

10-15-2006

"Where is that Worthless Dreamer?" Bottom's Fantastic Redemption in Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Frank P. Riga
Canisius College, NY

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Riga, Frank P. (2006) "'Where is that Worthless Dreamer?' Bottom's Fantastic Redemption in Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 25: No. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



"Where is that Worthless Dreamer?" Bottom's Fantastic Redemption in Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Abstract

A study of Michael Hoffmann's reinterpretation of Bottom in his 1999 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which treats Bottom and his interactions with Faërie seriously rather than farcically and resonates throughout the film in a shifting of focus from the aristocratic court to the dignity of the common man and his worthiness to enter Faërie.

Additional Keywords

A Midsummer Night's Dream. Michael Hoffman, dir.; Shakespeare, William—Characters—Bottom; Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This article is available in *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss1/14>

"Where is that Worthless Dreamer?"
Bottom's Fantastic Redemption in Hoffman's
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Frank P. Riga

“What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here?” (MND 3.1.60). So exclaims Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when he suddenly comes upon a group of artisans who are rehearsing the play *Pyramus and Thisbe* for Duke Theseus's wedding celebration. With the aristocratic disdain of a favorite in the court of King Oberon, Puck later designates them contemptuously as “A crew of patches, rude mechanicals” (MND 3.2.9). Puck further singles out one of the artisans, Bottom the Weaver, as “the shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort” (3.2.13). Without questioning Puck's authority as a judge of social class or human nature, critics and directors have, for the most part, adopted Puck's contemptuous view of the artisans, referring to them, in Puck's disdainful phrase, as “the rude mechanicals” and assuming that Shakespeare shared Puck's view. As a result, both on stage and in critical studies, Bottom has been consistently portrayed as a clown, a buffoon, and a caricature.

Michael Hoffman's 1999 film, by contrast, turns tradition on its head by making Bottom and his fantastic “redemption” the central focus of his production. Furthermore, Bottom becomes the representative for the artisan classes all told, resulting in a radical shift from the traditional privileging of the aristocracy to a new emphasis on the lower classes. Bottom and his fellow artisans are seen as participating in a new vision of social class and individual worth, a vision that is central to Hoffman's conception of the play.

Hoffman's innovation is particularly evident if we compare his vision to a long history of interpreting the artisans as little more than clowns. From the mid-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century, the aristocrats were viewed as the play's main focal point, while the artisans were seen as incongruous comic elements in an essentially aristocratic pageant. Strict neo-classical views of genre caused the “low comedy” of the

"rude mechanicals" performing a travesty of *Pyramus and Thisbe* to be removed entirely from productions of the play and, in some cases, to be performed separately as a brief farce (Williams 38).¹ During the nineteenth century, when the artisans were reintroduced into stage productions, their portrayal as bumbling fools led one contemporary newspaper critic to ask in 1854, "Why were [Shakespeare's] honest laborers always greasy, dirty, stupid and slavish?" (qtd. in Williams 117). Critical studies, as well as stage and film productions throughout the twentieth century have buttressed this view.² Theodor Weiss sums up a consensus when he states, "Bottom is meant to be an ass and nothing but an ass" (95).³

Several critics, however, have broken with this longstanding consensus. They have shifted the focus from the aristocracy of Athens as the thematic, emotional, and political center of the play to a more empathetic interpretation of the "mechanicals" and a more positive portrait of Bottom. Bottom is now an important figure who is central to the play's themes.⁴ Michael Hoffmann's 1999 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the first major film to incorporate this innovation. In the film, Hoffman abandons the caricature and clown in order to present Bottom, played by

¹ Following this restrictive view of genre, in his influential 1755 version David Garrick cut out all of the Bottom material including the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* (Williams 67), as did Charles and Mary Lamb over fifty years later in their well-known prose summary of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1807).

² At the close of the century, Beerbohm Tree's portrait of Bottom "with a bibulous visage [and] voice thickened with indulgence in liquor" (Williams 119) was representative of the standard view of the artisans. Athens and the fairy kingdom were the center of focus, while the artisans were reduced to the "butt of a class joke" (Williams 138-9). Max Reinhardt continued this tradition in his 1905 stage production, and later, in his influential 1935 film in which James Cagney played a broadly comic if occasionally pensive Bottom.

