



Bottom's Wife: Gender and Voice in Hoffman's *Dream*

In his screenplay to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), director Michael Hoffman characterizes Shakespeare's play as "like a magic mirror [that] enchants us and reflects back to us who we are" (Hoffman Introduction, n. p.). To say that it both "enchants" and "reflects" is to premise Shakespeare's play as both fantasy and mimesis. Hoffman's casual conjunction of two nearly contradictory positions describes the film itself: it revels in escapist fantasy, and yet it also engages the realities of contemporary culture. The film reflects back to millennial American culture one version of "who we are"—a consumer culture absorbed in fantasy and enchantment.

The film revels in beautiful images and sound, unabashedly exploiting the eye- and ear-candy of digital accessibility. With its pop-star casting, glossy flesh shots, and lush soundtrack, Hoffman's *Dream* is a document in the temptations of virtual imagery and sound. Many American consumers have unprecedented tools for the manipulation of virtual fictions. On my iMac®, I can create and reproduce images and tunes of unprecedented lushness using the tools of virtual fantasy—iPhoto™, iMovie™ and iTunes®. CDs, DVDs, websites, and HDTV can give us all instant access to the virtual. Now Michael Hoffman has given us another virtual tool, his Shakespearean *iDream*.¹

When I quoted Hoffman just now, I truncated his characterization of the play. Let me make amends. He actually writes that it "enchants us and reflects back to us who we are, and what we know of love" [emphasis added]. Love is ostensibly connected in the film with what "we know," with what might be called the "real" world. The convoluted courtship of the young lovers leads to "real" sex (or at least nudity) and marriage. Theseus and Hippolyta are presented as a "real" engaged couple caught up in familiar prenuptial tensions. Oberon and Titania are a little more difficult to imagine as real lovers—Rupert Everett and Michelle Pfeiffer in bed together? But their fairyland quarrel seems to resolve as nicely into their world as the squabbles of, say, Hugh Grant and Sandra Bullock. Centrally, the film makes Bottom's desire for love seem real: Kevin Kline engages us in a touching romance of awak-

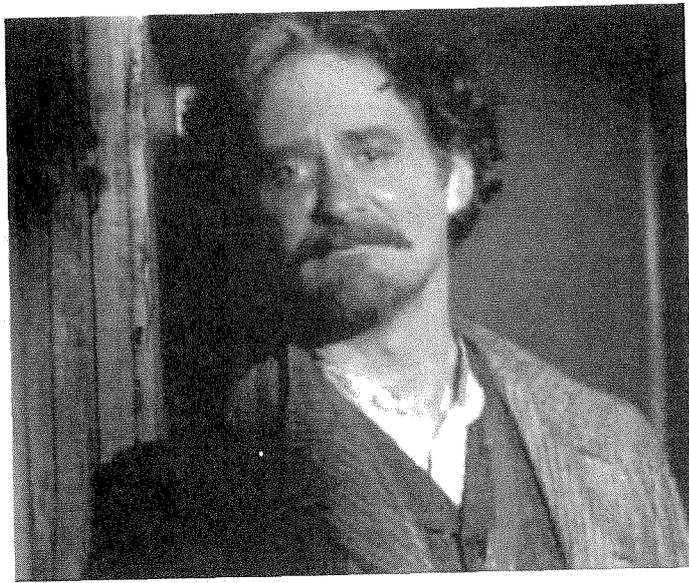
ened middle-age male sexuality, with just enough realism to make him the focus of audience identification—at least for middle-aged males.

