critics have noticed that Bottom's speech echoes the language of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, on the indescribability of Paradise: "The things which eye hath not seen, neither ear hath not heard, neither came into man's heart, are, which God hath prepared for them that love him." But Bottom's parodic allusions by no means suggest a literal claim for divine insight. It is the nature of the aesthetic, Adorno argued, that "its object is determined negatively, as indeterminable. It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it." In that sense, Bottom is being secular and true to aesthetics, rather than being theological. If anything, Bottom's inability to speak in determinate, rational concepts links his experience to the "divine frenzy" of the poet (a notion dear to Neoplatonism), which Theseus will address as well. The veiled allusions to the divine serve as metaphors for an experience that is otherwise coded secular and natural, if marvelous: the concept-without-a-name, the aesthetic. And Bottom is the privileged vessel of this experience.

The quasi-theological negations of Bottom's description of his dream, in fact, implicitly invite the audience that has just witnessed his experience to try to get to the bottom of this dream in the very proclamation of the impossibil-


52 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 72.

53 See John J. Joughin, "Bottom's Secret . . .," in Spiritual Shakespeares, ed. Ewan Fernie (London: Routledge, 2005), 130–56, for a similar analysis, which treats the unnamed category of Bottom's confused attempts at defining the indefinable as "an epistemological and ontological transformation" based on an "aesthetic attitude" . . . [which] refuses to be prescribed by predetermined categories" (134, 136). Joughin's analysis, however, is much more oriented to unearthing religious attitudes in the play than is my own.
ity of doing so. We have seen a foolish, plebeian artisan, accidentally inducted into a fantasy-as-reality and happily succumbing to it. He is brought into the enchanted, erotic, aestheticizing vision-world of Titania, with its dainty, fairy artifices made from objects of sensuousness and natural beauty (with a slight undertone of violence). As Titania puts it:

Feed him with apricots and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;
The honeybags steal from the humble-bees,
And for night tapers crop their waxen thighs
And light them at the fiery glow-worms' eyes
To have my love to bed, and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.
(ll. 148–55)

This moment of aesthetic concord with nature is followed by Bottom's attempt to befriend his servants in this new realm and make himself at home within it. And of course there is an undercurrent of sexual tension throughout this scene—carried here through references to going to bed—giving the whole experience a distinctly erotic aura. Bottom is a prisoner of love, as Titania makes clear: "Out of this wood do not desire to go. / Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no" (ll. 134–35). For his part, Bottom, relaxing into his gilded cage, creates his own version of the fairyland aesthetic mode in workmanlike prose and soon calls for rustic music as well.

The running gag in all this comes from the audience's ability, seconded by Robin and Oberon, to see the ordinary, disenchant, "material" Bottom in utter disjunction from Titania's doting vision. Bottom's name itself is one important signifier of this materializing strand. When Robin Goodfellow said that he loved to see things "That befall preposterously" (3.2.121), Latin-savvy members of the audience could note the reference to "bottoms" in the word "preposterous" (etymologically, posterior-first). The closeness of the word "ass" to "arse" (the word in American English remains "arse") is another of these associations. 54 Bottom's corporality is underlined when Titania, in her attempt to lure Bottom to stay with her voluntarily (after her announcement that he could not leave in any case), promises him, "And I will purge thy mortal grossness so / That thou shalt like an airy spirit go" (3.1.139–43). The comic, preposter-

54 On this point, see Annabel Patterson, Shakespeare and the Popular Voice (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 66–68; and Parker, 20–55. Iars Engle argues that with these allusions, Shakespeare was creating a distanced, symbolic version of the close encounter with Alison's lower bodily stratum by the fastidious, love-sick clerk Absalom in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale”; see his Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of His Time (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), 141.
ous concord of Bottom's corporality with airy spirits is among several versions of *concordia discors* in the play; like most of those other versions, it is related to an implied concept of the aesthetic. Like Bottom, the aesthetic is sensuous, dependent on materiality for its very form and expression, and yet perceived as spiritual, signifying, and revelatory of human experiences without a definite name. The aesthetic is the "rare vision" "that hath no bottom to it" (4.1.209)—no bottom because it lacks a determinate concept, because it suggests access to an unlimited world of new experiences, because it somehow transcends its own materiality—perhaps no Bottom because, as Rimbaud's famous and enigmatic dictum puts it, "Je' est un autre" ("I is another"). With Bottom and in the rude mechanics more generally, Shakespeare pays homage to the aesthetic usefulness of the ugly, as a moment of discord which, Adorno claimed, both violates and confirms aesthetic unity, creating a dynamic tension. Bottom in this way completes the aesthetic, even as he is transformed by it.