³ See also Berry 101-02, and more recently Louis Montrose who speaks of the "characteristic Shakespearean condescension" to the lower classes (219).

⁴ See Michael Mangan, Robert Ornstein, and Richard Cox. In Mangan's view, the artisans are among the subversive elements that challenge Theseus's court, "a particularly harsh version of patriarchal authority" (155). Robert Ornstein emphasizes Bottom's humanity rather than his buffoonery, noting that the weaver, unlike many of the other male characters in the play, demonstrates an "invarying good nature" and an innate chivalry (89). Ornstein sees Bottom as the "chief fashioner" of the newly found "harmony" established in the final scene. Richard Cox places Bottom and the artisans at the political and aesthetic center of the play. For Cox, Bottom even becomes "a kind of savior of Athens" (184). See also Dorothea Kehler's annotated bibliography of critical studies surveying political and theoretical interpretations (42-5), particularly her references to John Palmer (1946), Elliot Krieger (1979), Michael Bristol (1985), and Annabel Patterson (1988).

Kevin Kline, as a human being who is sympathetic and sensitive to a realm of experience that is closed to the other characters in the play. A character with unfulfilled longings for love, Bottom is not only redeemed and transfigured by his fantastic experience in the world of dreams, but he also participates more fully than any of the other mortals in the play's central dream vision. Thus, as Kevin Kline notes, Bottom is not simply a fool. Instead, "Bottom [...] is an artist at heart. The urge to ally himself to ideas or representations of an heroic or transcendent nature is one of the defining principles of his character" (qtd. in Hoffman 13). By making Bottom's role central to the film's theme and structure, Hoffman's production also validates the members of the lower classes for whom Bottom is representative.⁵

In Hoffman's rendering, the setting, the music, and a number of inserted scenes express the director's shift in emphasis from the aristocracy to the artisans. Contrary to Leslie Felperin, who views the setting in late nineteenth-century Monte Athena, Italy, as arbitrary and unmotivated, I would argue that the setting and the time are particularly relevant to Hoffman's vision,⁶ firmly embedding the film within the context of the late nineteenth century social history of Europe and thus facilitating the shift in focus to Bottom and his fellow artisans. By choosing the late 1890s of Europe rather than ancient Athens, Hoffman suggests coming social changes. By presenting bicycles, gramophones, and other products of the working classes from this period, he underscores the value of their work and its integral role throughout all the layers of society. Given their ability to earn more than an adequate living without depending on the upper classes, the artisans can turn their leisure to cultural pursuits. In this context, it makes sense that Bottom and his fellow artisans can put on a play that becomes, in Hoffman's film, far more than a mere farce. Furthermore, the setting allows Hoffmann to situate Bottom and his fellow artisans

⁵ Hoffman's shift in emphasis is evident in his negotiations with Kevin Kline, whom he chose to play Bottom. Initially, Hoffman selected Kline to play Oberon. Only by convincing Kline that this production would validate the weaver's vision was he later able to persuade the actor to accept the role (Hoffman, *Screenplay* ix).

⁶ According to Leslie Felperin, Hoffman's choice of late nineteenth century Italy is "the version's no-good-reason substitute for the original's Athens" (52). See also Richard Schickel, who sees "no discernible reason" for Hoffman's choice (82).

historically, economically, and politically so that they become representative for the common people of late nineteenth century Europe.

Not only the setting, but also the musical score is particularly relevant, emphasizing the central role of the artisans and the lower classes in general. The score is no mere hackwork, unrelated to the film's central themes as Jack Kroll has objected.⁷ In composing the score, Simon Boswell drew from a number of nineteenth-century operas whose cast of characters and themes specifically complement Hoffman's own emphasis on the artisans and the theme of love's transformative power: Gioacchino Rossini's *La Cenerentolla* (1817), Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831), Gaetano Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* (1832), Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853), and Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890). The choice is significant. Except for Bellini's *Norma*, all of the operas mentioned above deal with the lower classes or with challenges to class and rank. Mascagni's and Donizetti's characters are rustics. Rossini and Verdi also have "lowly" heroines, one a kitchen drudge and the other a courtesan, who challenge class hierarchies by validating a love which cuts across class divisions. Music and arias from these operas are performed in accompaniment to the scenes, complementing and unifying Hoffman's vision of the play which privileges the lower classes.⁸