But for all its gestures toward the real, love in Hoffman's *Dream* seems more virtual than real. The flesh we see is as artificial as the "mud" that covers and displays Hermia and Helena and as virtual as the glitter that accompanies Titania. The film's "shimmering skin-splendor" (Deilaeder 185) seems as distant from real sex as is the cool nudity of the pre-Raphaelite painters.² This highly cosmetic film was appropriately tied in with a product line of Max Factor (Lehmann 267). Even its phallic references—both Lysander and Bottom seem to sport erections—are more coy than arresting, kept at a virtual distance by the edge of the picture frame. Above all, Bottom's experience of love and sex, so clearly the emotional center of the film, seems unreal.³ We are led to believe that Bottom will be transformed by Titania: this sensitive soul, longing for beauty, frustrated by a barren marriage, is given a night of bliss. The screenplay wants us to feel a change: "Bottom is left smiling. . . . His eyes fill up with a strange kind of joy" (Hoffman 114). But in the film itself, there is no joy at the end. Bottom's *iDream* hath no bottom: nothing really changes. He is left only with a tiny golden crown, a mere token of his sexual encounter. He is no freer from the traps of frustrated desire than he ever was.

Like any good date movie, this romantic comedy avoids material and social complications. Bottom and Titania, like Kate and Leopold, cannot take too much reality. Hoffman gives us instead the transparency of the virtual, the chance to participate in fantasy without an irritable reaching after fact and reason. But he also makes certain moves toward critiquing virtual fantasy. The directorial choice that most prominently disrupts Bottom's fantasy is Bottom's wife, a shrew whose "beady eyes search the square" where Bottom promenades and flirts (Hoffman 10). In a romantic comedy, such an admonishing presence might be a comic butt like Malvolio, an anti-romantic fated to be outwitted and banished. But here, rather than reinforcing romantic comedy by losing out to it, Bottom's wife refuses to engage or bend. Her harsh presence breaks the transparency of the dream. In a film where most females are so lovingly served by camera and make-up artist, she is an exception; her image does not grace the glossy pages of the screenplay. She works on Bottom with her angry stares from margins where the likes of Calista Flockhart (Helena) are not found. Bottom's wife is, as Courtney Lehmann states, not "the dream you never want to end" but the "bitch" that "men awake to find themselves tethered to" (Lehmann 267-68).

The conventions that adhere in films of Shakespeare come into play strongly with Bottom's wife. To use period costumes and settings is acceptable; to cut lines is acceptable; but to add dialogue or characters is to usurp Shakespeare's authority. Giving Bottom a shrewish, though mostly silent, wife is right on the edge, hovering between directorial assertiveness (daring to add such a prominent character to Shakespeare's play) and humility (not presuming to write speeches for her).⁴ Certain of Hoffman's "non-Shakespearean" moves are easily incorporated into the genre: the bicycle and the Edwardian country house from Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, or the "Chiantishire" villa from Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Because of a history of such modernizations, they now seem naturalized as vehicles for Shakespeare's text. But an added character like Bottom's wife, who uses her silence so powerfully, disrupts the conventions of nostalgic period Shakespeare.⁵ It is no wonder that Max Reinhardt, having written in a similarly shrewish wife for Bottom in 1935, apparently cut her out again in production: the addition would not have supported the authority Hollywood then needed from Shakespeare (Jackson 40).

Though Bottom's wife is marginalized, she is intensely present in her brief screen moments. She may not be one of the glamorous, active, articulate "narcissistic women of *Ally McBeal*" (Lehmann 261), but her silence shames Bottom, even though it does not provoke him to change.⁶ Stuck in the world of "real life," she acts as a representative of resistance to the easy fantasies that women enact in the rest of the film.⁷ Bottom's wife is fierce, and her fierceness has little to do with witty post-feminist career women.⁸ One feels that her animal inarticulateness—Hoffman describes her as uttering "a noise, something between a grunt



and a growl!" (Hoffman 17)—could be as easily directed toward her "sisters" as toward her husband. Her silence is not the silence of a lamb.⁹

Hoffman surely gives us Bottom's shrewish wife to help us see Bottom's fantasies as understandable and likeable. The film plays along with Bottom's fantasies. Even though he is a failed "Boulevardier" (Berney 23), at least he cuts a decent figure. Though he is an ass, he is a cute one.¹⁰ The film constructs Bottom as a warm and fuzzy man, a dreamer for whom we can root. In particular, the film makes us enjoy Bottom's longing for a life of theatrical fullness. He seems to live for language and music. In the first mechanicals' scene in the piazza, Bottom revels in theatricality: his "Ercles" speech is a big show-off for the local girls, his mincing "Thisne" "has the crowd in stitches" (Hoffman 14), his lion is a great success, and, when he promises to "roar you as gently as any sucking dove," he is in heaven. He thrives on theatricality, on the chance to "aggravate [his] voice" into the richness of theatrical sound.