The play-within-the-play that takes up most of Act 5 is the long and hilarious gloss on Bottom's dream. Bottom himself expressed a desire to incorporate the dream into the play as a song to be sung at Thisbe's death (4.1.210–11). The song never in fact appears, but the connection has been made: the play itself embodies the same concept of the aesthetic that the dream does. There is, of course, a strong element of parody at work, and Hippolyta and the three bridegrooms keep up witty patter to drive the point home. The rustic players have had recourse to their own kind of allegory or personification in the production—just as this play personifies concepts in the allegories associated with the fairies. In the parody version, concrete objects are signified by Wall and Moonshine; the method is self-parodying, another call of attention to the techniques of the larger play it both represents and is a part of. The impersonators of Pyramus and Thisbe (Bottom and Flute) distance us from the convention of using men to play women and to the craft of acting itself. Bottom is an obvious ham, and we see parodied precisely the kind of scenes of death and grief, which in plays like *Romeo and Juliet* are prime examples of the theater's power to move audiences. The result of the parodic elements is precisely the meta-aesthetic one of creating self-consciousness of the aesthetic space of illusion within the audience—the fictionality in which it has been immersed—and to show us the materiality of the signifiers used to create the illusion. This reminder of materiality was, as we saw previously, the function of Bottom throughout his erotic captivity by Titania, and thus we have within the action the same parallel

55 Rimbaud, letter to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871; reprinted in *Oeuvres*, 344.
between love / desire and poetry that Theseus develops in his famous speech on imagination. This insistence on the materiality of the aesthetic—one of Shakespeare’s recurrent themes throughout the play—is skeptical in that it anchors the potentially extravagant claims of Neoplatonist poetics (to which the play indirectly alludes twice) to the poet’s mystical power of insight. Nowhere in the play are we outside the natural world; that world has been poeticized and idealized through imagination, but never transcended. It is a world permeated with a quite human aura of eros, not the supernatural celestial heights of a Dante.

However, there is another point of view in dialogue with the skeptical materializing thread embodied in the parody, a dialogic strand that insists that the material signifiers of aesthetic experience may not transport us to heaven, but they do transport us—in the sense of the word “transported” used by Starveling (4.2.3–4) to refer to Bottom’s metamorphosis—to the region where Bottom experienced his visions. During the inset play we also hear evidence that Bottom (as Pyramus) is still involved in his posttransport synesthesia: “I see a voice. Now will I to the chink / To spy an I can hear my Thisbe’s face” (5.1.190–91). The confused sensory references clearly allude to Bottom’s dream and imply that Bottom has brought back something with him from the aesthetic realm. The poet, Rimbaud had claimed, must be a voleur de feu—Prometheus—a seer who mediates to the rest of mankind the harmonious realm of aesthetic imagination. But it is not a proposition communicable in utilitarian language, as we discover in Bottom’s words to his fellows upon his return:

**BOTTOM** Masters, I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what. For if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything right as it fell out.

**QUINCE** Let us hear, sweet Bottom.

**BOTTOM** Not a word of me.

(4.2.25–29)

Bottom’s transgressive experience of pleasure for pleasure’s sake—a humiliation for Titania, but an ennoblement of Bottom the weaver—is a version of the eros-suffused aesthetic celebrated in this play. Bottom is, as Rimbaud recognized, the aestheticizing Symbolist poet of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

**Love, Madness, and the Aesthetic**

The play’s aesthetic theorist, on the other hand, is clearly Theseus, in the often-quoted lines I alluded to above:

58 Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871; reprinted in *Oeuvres*, 347.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.

