

Chapter 2

The Ecology of Self in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

Robert N. Watson

All images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read Nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.

—John Dryden, on Shakespeare, from the *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*

I.

Sir Thomas Browne remarked that “to call our selves a Microcosme, or little world, I thought it onely a pleasant trope of Rhetorick, till my neare judgement and second thoughts told me there was a reall truth therein,” which is that “we live the life of plants, the life of animals, the life of men, and at last the life of spirits ... for though there bee but one [world] to sense, there are two to reason; the one visible, the other invisible.”¹

Compare this antique microcosmic vision of human life, popular among Italian Renaissance philosophers, with a recent scientific analysis:

each of us harbors approximately 10 bacterial cells for every one of our eukaryotic cells Although we are, strictly speaking, eukaryotic organisms, we might more accurately be described as a series of linked and densely populated ecosystems, each a rich mixture of interacting eukaryotic, bacterial and archaeal cells Over the past decade, we have discovered how vital to us these bacterial communities really are ... only a tiny, biased sliver of microbial diversity could be cultured in the lab. As a result, we could guess, but we could never really know, what was out there.²

¹ Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1634), part 1, chapter 34; in *The Major Works*, ed. C.A. Patrides (New York, 1977), pp. 103–4.

² Robert Dorit, “All Things Small and Great, *The American Scientist*, 96/4 (2008): 284. *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, edited by Lynne Bruckner, and Dan Brayton, Taylor and Francis, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wesleyan/detail.action?docID=674517>.
Created from wesleyan on 2018-01-19 10:37:54.

What I am proposing is that we consider *Midsummer Night's Dream* as a kind of prescient allegory of these facts, with fairies in the role of microbes. Looking back at Shakespeare's fantasy, we can say—like Browne and also Francis Bacon, looking back at Paracelsus's "fantastically strained" depiction of human beings as microcosms³—that it contains a deep and insufficiently recognized truth about our nature and our place in the world. Shakespeare's *Dream* was therefore doing what was understood as the work of dreams: "a man doth more comprehend in his dream than waking in the day-time" because a sleeper is not "troubled through the doings of outward sense."⁴

In recent decades, literary scholarship has invested heavily in refuting the illusion of the autonomous self: the unified human individual possessing free will and a unique interiority. The refutations, often based on the work of Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, have emphasized the unconscious dependence of persons on powers much larger than themselves: epistemic vocabularies that dictate patterns of thought, and structures of political authority that dictate subject-positions.

My argument here is that the same refutation can be conducted—perhaps even more compellingly, and certainly for environmentalist causes more usefully—by recognizing the way our illusory boundaries of selfhood are overrun (interpenetrated, as well as interpellated) by entities much smaller and seemingly weaker than ourselves: not mighty con-men, but mitochondria. Shakespeare may have been present at "the invention of the human," but I suspect that Harold Bloom is mistaken in depicting him as the inventor.⁵ As *Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrates, Shakespeare's role was more like that of a very skeptical patent-officer, asking, is this invention really so new, unique, and independently functional as it claims?

Because, autonomous we certainly are not. We are less inhabitants of an ecosystem than participants in it, as other systems are pervasively and indispensably part of the "us." The question of whether we serve our DNA or our DNA serves us is not finally answerable—and the same is true of many microbiological systems within us which are far less proprietary to the self.⁶ Endosymbionts inhabit our

³ Francis Bacon, *Of the Advancement of Learning* (1605), pp. 38–9; see also Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (London, 1615), p. 2. For intervening versions of this notion of the human being as microcosm, see C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 153.

⁴ Thomas Hill, *The Most Pleasant Art of the Interpretation of Dreams* (1576), sig. B2v; quoted by Peter Holland, ed. *The Oxford Shakespeare A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Oxford, 1994), p. 11.

⁵ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human* (New York, 1999), pp. 7–45.

⁶ David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, updated and expanded (Vancouver, BC, 2007), p. 207, building on Lynn Margulis's study of "organelles," observes that "each of us is a community of organisms. We are each an aggregate of trillions of cells, every one of which

cells in massive numbers, generating most of our energy. Hormones run a show in which we are largely puppets, making human life in general, and *Midsummer Night's Dream* especially, a Bergsonian farce of mechanicals within a vitalist comedy. Our acts of sexual selection are at once the apex of personal choice and the epitome of our servitude to biological systems beyond our comprehension. This play makes sexual desire—itsself a deeply selfish, deeply selfless motive—a test-case for the problem of human identity.