In addition to the setting and the music, several inserted scenes focusing on the lower orders underline Hoffman's shift in emphasis from the aristocrats to the artisans. Shakespeare's play opens with a scene at the court of Theseus; the artisans and members of the lower classes are not introduced until Scene Two, and then only briefly. In Hoffman's film, by contrast, both scenes undergo a metamorphosis, so that the members of the lower orders as well as Bottom and the artisans play far more significant

⁷ According to Kroll, Hoffman "miscegenates chunks of Mendelssohn's celebrated music with gobbets of Italian opera" (74). This comment does not do justice to Simon Boswell's score. Far from patching together a disjointed pastiche, Boswell has incorporated Mendelssohn as well as the operas cited below into a coherent musical accompaniment to the themes and actions. For example, the drinking song from *La Traviata*, "The Brindisi," becomes a leitmotif accompanying the artisans. Similarly, during the Bower scene with Bottom and Titania, Boswell's own original composition is integrated seamlessly with Mascagni's "Intermezzo," and both the Boswell and the Mascagni become the love motif.

⁸ Simon Boswell's score is part of a longstanding tradition of providing musical scores in accompaniment to the play. The tradition includes composers from Henry Purcell and Felix Mendelssohn to Benjamin Britten.

roles. A long series of inserted scenes centering on the servants, cooks, and garden workers precedes the introduction of Theseus and his court. The camera pans the castle grounds, featuring the butlers and maids as they set up long tables on the terrace, accompanied by Mendelssohn's "Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." We see the gardeners cleaning fountains, sweeping, and pruning flowers. The camera moves below the stairs to the dark recesses of a vast kitchen. There, in Hoffman's words,

A dozen cooks and scullery persons labor at the feast. Whole roast pigs, pollo, tacchino, bistecca Fiorentina. Mountains of garlic and onion, baskets of rosemary, basil and thyme. Grilled peppers, yellow and red, swimming in olive oil and anchovies, braised fennel, grilled eggplant, delicate zucchini flowers and porcini mushrooms, like fairy umbrellas, grilled whole. (1)

After the camera has panned all of these figures, whose work supports the pleasures of the wealthy aristocrats, it moves to a shot of Theseus, standing on a balcony overlooking the gardens, surveying the work being accomplished by the hands of others.

Only now does the camera move to the scene's two central characters, Theseus and Hippolyta, and Shakespeare's original opening to the play. But, as the camera moves to the figure of Hippolyta, we discover that Mendelssohn's "Overture," which has held all of these disparate images together musically, is emanating from the gramophone—the product of artisans—to which Hippolyta is listening in a quiet reverie. From the outset, then, the rich, pageant-like music of the soundtrack has linked the two social worlds in the play—the worlds of the aristocrats and the artisans—and by so doing, has underscored the significance of the working classes for Hoffman's interpretation. Even as Hoffman dwells on the actions of the aristocrats, filmic references to the lower classes persist throughout the scene. The viewer is reminded of their presence, as we catch continual glimpses of workers, gardeners, cooks, and market vendors in the background as the actions involving the aristocrats unfold.

The short scene introducing the artisans (*MND* 1.2) also undergoes a metamorphosis similar to that of Scene One. Hoffman uses extensive inserted scenes, music, and images which are not in Shakespeare's original play to indicate the new emphasis on Bottom as the central focus of the film. Hoffman begins with a prelude in images paralleling the opening to Scene

One. First we are presented with a view of the castle, high on a hill. The camera then pulls back to reveal the city and the market place below, bustling with life. Within the crowd, where classes mingle, we catch brief glimpses of each of the artisans in the context of their work. For Bottom, however, Hoffman has invented an entire history in images which gives him far greater depth and complexity than are traditionally attributed to a character who is portrayed exclusively as a clown. But, at the same time, through filmic allusions, Hoffman at first suggests the traditional view of Bottom as a buffoon, a pretender, and an ass. Contrary to viewer expectations, however, he does so only to destroy this traditional image, allowing Bottom to be transformed in subsequent scenes with Titania and rebuilt anew into a character with greater emotional depth and thematic significance.