But it is when he is most engaged in theater that Hoffman cuts him down. Young rascals pour wine on his head, staining his white suit and dousing his theatrical fantasy.¹¹ As the crowd laughs at him and the girls turn away, Quince builds him up again: "Pyramus is a sweet-faced man . . . therefore you must needs play Pyramus." Nonetheless Bottom has to go home to encounter the wife whose silence and marginality more profoundly extend and complicate the comic discomfiture that he has experienced in the piazza.

What does Bottom long for in the theatrical? The transformative potentiality of acting seems central. This Bottom wants to play all the parts not because he is a big ego but because his ego seeks ways to become bigger. His Ercles, Thisbe, and lion represent an escape from the traps of class, gender, and even humanity (if we include the lion). He is simultaneously wonderful and atrocious in these roles because he believes so totally in their effect on him, on his audience, and on life itself. Partly because this Bottom so yearns for theatrical success, Hoffman's "Pyramus and Thisbe" is not particularly funny: it is hard for us to laugh with him or even at him, as do the aristocrats. Bottom's aspirations are not simply ridiculous. Theater is for Bottom a deeply engrained fantasy of freedom and transformation, thwarted by his unnoticed marginality.

As often in this play, gender is at the core. The silent gaze of Bottom's wife speaks of many things, but central among them is the inescapability of gender politics. If she is re-



duced to silence and anger by her gender, Bottom is trapped by his gender as well. His trap is the masculine fantasy to be all things, to live beyond the constraints of the material and social. The fantasy is highlighted in a telling moment during "Pyramus and Thisbe." Flute, playing Thisbe, abandons his disastrously artificial "woman's" voice and begins to speak in his own male register. He takes off his ridiculous wig, and somehow, suddenly, understands how to give meaning to his stilted lines (of course, this sudden success of Flute's is yet another fantasy of the film). To play another, to escape himself, he needs to be in his own body, not in some fantasy of another's. But Flute's success "[a]gainst impossible odds" (Hoffman 108), finding in Thisbe a theatricality of the corporeal, highlights the failure of Bottom's theatrical fantasies.

After playing Pyramus, Bottom goes home alone. We might have hoped for some carryover—that, after a night in the woods and then a night in the theater, he might relate to his wife in a new way. An exterior shot of the warmly lit window of their apartment suggests that transformative possibility, but at the end Bottom apparently retreats into fantasies, sighs, and sad smiles. Flute, not Bottom, experiences the transformations of the theatrical. Titania, not Bottom, experiences the transformations of sex, returning to regenerative amity with Oberon. Why not allow Bottom to be "translated" by his experiences of theater and sex? These experiences remain for Bottom finally non-transformative because they are virtual rather than material.

The film maintains a stubborn insistence on the incompatibility between the desire for transformation and the possibility of its fulfillment. Perhaps the most powerful trope of that insistence is the operatic music that dominates the soundtrack. Both in its predigital (phonographic) manifestation in the film and in its digitized representation on soundtrack and CD, operatic music unmistakably sets out the temptations of the virtual and the resistance of the material. Bottom's fantasy life seems indistinguishable from the nineteenth-century Italian opera music that accompanies him in the town and forest. Arias practically define the world in which he lives. Simon Boswell's film score and soundtrack CD resound with operatic excerpts and remakes of chestnuts like the *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Opera thankfully even pushes Mendelssohn to a smaller corner of the soundtrack than one might expect.