When Demetrius—four times within six lines⁷—ludicrously cites “reason” as the cause of what we know is an arbitrary, drug-induced shift of lust-objects, Shakespeare is surely parodying the principal criterion Renaissance philosophers used to differentiate humanity proudly from other species.⁸ Readers often note uncomfortably that, when Demetrius later says he has “come to my natural taste” in returning to his erstwhile preference for Helena, he is actually still (and remains indefinitely) in the thrall of the juice of the magic flower (IV, i, 174). But can we confidently say he is mistaken, when his enchantment so clearly resembles the seemingly arbitrary charm a midsummer night often casts on young adults? Is “love-in-idleness” a magic spell, or a flower—or a common fact of adolescence? Before it is imposed on their eye-sockets, this force had surely already risen up from within Demetrius and Lysander. Renaissance commentators generally described erotic love as a kind of possession, an occupation of the heart by the image of the beloved that entered through the eye. When a young man’s self-conscious disdain melts into unqualified adoration, can we confidently distinguish between the grip of Ecstasy and the grip of Ecstasy—between the psychoactive party drug and the mental state allegorized in *psychomachia*?

Recent studies of brain-chemistry confirm that being in love is not neatly distinct from being drugged: testosterone and/or estrogen leading to endorphins that flood the ventral tegmental areas at first sight (Romeo and Juliet at the Capulet ball), then phenylethylamine releasing dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin as love thrives (Acts II and III of that play), and oxytocin (for women) and vasopressin (for men) sustaining the long-term bonding of marriage (the potential happy ending

is inhabited by numerous descendents of parasites; they now provide services for us in return for an ecological niche.” A similar symbiosis goes back to the earliest stages of life on earth, as “one bacterium invaded another, actually penetrating a host’s membrane to lodge inside the protoplasm Rather than creating an antagonistic union, both host and invader discovered mutual advantages from this relationship” (Suzuki, pp. 67–8). Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 1989), has popularized the question of whether we are fundamentally tools of our DNA.

⁷ II, ii, 115–20; all citations are based on the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.B. Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (2nd edn, Boston, 1997).

⁸ Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 2006), demonstrates that reason was the key element in this distinction in this period.

that leads instead to the tragic suicide-pact, in *Romeo and Juliet* as in *Pyramus and Thisbe*). My point is not to reduce these emotional events to biochemistry; on the contrary, my point is that love involves forces and interactions and emergent phenomena so mysterious—and so far beyond our rational regulation, though poignantly entangled with it—that we might as well turn the names of the compounds into names of fairies.

Shakespeare, of course, did not study microbiology or endocrinology—any more than he read second-wave feminism before writing the opening scene of this play, or Freud before *Hamlet*, or Marx before *Merchant of Venice*. But he noticed, first, that human actions were often not explicable by conscious choice, and second, that the world occurs in mysterious orders of scale and fractal symmetries (he could have “looked inwards,” in Dryden’s formulation, to his heartbeat for this),⁹ which his art often manages to replicate. Duke Theseus does not see what Hippolyta glimpses, and what audiences see quite plainly when the roles are doubled with those of Oberon and Titania (as they often are): that they are both guided and guarded by shadow versions of themselves, the selves which take command at night, while the body and mind are repaired by slumber and dream, and while we dream up less mortal versions of ourselves through procreative desire. The fact that the fairies are repeatedly called “shadows” suggests that they are hardly distinct from the persons they follow. *Midsummer Night’s Dream*—with its unusually small and benign fairies—recognizes a world of mostly tiny or invisible entities which, while we blunder along proudly, sorts out our mating and our feeding, patches our wounds, helps us sleep and wake, and continually helps us fight off the demon death.