In the inserted scene introducing Bottom, the expected kinship between Bottom and the ass is asserted, as the camera moves along the back and rump of a jackass, coming to a halt on Kevin Kline as Bottom. The camera now focuses on Bottom, the dreamy social climber, sitting in a sidewalk café, sipping espresso, and admiring his own reflection in the window. Unlike the other artisans in dark tradesmen's clothing, he wears an immaculate white suit, sports a jaunty straw hat, and carries a cane with an ornamental handle. Both his stylish clothing and demeanor demonstrate his attempt to set himself apart from his fellows artisans. Hoffman emphasizes Bottom's pretensions as he apes those who belong to the social class above his own. In the subsequent scene, his beautiful white suit, along with the social pretensions it represents, are in ruins, preparing him for a true transformation which, as Hoffman suggests, transcends social class and the petty longings of Bottom, the social climber. As Hoffman notes, he envisions Bottom as an actor and a pretender, who wishes for something beyond his station and his unsatisfying home life. Although Bottom takes refuge in his day dreams and delusions of self-importance, Hoffman suggests that these very delusions imply the Weaver's longing for something different and more fulfilling. Thus, as Peter Quince recognizes in the subsequent scene, Bottom is a man who deserves our sympathy, rather than our scorn and laughter.

Even here, while establishing the traditional asinine Bottom, Hoffman introduces a number of human elements which are not present in traditional farcical interpretations of this character. Hoffman shows Bottom

as a man who longs for love, but not in the lewd, scatological sense envisioned by Jan Kott and Peter Brook. He is not the crass jackass, but the chivalric gentleman, tipping his hat to two beautiful, well-dressed women in the crowded piazza. The women's clothing suggests that they belong to the wealthy middle class. They smile and nod; he smiles back somewhat wistfully. He knows they are beyond his reach. The brief flirtation is little more than a delusion which is immediately undercut. He is jerked back to reality by the appearance of his handsome but shrewish wife, a character not in Shakespeare's play. To underscore the love theme, Hoffman adds this stock comic character. Her presence suggests that Hoffman's Bottom fulfills yet another comic stereotype, that of the farcical henpecked husband. His wife angrily grabs one of the bystanders by the shirt and demands furiously, in Italian (translated in subtitles), "Where is that worthless dreamer?" Her words sum up the quintessence of Bottom the fool. Her presence underlines Hoffman's premise that Bottom's pretensions are symptomatic of a life that is barren and without love. Bottom quickly dodges out of sight to avoid his wife and sets off for the meeting with the other players, the artisans, who plan to rehearse "the most lamentable comedy," *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which they hope to act before the duke and the wedding party.

Later in the scene, during the assigning of roles, Hoffman presents Bottom as an impromptu ham actor and exhibitionist. But he is not simply a fool. He is admired and even applauded by a gathering crowd in the square, including the two beautiful young women he had seen at the café. At the height of his histrionics, two mischievous boys on the scaffolding above him dump two bottles of wine over his head, staining his white suit red and leaving him at first offended, then bedraggled and crestfallen as the crowd's admiration turns to scornful laughter. Hoffman uses this slapstick strategy to depose Bottom from his pretentious stance. While the audience is delighted with his fall from grace, the two beautiful women turn away, one with a final, lingering, and ambiguous look over her shoulder at the humiliated man who had formerly been the object of her admiring glances. "Was it pity?" Hoffman asks in the notes to his film script, preparing the viewer for a more empathetic response to the weaver (Hoffman, *Screenplay* 16). Peter Quince also responds with sympathy as he ineffectually brushes away at the wine stains.