Hoffman's use of opera both represents Bottom's desires and complicates them by implying the (absent) material circumstances of production and transmission. On the one hand, this music is invisibly manifested, produced without apparent effort or agent. But the film also implies the material reality that would make the virtual possible. Hoffman tells us that an expert informed him that there was no popular music tradition in the Tuscany of 1895. "They must have listened to something," I said. "Oh, they did. They listened to opera" (Boswell CD liner notes). The film suggests that the Monte Athena Opera House is just around the corner and that Duke Theseus listens to opera on the Edison machine that we see the fairies steal from his party. The opera tunes that dominate the nondiegetic world of this film imply a material reality in the diegetic, but the connection is not simple. We do not see the opera house, and we do not really know how the arias come to be on the soundtrack. An old phonograph is given considerable screen time, but it is obviously not the source of the music we hear, for the orchestras, singers, and engineering are from the latter years of the twentieth century. As with almost all representations in the digital age, these arias appear in all their virtual perfection, unflawed and disembodied. We get these gems without buying an opera ticket, without sitting through the boring parts, without suffering a bad conductor or a wooden tenor. CDs and soundtracks, like computer writing and digital video, remove all the flaws of life, to give us unmediated, blissful, airbrushed fantasy.

The rich, generous music of these operas surrounds us with grand, victorious, fulfilled love. In "*Che gelida manina*" (Puccini, *La Bohème*) we hear Rodolfo's sensitive dreams, fantasies that are finally being realized in his love for Mimi.¹² In the drinking song from Verdi's *La Traviata*, Alfredo sings rapturously of pleasure, and Violetta responds with ecstatic abandon. From *La Cenerentola* (Rossini) we hear Cinderella's song of victory ("*Non più mesta*"). The buffoon Nemorino (in Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*) miraculously transcends his tongue-tied repressions in the passionate love song, "*Una furtiva lagrima*." The orchestral *Intermezzo* from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* summons a passionate emotional intensity far beyond our daily lives.¹³ And perhaps most powerfully—at the moment of consummation for Titania and Bottom—we hear "*Casta diva*" with its enormously virtuosic grandeur and its implication of utterly present womanliness.

Recent studies have identified the power and complication of music and nondiegetic sound in creating a virtual space in theater and film. Leslie C. Dunn, for example, analyzes the strange moment in *Henry IV, Part I*, when Lady Mortimer sings in Welsh (3.1). The song, in a language almost no one understands, marks the woman as separate from the heroic and efficient world of men, who negotiate the business of war in English. The song in Welsh marginalizes the singer in "a different social or psychological space relative to that occupied by dominant groups." At the same time it associates that marginalization with a mode of excess, the music serving "to release emotions that could not be so fully or freely expressed under the constraints of ordinary social discourse" (Dunn 57, 58). The singing space is thus removed from the normal course of the theatrical impulse (the singing is an interruption of the plot, a kind of pre-cinematic analog to the extra-diegetic space created by a soundtrack). The female singer becomes an object of pleasure and desire, "charged with the expressive supplement of music," representing a kind of nonlinguistic female space. Dunn draws on the work of Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman to show how the desirability of expression carries risks of excess and engenders a male anxiety that figures the singer as a dangerous siren:

The pervasiveness of the siren figure suggests that underlying the cultural stereotype of the feminine is a cultural anxiety about music . . . [T]his anxiety is projected onto female figures because it is fundamentally a male anxiety—a fear of being "unmanned" not only by sexual desire, but by any strong emotion, both of which can be aroused by music . . . [P]atriarchal thinking constructs music as the irrational other among signifying practices, its *melos* a "feminine" signifier that exceeds the semantic containment of the *logos*. (Dunn 61)

Carolyn Abbate's work theorizes the contradictions in opera between the tragic fates of women and the indispensability of their voices, marking how "unconquerable" sound tri-

umphs even while women characters succumb. "Such [virtuosic] moments enact in pure form familiar Western tropes on the suspicious power of music and its capacity to move us without rational speech" (Abbate 4). The uncanny power of the singer creates a "penumbra of uneasiness" whereby, for example, the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* "suddenly becomes not a character-presence but an irrational nonbeing, terrifying because the locus of voice is now not a character, not human, and somehow not present" (Abbate 11).