Theseus will have none of it, perhaps because he cannot bear to see how much of it he has. To his dismissive category of lunatic, lover, and poet, this Greek rationalist, “over-full of self-affairs” (I, i, 113), would surely have to add the microbiologist, for populating the universe with “more devils than vast hell can hold” (some 5×10^{14} alien cells, if not souls, burning within each of us). But for Theseus here, “things unknown” is a revealingly inattentive synonym for “things non-existent” (V, i, 7–15). In the world of the fairies—and the wondrous functions of love, so powerful and yet so hard to locate or control or define—Shakespeare codes the world we do not know, but could not live without. In biology as in so many areas of early modern science, “magic” is the place-holder for phenomena with pending explanations.

⁹ See, for example, Ary L. Goldberger, “Non-linear dynamics for clinicians: chaos theory, fractals, and complexity at the bedside,” *The Lancet*, 347 (1996): 1312–14; other studies have suggested that Mandelbrot patterns may also be detectable in the human gait and the movement of the human eye.

II.

Man is all symmetric,
 Full of proportions, one limbe to another,
 And all to all the world besides:
 Each part may call the farthest, brother:
 For head with foot hath private amitie,
 And both with moons and tides.

...

More servants wait on Man,
 Then he'll take notice of: in ev'ry path
 He treads down that which doth befriend him,
 When sicknesse makes him pale and wan.
 Oh mightie love! Man is one world, and hath
 Another to attend him.¹⁰

Evolutionary biologists are now seeing evidence of the common ancestry of all living things, through the presence of shared DNA sequences in the genomes of animals and plants. But it was already widely believed in Shakespeare's time that the human soul had within it, along with our identifying rational soul, the living legacy of the creatures made in the days before humankind: a vegetative soul shared with plants and animals, and a sensible one shared with animals. As Francis Bacon wrote, "Man has something of the beast; the beast something of the plant; the plant something of the inanimate body; and so all things are in truth bifurcated and made up of a higher species and a lower."¹¹

The Scriptural notion that all flesh is grass seems to be far more than a metaphor in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Drawing constantly on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—the great wrecking-ball shattering Western Culture's partitions between human and other forms of life—the play takes its audience on a journey (or, I suppose, a soiree) through the interwoven rungs of the Chain of Being. When the lovers are (as Demetrius comments) "wode within this wood," the pun—soon echoed by Helena's "We should be woo'd"—alerts us to the wilds that are both within and around them (II, i, 192, 242). Even the back-story of the play is rife with violations of the category of the human. Shakespeare gratuitously names Hermia's interfering father Egeus, which surely recalls the figure of Theseus's own father Aegeus,¹² whose very name identifies him as a goat-man; and Aegeus was supposedly only half the father, his sperm mixing with that of Poseidon such that Theseus himself—

¹⁰ George Herbert, "Man" in *The Temple* (1633), lines 13–18, 43–8.

¹¹ Francis Bacon, *The Wisdome of the Ancients*, trans. Sir Arthur Gorges (London, 1619), sig. B2r.

¹² Peter Holland, "Theseus' Shadows in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 47 (1994): 145–7, offers other intriguing speculations about the shadowy presence of Theseus' father.

whose fame depends partly on slaying the half-human Minotaur, partly on battling the half-human Centaurs—loses his ceiling as well as his floor in the hierarchy.

What follows is a guided tour through the story in sequence, showing that unseen world winking into view, and the dream-like blurring of species-boundaries that undermines humanity's proud and foolish claims to insularity. The familiar three-part movement of Shakespearean comedy from a decadent or desiccated city out into the green world and back to a revived city,¹³ and from constricting personal identities into confusing anonymities and then back into more full and free identities, here entails also a combination of the two: a movement from a destructively narrow definition of the human self, to the near dissolution of humanity in the wilds of nature, to a new, more flexible and biologically inclusive definition (which only Theseus mistakes for a re-establishment of pure human sovereignty).

The play begins with an oblique reminder that mating attends on endocrine rhythms, as the prospective couple waits for the lunar cycle to authorize their union:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
 Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
 Another moon; but O, methinks, how slow
 This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
 Like to a step-dame, or a dowager,
 Long withering out a young man's revenue. (I, i, 1–6).