The camera then follows Bottom as he makes his way across the square, alone and alienated, accompanied by the introductory bars to an

aria from Donizetti's opera, *L'Elisir d'Amore*. The aria, "Una Furtiva Lacrima" ("One Furtive Tear"), is a plaintive love song referring to a single tear in the lover's (Adina's) eye. For the singer, Nemorino, the tear reveals not pain but the love Adina feels for him. Bottom by contrast feels the rejection and absence of love. The aria thus underlines ironically the emptiness of his life. Even if we do not know the context or words of the aria, its plaintive music seems fitting as an accompaniment to an entire mute scene as the camera follows Bottom into his squalid apartment. He stands, humiliated, before the mirror. His wife, arms crossed, a frustrated expression on her face, looks at him and shakes her head dismissively before turning her back on him. Bottom, looking down at his wine-stained suit, makes a gesture of helplessness.

In deconstructing the traditional view of Bottom, Hoffman can now reconstruct Bottom's character. In these invented scenes, Hoffman has already expanded our view of Bottom to bring the character to life as a suffering human being rather than a mere clown. What is little more than a brief interlude with the artisans in Shakespeare's play (*MND* 1.2) is extended to the point where Bottom is now the center of focus and the object of our sympathy. This extension conforms to Hoffman's vision: "It wasn't Bottom the egotist, the clumsy outspoken braggart, nor Bottom the buffoon" he wished to present. "It was Nick Bottom, the dreamer, the actor, the pretender" (*Screenplay* viii), and, above all, the man who "clings to delusions of grandeur because he has no love in his life" (viii). After experiencing the depths of public and private humiliation, Bottom is now prepared for a change that, as Hoffman envisions it, will be brought about by the weaver's first taste of love in a realm beyond the ordinary world of mortals. Thus, the amplified scenes with Bottom have, on the one hand, exploited the comic dimensions of his role while, on the other hand, they have suggested a richer and more complex view of his character.

Bottom's subsequent transformation into an ass and his meeting with Titania in her bower represent a further innovation on the part of Hoffman. Traditionally, in their interpretation of the bower scene, critics and directors have made the case that Bottom's transformation into an ass is the concrete manifestation either of his crass stupidity and insensitivity (Vaughn 70-71; Foakes 35) or of his irredeemable bestiality (Kott,

Contemporary 228).⁹ In both cases, the emphasis falls on Oberon's intended degradation of Titania. For Jan Kott, as for directors influenced by his interpretation, the sexual union of Titania and Bottom is similar "to the fearful visions of Bosch and to the grotesque of the surrealists" (*Contemporary* 229). If the scene can be viewed as comic, then the humor is dark, resembling the "cruel and scatological" humor of Jonathan Swift (228).¹⁰

Hoffman, by contrast, humanizes Bottom, thereby challenging the notion of bestiality to which numerous critics and directors have relegated him. By the same token, the director counteracts the intended degradation of Titania in a scene which is sensuous rather than crass, and lyrical rather than grotesque. Even the "donkey" mask Hoffman chooses demonstrates how radically he departs from the portraits of Bottom as beast or buffoon. In costuming Kevin Kline, Hoffman rejected a full donkey head which "consumes" the actor and erases his humanity. Instead, he wished to restore the beauty, the sensuality, and, above all, the humanity to Bottom in what is portrayed as an elevating moment, during which the weaver enters a new sphere of being through his dream-vision experience of love. Hoffman therefore chose as the basis for Bottom's make-up and costuming an idealized and spiritualized portrait of Pan from a canvas by the late nineteenth-century painter, Gustave Moreau. In Hoffman's words, "Sensual, dreamy, bestial, beautiful; it became our model" (*Screenplay* 72). The sketch and make-up artists translated this figure into a "mask" which emphasized rather than concealed Bottom's human features.

In the bower itself, unlike the productions influenced by Jan Kott and Peter Brook, Hoffman portrays Bottom's encounter with Titania as lyrical and erotic rather than crassly sensual and sexual. The focus is on their faces. Kevin Kline's face is visible, with only ears and an excess of hair

⁹ Jan Kott notes that the ass was associated from antiquity through the Renaissance with "the strongest sexual potency" and was purported to have "the longest and hardest phallus" (*Contemporary* 227). Following Kott, Peter Brook portrayed Bottom's interlude in the bower with Titania as Oberon's intended sexual degradation of the fairy queen (Foakes 23).