(5.1.4–8)

Although some critics have seen these words as choral, the consensus for many years has been that there is a strong element of irony here, that his rationalism too strongly contradicts the main themes of the play to merit acceptance at face value. My own view is that Theseus’s rationalism is dialogically related to the claims that the other characters make about experiences which seem to them transcendent. While his rationalism is reductive, it serves to question the kind of transcendent claims about aesthetic visions that Renaissance Neoplatonists (and later Romantics) made about aesthetic vision.

Certainly the comparison that he makes between lovers and madmen does not really strain the audience’s credulity after it has witnessed the turmoil created by mobile desire, with its attendant jealousy, rage, fighting, and murderous threats. It is when he makes it a triple comparison, by bringing in the poet, that he raises our suspicions. We have been engrossed in a poetic feast so rich that Theseus’s confidence that the poetic is merely a form of madness must give us pause. Hippolyta’s counterargument is an assertion that a shared dream, recounted consistently by four different dreamers, is surely something to be wondered at and perhaps beyond the ken of Theseus’s narrow rationalism. A shared vision, we can surmise, has a reality of its own. If, as I argued above, the dream space is one of this play’s chief signifiers of the aesthetic, then Hippolyta’s last words affirm a positive role for the aesthetic against Theseus’s debunking.

And if we are spirits of another sort, we will be discontented with Theseus’s Platonic reduction of poetry to the status of mere illusion. To the extent we have allowed ourselves to share in the magic of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, we have implicitly found a value in imagination, in an aesthetic experience. And yet there is little warrant in this play to elevate the imagination to Romantic levels, to make it the privileged portal to the deepest reality of creation. The play’s fifth act is mostly taken up with a farcical anatomizing of drama at its degree zero


60 Cf. Gheeraert-Graffeilie, “Call you me fair?” 273–74.
in the version of "Pyramus and Thisbe" given by the workmen. In this inset play, we see all the artifice of the theater, its rehearsals, its props and costumes, its calculations of audience reaction, on display before us. Just as the character Bottom never allows us to forget the flesh, materiality, and irrationality of love and desire, just as he shows us how the aesthetic, for all its spiritualizing effects, remains rooted in materiality, the inset play in which he performs meta-theatrically reinforces this message. The aesthetic magic we have witnessed is based on nothing less material than can be supplied by "Hard-handed men . . . / Which never laboured in their minds till now" (5.2.72–73). The poet's eye, after all, as Theseus tells us, "Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" (5.1.13) in its fine frenzy. Its vision is not of the real, but of what the real lacks, what is desired, what we dream of. Desire, in short, is one of the crucial links between the poet and the lover; it is the engine of the imagination. Rooted in a material world represented by the civic life of Athens and by the play of destructive desire among the four lovers, desire has recourse to imagination in order to body forth from the airy nothing of lack the needs and wants that could potentially humanize the world, if the world would wake up to them.

For now, this play tells us, all the magic is theatricality, stage illusion, aesthetics, wrought in a material world from a motley collection of resources. It is a play that presciently constructs a modern concept of the aesthetic and at the same time shows us the constructedness of this concept, its relation not only to imagination and the artistic past, but to desire and labor as well. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, we see Shakespeare engaged in precisely this double task. In the travesty that is the rude mechanicals' play, he presents us with the final truth of his own masterpiece—its made-ness, its materiality, its resistance to the artist's shaping fantasies. In case we missed it, Shakespeare ends the play with the plebeian voice of Robin Goodfellow, who speaks the epilogue—quite against the wisdom of the imperious rationalist Theseus, who had told the artisans, "No epilogue, I pray you; for your play needs no excuse" (5.2.340). Robin reinforces Theseus in one sense, but in a mode which he expects will lead rather to applause than to skepticism:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear;  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream.  
Gentles, do not reprehend . . .  
Give me your hands, if we be friends,  
And Robin shall restore amends.  
(Epilogue, ll. 1–7, 15–16)
Thus, it is a misleadingly self-deprecatory assertion of the purposeless purposefulness of aesthetic production, creative of a specialized “place,” a sphere where materials of the social text are refunkoined into an autonomously structured aesthetic realm made from, and imprinted with, all the cultural materials that inform the autonomous artifact. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is Shakespeare’s paean to, and anatomy of, impure aesthetics.