The old pre-marital moon, associated with Diana's chastity, hunting, and guarding of boundaries—what Theseus will soon call “the cold fruitless moon” of the convent (I, i, 73)—must be replaced by a new moon including Cynthia's associations with mutability. This will be Titania's moon, “the governess of floods” (II, i, 103), including women's bodily cycles that enable fertility.¹⁴ The shift from purity to flux, which degrades Sir Walter Raleigh's Cynthia, here promises the redemptions of comedy. Theseus clearly resents being controlled by women, even to this extent, but—as so often for men in this period—woman is really a marker for nature itself, for an undifferentiated life-force that is under no one's voluntary control. Hippolyta's name and circumstances mark this masculinized woman as also a human-animal hybrid, much like the Centaurs whose violent destruction of a wedding is offered as an alternative to *Pyramus and Thisbe* at V, I, 44.

Pyramus and Thisbe itself entails acts of hybridization. The actors, who are called “mechanicals,” assume they will merely be pretending to be partly other creatures: when Snug asks, “Have you the lion's part written?,” Peter Quince

¹³ C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, 1959) provides the classic formulation of this tripartite theory.

¹⁴ There are persistent echoes here of Renaissance theories about menstruation; see Croke, 261.

replies, "You may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring." Bottom offers to over-study the role, and thus over-determines its confusions: "I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you and 'twere any nightingale" (I, ii, 66–84). His willingness to be all creatures at once may be part of Bottom's appeal in a play that denigrates men's pride in their rigid and exclusive identities; apparently he has enough ego, in the ordinary sense of vanity, that he feels no need to defend his ego, in the Freudian sense of selfhood. The dramaturgic discussion in III, i turns on how a man can be sufficiently but not excessively like a lion. Bottom suggests that "half his face must be seen through the lion's neck." Later, after he is "translated" into an ass, or perhaps the fact that he is already one becomes physically evident, Bottom adds to his naturalistic suggestions for the costume: "let not him that plays the lion pare his nails, for they shall hang out for the lion's claws. And, most dear actors, eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath; and I do not doubt but to hear them say, it is a sweet comedy" (IV, ii, 40–44). The man's fingernails become part of the lion, and the bulbs part of his very breath.

Puck's disguises are similes that animals and people alike mistake for realities; and throughout the play the vacillation between simile and metaphor in describing such transformations suggests that in one sense we sometimes resemble, in another sense truly are, non-human forms of life: "When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, / Neighing in likeness of a filly foal," Puck not only moves—as he will soon move Bottom—from human to equine shape, but also does to the male horse, who is packed with vegetables, what he will later do to the rutting young men in the woods. Puck's next lines continue to blend human, animal, and vegetable:

And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl,
 In very likeness of a roasted crab,
 And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
 And on her withered dewlap pour the ale. (II, i, 47–50)

The crab is probably a crab-apple, and the dewlap of the gossip (whose lap is dewed with ale) will be matched by those of the dogs and bulls in Theseus's praise of his hunting pack.

Oberon reminds Puck (so that Shakespeare can tell us) that love-in-idleness grows amid a tangle of species, where "once I sat upon a promontory, / And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back" and saw the winged boy-god Cupid's arrow miss its human target and hit a flower "now purple with love's wound." Its juice erases the usual boundaries separating humanity from other animals:

OBERON: The next thing then she waking looks upon
 (Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
 On meddling monkey, or on busy ape),
 She shall pursue it with the soul of love. (II, i, 176–82)

The soul of love is actually a bridge across species, not a guardian of human identity. Helena is crossing over: “I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius, / The more you beat me, I will fawn on you. / Use me but as your spaniel” (II, i, 203–5). When Demetrius warns, in reply, “I’ll run from thee, and hide me in the brakes, / And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts,” he does not seem to see that they have already become wild themselves.

Helena, however, knows it very well: “The wildest hath not such a heart as you. / Run when you will; the story shall be chang’d: / Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (II, i, 229–31). In Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden,” Apollo pursues Daphne in order to turn her into a truer object of desire, namely, a plant; just six lines after Helena’s Daphne reference, Demetrius answers with a threat to “do thee mischief in the wood,” which seems to threaten the same kind of flora-philiac perversion—Daphne raped all the more eagerly despite her transformation. Just five lines after that comes Helena’s complaint that women “should be woo’d.” The puns suggest that perhaps this Daphne has already become a plant, and (abandoning conventional female passivity) sends out tendrils to embrace the terrified deity, like Birnam Wood reaching for Dunsinane Castle, like weeds pushing up through the glorious pavements of an aging city. It may be worth remembering that, at the time Shakespeare wrote this play, Athens itself was little more than a decaying village, foliage pushing through its shattered monuments.