¹⁰ Following Kott's lead, Peter Brook's 1970 film fuses the purely bestial creature with an existentialist interpretation of Shakespeare as the creator of an essentially absurd, Beckettian universe, in which Bottom is a clownish figure sporting a giant phallus (Foakes 23). While Brook's emphasis on theatricality represented a radical departure from previous illusionistic interpretations, the concept of Bottom as a grotesque and clownish figure was not essentially altered.

suggesting the donkey. The subtle play of emotions is clearly visible, as Bottom is not merely translated, but unexpectedly transported in a scene whose lyricism is underscored by Mendelssohn's music, the gentle laughter of the participants, and their stately movements. Significantly, Bottom initiates the music which accompanies the scene. He plays a recording of the aria "Costa Diva," from the opera *Norma*, on the gramophone which has been stolen from the world of mortals. Tellingly, in the context of the opera, the aria is not a love song, but a plea to the moon goddess to bring harmony between the warring factions of the Gauls and the Romans. Since Titania is another form of the name Diana, goddess of the moon,¹¹ this aria is a fitting accompaniment to a union which brings about harmony between the world of mortals and the world of faerie under the auspices of the moon goddess, Diana/Titania. The aria is not an ironic commentary on Titania's degradation, as Courtney Lehmann has argued (268). Instead, it is a celebration of the harmony resulting from Bottom's elevation and his role as the intermediary or peace-maker. He is the only mortal in the play who actually perceives and interacts consciously with the world of faerie.

In the scene when Bottom awakens from his dream, Hoffman presents Bottom, not as a "natural, ingrained fool" (Foakes 35), but as a visionary and dreamer. Hoffman depicts him discovering his crown, now a miniature size, in a bird's nest, formerly Titania's bower. These two artifacts, the crown and the bower, trigger his recollection of the vision, which is expressed in words that parody Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In Paul's words: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him" (2:9). Paul is referring to a vision of heaven, which mortal human beings can neither imagine nor put into words. Bottom's words reverse and displace the senses: "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" (4.1.208-11). Contrary to those critics and directors who see Bottom's words as a further demonstration of the weaver's stupidity and buffoonery, Hoffman portrays a thoughtful Bottom, whose parodic words generate a meaning of which he himself is at least partially aware. His words express the serious thought that, in the attempt of mortals to describe the unexpected fulfillment of spiritual longing,

¹¹ See Ovid 3, 173.

language fails. The break-down of language is thus akin to what the mystics and other religious writers term "ineffable," that which cannot be expressed in mere words. As Bottom states, "man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had" (4.1.207).¹² Hoffman has underlined the further possible layers of meaning in Bottom's words by playing this scene not as a joke, but as a touching and even plaintive memory of a vision beyond the world of ordinary reality.

Hoffman's most radical departure from the traditional approach to Bottom and the artisans as a social class may be seen in his depiction of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play within a play. The traditional view of the "mechanicals" as incompetent and farcical has informed critical analyses, as well as the staging and filming of this scene. The artisan's version of *Pyramus and Thisbe* is viewed only as a slapstick farce in which a crew of oafish louts unwittingly transform tragedy into comedy.¹³ Hoffman, by contrast, turns the entire tradition on its head. Comedy and slapstick accomplish a sudden generic about-face into tragedy. This generic turnabout represents a transformation which parallels Bottom's translation from foolish clown (comic mode) into the human being most profoundly touched by the vision in the forest, a man worthy to become the heart and center of Hoffman's interpretation of the play (dramatic, serious mode).

For the artisans' production of the play, the change from farce to tragedy is signaled as Flute, playing Thisbe, begins lamenting the death of Pyramus in a humorous falsetto. Within seconds Flute/Thisbe's voice shifts to its normal range. He tears off the ridiculous wig and presents a moving lament which leaves the court audience, like the film viewer, astonished, moved, and silent. Again, as in Bottom's dream speech, the language of Thisbe's lament is in the form of a satiric parody. And, just as Bottom's speech translates him to a different level, so Flute, as Thisbe, is transformed from buffoon to tragic heroine. As Hoffman states, "Real tears come to her eyes, a real performance" (107). The artisans and the formerly scornful

¹² See Chris Hassel's commentary on the allusions to Paul and Erasmus (52-8). According to Hassel, "Bottom ceases to be a man, is in fact transformed into an ass, but simultaneously into a spirit, and this miraculous transformation allows his brief communion with inexpressible reality" (56).