Hoffman's nondiegetic opera voices, too, are both deeply desirable and deeply disturbing. If they operate at one level as a sign of the virtual dream—conveniently disembodied, digitally accessible, immaterial—they are on the other hand imbued with material consequences. Nemorino's discovery of love in "*Una furtiva lagrima*," for all its tunefulness, is inseparable from his anxiety-ridden discovery of the corporeality of women: perceiving a secret tear fall from Adina's eye, he realizes in that bodily function her passion and her essential materiality. "*Lo vedo*," he sings: "I see it." What he sees is, in one instant, her falling tear, her body, her passion, his sighs and his death.¹⁴ Alfredo in his duet with Violetta links himself to her passion, jealousy, and eventual death. Rodolfo and Mimi, happy in Act I, are destined to suffer the fateful tragedy of the corporeal. The Mascagni *Intermezzo* evokes an apparently transcendent moment of peace, but is only a breathing space in a fierce and deeply sexualized vendetta leading to inevitable death. "*Casta diva*" figures "Bottom's dream as a sequel to Bellini's [tragic] opera" (Lehmann 268). Though the aria's pace is serene, the melody graceful and liquid, the setting sylvan, the mood prayerful ("Chaste goddess, turn your face to us, spread your peace among us"), this prayer for peace, directed to a goddess of chastity, is deeply fraught. Norma, the priestess of the chaste moon, is herself far from chaste, so as she summons the moon to show herself "*senza vel*" (without veil), she also summons the full reality of her own sexuality. No one can escape the intense sexual politics of opera plots like this. The silvery forest scene, so apparently benign, is in fact a place of sacrifice. If a man engages with Norma, he is likely to end up not *at*, but *on* the altar.

Apart from matters of plot, aria itself inherently signals its deep commitment to passion and the body. No singer can project her voice so intricately and so grandly unless she is eminently material: her voice may be digitally encoded, but it has been produced in her body. In Barthes's term, the "grain of the voice" is still *inevitably* present: it is that grain, the body encountering difficulty, which makes us listen and thrill to opera. "Norma" is here both a fantasy and a real body at the same time. A soundtrack, as Doane suggests, succeeds in moving us only if it has what sound engineers call "presence" (the sense of a real body behind the recorded sound). "The voice is not detachable from a body which is quite specific—that of the star" (Doane, "Voice" 164). So, Norma is here "anchored by a given body," in this case the body of Renée Fleming, recorded at such and such a time and in such a space.

And yet, the body is present only by implication, metaphorically; we *see* no singer. Doane articulates the paradox: "who can conceive of a voice without a body? However, the body reconstituted by the technology and practices of the cinema is a *fantasmatic* body . . ." (Doane, "Voice" 162). What seems indissolubly unified—the image and the sound—are in fact at odds. To return to Bottom and his blissful encounter with the queen of the fairies, the image is a dream vision; the soundtrack is a tragic foreshadowing of the contradictions and complications of passion.¹⁵

The *bel canto* soundtrack of Hoffman's *Dream* opens up for Bottom a virtual space that is the sonic equivalent of his "dream" of love with the Queen of the Fairies. Where his marriage is pinched, constrained, and silent, this operatic space is open, melismatic, and marked by "full-throated ease." We might expect nondiegetic sound to operate transparently, supporting the protagonist's fantasies and reinforcing cinema's expected moves toward fulfillment. If that were enough, the soundtrack in *Dream* would serve primarily to underscore the text as a romantic comedy; that is, to reinforce a sense that dream and fantasy are effective modes of personal and social transformation. But this operatic soundtrack works on a

more complicated level. While it may well be intended to suggest a liberatory experience for Bottom, it has something of an opposite effect. Subjected to the critical silence of Bottom's wife, the lush music of the operatic voice signifies that this *iDream* is a temptation, a fantasy of virtual, immaterial, and unattainable fulfillment. Like the film as a whole, the soundtrack, in Hoffman's words but perhaps not in his intended meanings, both "enchants us and reflects back to us who we are, and what we know of love."¹⁶

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Notes

¹ My computer "created" this pun. Intending to type "Apple-i" in order to italicize "*Dream*," I got the hybrid "iDream" instead. The virtual fantasy of perfect and instant writing is the promise of the computer: even as I typed the roughest drafts of this paper, I could instantly make it all *look* beautiful on the screen.