As men tend to become fauna in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, women tend to become flora. Oberon envisions Titania as a flower—or perhaps flowers as extensions or expressions of the qualities of the wild, canopied, luscious, sweet Titania as she nods off:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine;
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull’d in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamell’d skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in. (II, i, 249–56)

So the fairies—themselves little bits of nature called Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed—enter into the forms, even the skin, of other living creatures. In the lullaby they call on Philomele—a prime example of a person violated and therefore metamorphosed into another species—to protect Titania from parasitic invaders. Titania assigns these creatures,

Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds,
Some war with rere-mice for their leathern wings
To make my small elves coats. (II, ii, 3–5)

The fairies thus invade the bats' bodies, even while singing about excluding parasites:

You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen,
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our fairy queen.
Philomele, with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby. (II, ii, 9–14)

Oberon immediately slips past these guards and applies the flower-juice that opens her up (through the eyes) to the sub-human:

What thou seest when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy true-love take;
Love and languish for his sake.
Be it ounce, or cat, or bear (II, ii, 27–30)

When Helena complains, a little later in the scene, that she must be “ugly as a bear” (line 94), it is not only another direct assault on the human/animal boundary, but also another reminder that—with the right herbal go-between—a bear can become eligible for human love, as she becomes for the love of Demetrius. *Midsummer Night's Dream* is an orgy of life—as, really, are we all.

Hermia has been seeking exemption from this orgy since the opening scene, where the threat to women's right to choose who enters their bodies may be a subset of more general anxieties about human autonomy. She refuses to echo her “father's voice” or to look “with his judgment,” thereby refusing to yield her “virgin patent” where her soul “consents not to give sovereignty”—especially not to a “spotted and inconstant man” like Demetrius (I, i, 54–110). In this cause, she must resist Lysander also, who wants to sleep next to her, “one heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” (II, ii, 42). When he tries to disarm the sexual threat, he only intensifies the threat to her autonomy:

I mean, that my heart unto yours is knit
So that but one heart we can make of it;
Two bosoms interchained with an oath,
So then two bosoms and a single troth. (II, ii, 47–50)

She still refuses, on the grounds of “human modesty,” which is also known as human pride. So when she then promptly dreams that “a serpent ate my heart away,” what she fears may not be simply genital penetration, as a Freudian might deduce; sexual intercourse seems to be just one version of the threat to insular selfhood lurking in this intercourse of hearts, by which (as Theseus later puts it) “These couples shall eternally be knit” (IV, i, 181).

That repeated verb may alert us to the works of Bottom the weaver. The “rude mechanicals” are (as was often implied in descriptions of the working class) also partway between animals and humanity, and (Quince’s name suggests) partly floral as well. The same is true of the characters they play: Pyramus is “lily-white of hue, / Of color like the red rose,” and “As true as truest horse” (III, i, 93–6). Puck takes this at its word, making the figure of the actor match this figuration of the character (“This is to make an ass of me,” Bottom decides at line 120), then chases away the translated Bottom’s companions through a series of Protean shifts:

Sometime a horse I’ll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire,
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn. (III, i, 108–11)

...

These metamorphoses turn Bottom’s comrades into birds:

As wild geese that the creeping fowler eye,
Or russet-pated choughs, many in sort
(Rising and cawing at the gun’s report),
Sever themselves and madly sweep the sky,
So, at his sight, away his fellows fly. (III, ii, 20–24)

The scene then turns to Hermia driving Demetrius fiercely out of the category of the human:

HERMIA: Out, dog, out, cur! thou driv’st me past the bounds
Of maiden’s patience. Hast thou slain him then?
Henceforth be never numb’red among men!
...
Could not a worm, an adder, do so much?
An adder did it! for with doubler tongue
Than thine, thou serpent, never adder stung. (III, ii, 64–73)

Actually Demetrius has become more herbivore than carnivore, having absorbed the flower-juice that makes Helena the “apple of his eye” and makes him see her lips as “kissing cherries” (III, ii, 104; 140). This recalls the remarkable portraiture of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (mostly done, like *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, late in the sixteenth century), which composed the faces entirely out of trees, fruits, and vegetables (see Figure 2.1). These portraits are often taken as symptoms of madness, but it may not be so different from the *Midsummer* madness, which is largely a form of forbidden recognition.