¹³ Foakes expresses a widely held consensus when he states that the dialogue of the courtiers during the play, however patronizing, nonetheless "exposes the mental distance between the court and the 'rude mechanicals', who lack the wit or imagination to 'amend' their own incompetence" (38-9).

courtiers alike are moved to tears. Just as the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in traditional interpretations comically foregrounds the tragic possibilities and provides a serious undertone to the tale of the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so in Hoffman's interpretation, the tragic resonances of the performance elevate and dignify the "comic" artisans. If one considers the fact that traditionally the tragic genre has been associated with the high born, while the comic genre has concentrated traditionally on the lower orders, then Hoffman has achieved a metamorphosis that not only cuts across traditional divisions of genre, but also across the barriers between social classes.¹⁴

A final scene with Bottom does not exist in Shakespeare's text, but it is a key to Hoffman's interpretation of the dream vision which is central to his film. In Shakespeare's play, once the "rude mechanicals" have completed their play, they disappear and are neither seen nor heard from again. However, Hoffman adds two additional endings to the several endings Shakespeare already provides in the play. After the central action of the play is complete, with the newly married couples going off to bed, Hoffman introduces an invented scene with the artisans celebrating their achievement and the pension Theseus has granted them. Hoffman then returns to Shakespeare's play, to the scene during which Oberon and the fairies bless the bridal chambers of the three newly married couples. Puck begins to deliver the famous last words of the play:

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. (5.1.411-16)

But this epilogue is interrupted in Hoffman's film by an additional scene at a window casement. Bottom is looking into the darkness over the square. His face expresses wistful longing as he turns the miniature crown

¹⁴ See Aristotle's *Poetics* 5, 9 and 17. According to Aristotle, while tragedy is associated with the high born, comedy, by contrast is "an imitation of baser men. These are characterized not by every kind of vice, but specifically by 'the ridiculous,' which is a subdivision of the category of 'deformity.' What we mean by 'the ridiculous' is some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects" (9).

in his fingers. The crown, reduced to the size of a ring and reminiscent of a wedding band, is the evidence Hoffman provides, the link, which proves the validity of the dream. The fairies appear, imaged in dots of light, and move toward Bottom. The largest of them, Titania, seems to greet him and even to bless him.¹⁵ Hoffman views Shakespeare's dream vision as the expression of an alternate form of reality, a view that corresponds to the medieval interpretation of the dream vision, which, though fantastic in form, expresses a true experience.

By presenting a final invented scene with Bottom, featuring the real artifact from the world of dreams, Hoffman undermines Theseus's famous, dismissive comment that the dream was, like the shaping fantasies of lunatics, lovers, and poets, merely a figment of the imagination. The director also undermines Puck's claim that these are mere shadows and subtly privileges Hippolyta's more intuitive view that the dream was more than a mere illusion. The dream vision, as Hippolyta suggests, expresses realities which contradict Theseus's shallow, rationalistic view of the world, and although the tale was grounded in an alternative world, quite unlike that of everyday life, the dream vision bodies forth the true experience of the complicated and beautiful, if somewhat mad, reality of love and its transformative power.¹⁶

As the film concludes, the camera moves from Bottom's smile of acknowledgment as he greets the fairies, to Puck's sympathetic smile as he walks away in the garb of a street sweeper to the accompaniment of Mascagni's "Intermezzo." Like his attraction to the bicycle in the earlier forest scene, Puck's change of costume is significant. He has joined the artisans and the modern world, if only in garb and sympathy.¹⁷ This final invented scene with Puck, the worker, suggests that for Hoffman, Bottom and those whom Puck had derided as "rude mechanicals" are the key to our

¹⁵ In the original screenplay for the film, Hoffman had imagined Titania actually taking shape, "suspended in the air before" Bottom at the window. She then "reaches out her hand [...] takes the crown and slips it onto his finger, like a wedding ring" (*Screenplay* 114). In the film, he opted for a far more suggestive and subtle imaging of Titania's farewell to Bottom.