² Hoffman cites Burne-Jones, G. F. Watts, and Alfred Waterhouse in particular (Hoffman 27, 34).

³ The film web site cites the encounter of Bottom and Titania as the place "where Hoffman found his film's emotional core."

⁴ She does speak once, but in Italian, with a subtitle in English. The speech is not in the published screenplay.

⁵ See my article on Nunn's *Twelfth Night* for a discussion of other forms of disruption in period Shakespeare.

⁶ The screenplay gives her more than the film does: Hoffman writes that at the end, she "grunts in contempt at [Bottom's] delusions of grandeur. He shrugs. She walks away" (Hoffman 113).

⁷ In the screenplay, though not in the film, there is a baby crying. And someone—not Bottom—is going to have to clean the wine-stained suit that Bottom wears (Hoffman 17). Reinhardt, too, proposed showing Bottom's wife at the end "busy over the wash tub" but thought better of it (Jackson 40).

⁸ As Lehmann and Deilaeder both note, the feminism of the film, like that of period romance in general, is ambivalent. "[I]t seems to foster a feministic, 'go girl!' response in its audiences, but on the other hand, it offers a debased definition of female empowerment—namely, marrying the man you want . . ." (Deilaeder 195).

⁹ John R. Ford sees the film as an attempt to catch the comic celebratory energies of a theatrical performance, and rightly notes that Bottom's wife is too tangible for such a purpose. She represents, he says, "an all too gross and palpable *explanation* for Bottom's desire to dream" (Ford 6).

¹⁰ Hoffman and the production team call attention to the choices in making Bottom an ass (Website *About the Production*). Since they wanted Kevin Kline to be able to use his expressiveness in the scenes with Titania, they avoided the usual removable ass's head, using ears, beard, and makeup instead. The effect underscores that Bottom is already something of an ass, but also emphasizes the endearing humanity of his ass-head.

¹¹ In the screenplay, it is donkey manure that they drop on him. I suspect it did not make as lasting an impact on the white suit as the Chianti.

¹² "*Che gelida manina*" features much more strongly in the soundtrack CD than in the film itself.

¹³ The description of this tune from my ancient opera guide is unabashed about its power and transcendence: "a haunting melody, vibrant with a certain religious ecstasy and yet pulsating with tense, fervid passions like unto those of the scenes being unfolded in the drama . . . renowned in even the most remote corners of civilization" (*Victor Book of the Opera* 93).

¹⁴ "One secret tear welled up in her eyes . . . I see it, she loves me. For one moment, to feel the beating of her heart mixing with my sighs . . . Oh, God, if I could die now I'd ask no more" [my translation].

¹⁵ Doane points to the way soundtrack and image draw attention to the split between forms of sense and aspects of knowledge, with the image taking the side of the empirical and the soundtrack the side of the ineffable. In continuity cinema, technicians work to "marry" sound to image, to minimize contradictions between them. But "[b]ecause sound and image are used as guarantors of two radically different modes of knowing (emotion and intellection), their combination entails the possibility of exposing an ideological fissure—a fissure which points to the irreconcilability of two truths of bourgeois ideology" (Doane, "Ideology" 56).

¹⁶ My thanks to my colleagues Robert Pierce and Phyllis Gorfain, to my students (especially Amy Cimini and Colin Booy) for stimulating discussion about seventeenth-century drama, gender, and music, and to the members of the Shakespeare and Film Seminar at the 2003 Shakespeare Association of America meeting, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

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