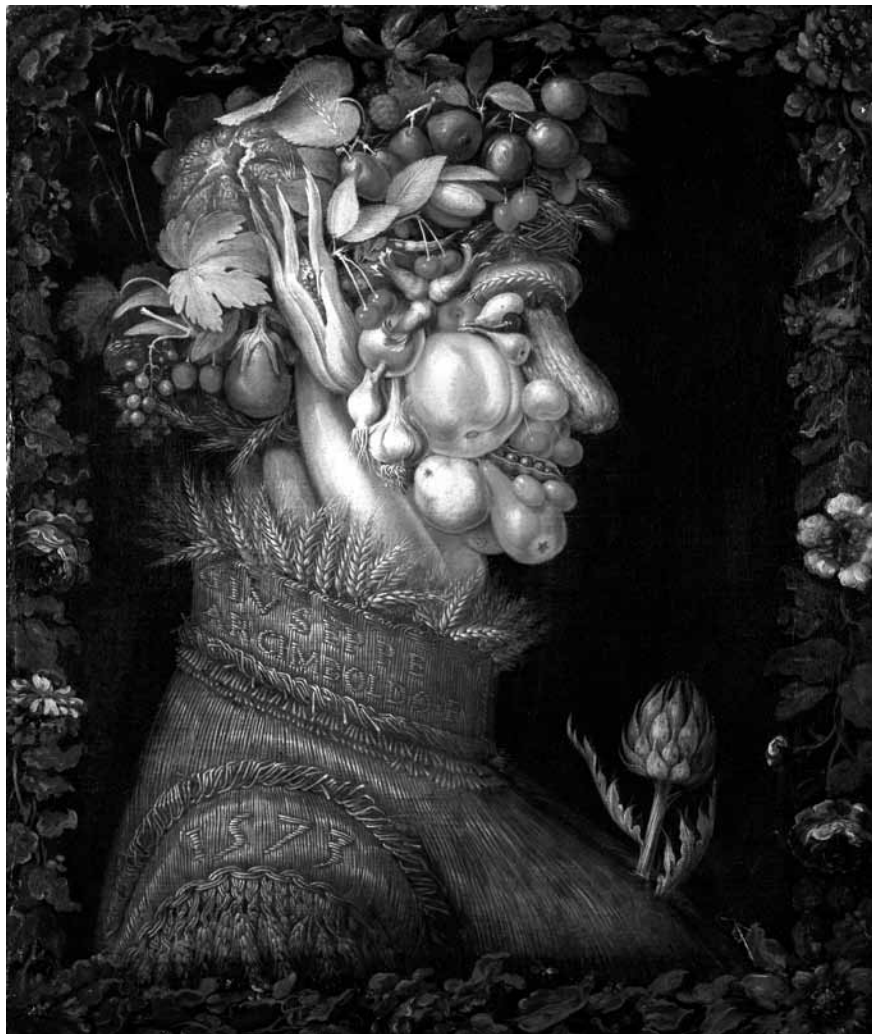


Figure 2.1 Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Summer*, allegory, 1573. Oil on canvas, 76 x 63.5 cm. R.F. 1946–31. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

As Hermia and Helena become fungible erotic commodities, they start becoming interchangeable with flora as well:

We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
 Have with our needles created both one flower,
 Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
 Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
 As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds
 Had been incorporate. So we grew together,
 Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
 But yet an union in partition,
 Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
 So with two seeming bodies, but one heart (III, ii, 203–12)

This is a benign instance of the vegetable and human worlds making each other, but the command of art over nature may be illusory, and “an union in partition” can easily become malignancy. Hermia’s indignant reply is a reminder that, for plants and people alike, what looks like symbiosis from one side may look like parasitism from the other, and what is shared may be stolen:

HERMIA: O me, you juggler, you canker-blossom,
 You thief of love! What, have you come by night
 And stol’n my love’s heart from him? (III, ii, 282–84)

The problem of parasites is unfortunately not completely separable from the problems of love—of the things that seize and consume the heart, but may not be of its essence or in its interests. Hermia has always been a delicate flower (I, i, 128–31), and the dark side of a midsummer dream of love-mergers is her nightmare that converts Lysander’s phallic potential into a snake, something eating at her heart like the canker worm against whom the fairies were supposed to protect Titania, and like Helena stealing Lysander’s affections.