¹⁶ For an insightful discussion of how Theseus's position is undercut in the play itself, see Mangan (170-71). Mangan astutely counters the traditional view that Theseus was Shakespeare's mouthpiece, representing Shakespeare's point of view.

¹⁷ This change of occupation, and thus its implications, is already suggested in Shakespeare's text. As Puck himself states, "I am sent with broom before / To sweep the dust behind the door" (5.1.367-8).

understanding of the dream vision, and thus for a unified interpretation of the entire play. In a topsy turvey shift, Bottom, the lowest of the "rude mechanicals," has come out on top and has assumed a privileged position as the only mortal whose eyes are capable of seeing beyond the veil which hides the vision's reality from the other mortals in the play. This translation of Bottom prepares the ground for the unexpected and moving performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, thereby allowing all of the other artisans to participate in Bottom's sublimation. And finally, the elevation of Bottom and the artisans also makes sense of Hoffman's decision to transpose the play from a mythic Athens to nineteenth century Italy, and by extension, to nineteenth-century Europe, where the "mechanicals," or common men, will have the opportunity to become something other than worthless dreamers.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Trans. Leon Golden. Commentary by O.B. Hardison Jr. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968.
- Berry, Ralph. *Shakespeare's Comedies: Explorations in Form*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1972.
- Bristol, Michael. *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Cox, Richard. H. "Shakespeare: Poetic Understanding and Comic Action (A Weaver's Dream)." *The Artist and Political Vision*. Ed. Benjamin Barber and Michael J. Gargas McGrath. New Brunswick: Transactions Books, 1982: 165-92.
- Felperin, Leslie. "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*." Film Review. *Sight and Sound* 9.10 (October 1999): 51-2.
- Foakes, R.A. "Introduction." *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. 1-41.
- Hassel, Chris. *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1980.
- Hoffman, Michael. Dir. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Perf. Rupert Everett, Calista Flockhart, Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Stanley Tucci. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.
- . *Screenplay: William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

- Kehler, Dorothea. "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Bibliographic Survey of the Criticism." *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Critical Essays*. Ed. Dorothea Kehler. New York: Routledge, 1998. 3-76.
- Kott, Jan. *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Carnival Tradition*. Trans. Daniela Miedzyrzeczka and Lillian Vallee. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1987.
- . *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski. New York: Norton, 1974.
- Krieger, Elliot. *A Marxist Study of Shakespeare's Comedies*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979.
- Kroll, Jack. "Midsummer Madness." *Newsweek* (24 May 1999): 74.
- Lehmann, Courtney. "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Agenda: How Shakespeare and the Renaissance are Taking the Rage out of Feminism." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53.2 (2002): 260-79.
- Mangan, Michael. *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies: 1594-1603*. London: Longman, 1996.
- Montrose, Louis. "A Kingdom of Shadows." *A Midsummer Night's Dream Critical Essays*. Ed. Dorothea Kehler. New York: Routledge, 1998: 217-240.
- Ornstein, Robert. *Shakespeare's Comedies: From Roman Farce to Romantic Mystery*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1986.
- Ovid. *Metamorphosis*. 2 vols. Trans. Frank Justice Miller. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1976-7.
- Palmer, John. *Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. London: Macmillan, 1946.
- Patterson, Annabel. "Bottoms Up: Festive Theory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Renaissance Papers* 1988: 25-39.
- Paul, the Apostle. "First Epistle to the Corinthians." Cited according to William Fulke. *The Text of the New Testament of Jesus Christ*. London, 1589.
- Schickel, Richard. "But Midsummer Night's Dream." *Time* (10 May 1999): 82.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Eds. Linda Buckle and Paul Kelley. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Vaughn, Jack. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980.
- Weiss, Theodore. *The Breath of Clowns and Kings: Shakespeare's Early Comedies and Histories*. New York: Atheneum, 1974.
- Williams, Gary. *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night's Dream in the Theatre*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1997.