Helena warns that Hermia is “shrewd” and “a vixen” (III, ii, 323–24). Behind “shrewd” etymologically lies “shrew,” which (as “shrewishness” twenty-two lines earlier alerts us, and as *Taming of the Shrew* proves Shakespeare recognized) is itself a word bridging the gap between an animal and an untamed woman. “Vixen” already meant both an ill-tempered woman and a female fox. Soon Hermia becomes herself a kind of brier as well as several kinds of beast: Lysander tells her, “Hang off, thou cat, thou bur! Vile thing, let loose; / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!” (III, ii, 260–61).

When the scene shifts to Titania romancing the trans-species-translated Bottom, the theme of interpenetration among the fairy, human, animal, and plant worlds hardly shifts at all:

TITANIA: Come sit thee down upon this flow'ry bed,
While I thy amiable cheeks do coy,
And stick musk-roses in thy sleek smooth head,
And kiss thy fair large ears, my gentle joy
...
So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
Gently entwist; the female ivy so
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm. (IV, i, 1–44)

Once again, an already transformed Daphne holds the chase. Oberon looks at the crown of flowers and observes that the

... same dew which sometime on the buds
Was wont to swell like round and orient pearls,
Stood now within the pretty flouriets' eyes,
Like tears that did their own disgrace bewail. (IV, i, 53–56)

Plants now have human eyes and emotions, as humanity has repeatedly been compared to flora in the earlier scenes.

Titania's besotted devotion to the unworthy mortal Bottom evokes the most benign possibilities for humanity's engagement with nature—a vision of God's infinite generosity in the collective providence of Eden:

Be kind and courteous to this gentleman,
Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;
Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,
With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;
The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,
And light them at the fiery glow-worm's 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.
Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies. (III, i, 164–74)

Bottom, the only character who really engages with all the living worlds, is by trade a weaver. Consciously or not, we are all wrapped up in the warp.

And also in the woof. Theseus enters, and promptly begins boasting about the best-known instance (along with the horse) of cross-species symbiosis: the dog. Domesticated livestock present a conundrum for deep-ecology advocates, since few of these animals and species could survive liberation into the wild. The idea of a perfect release of earthly nature from humanity is no more realistic than the idea of earthly humanity perfectly insulated from nature. The ruler of Athens—master

of the supposed zenith of civilization—tries to turn them into an Apollonian epiphany of human art:

THESEUS: We will, fair queen, up to the mountain's top,
 And mark the musical confusion
 Of hounds and echo in conjunction.
 HIPPOLYTA: I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,
 When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear
 With hounds of Sparta. Never did I hear
 Such gallant chiding; for besides the groves,
 The skies, the fountains, every region near
 Seem all one mutual cry. I never heard
 So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.
 THESEUS: My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind;
 So flew'd, so sanded; and their heads are hung
 With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
 Crook-knee'd, and dewlapp'd like Thessalian bulls;
 Slow in pursuit; but match'd in mouth like bells,
 Each under each. (IV, i, 109–24)

“Confusion,” which had been the doom of “quick bright things” at I, i, 149, now becomes a harmonic blend. Hercules was a demi-god; Cadmus—in a story Ovid tells just after the story of Pyramus and Thisbe—is a man transformed into a serpent. Just before the breeding-drive of the young humans is recaptured by civilized order, the slant-rhyme from bull to bells establishes a progression from the animal aspect of humanity to its aesthetic arts and rituals. In this passage the bay is also audibly part of the bear it rouses, the dogs sweep the dews off grasses with the dewlaps they share (with a tiny vowel shift) with the dewlapped old woman Puck described, but share yet another kind of dews with the Thessalian bulls, whose name links them aurally to Theseus (and thus to the half-bull Minotaur he fought in the labyrinth); and the entire passage builds to the crescendo of the entireness of an ecosystem, in which everything is a mutual cry, echoes in conjunction, a vast *concordia discors*, a sweet thunder of all the scales of nature, each under each.

What Golding's Ovid called “the Monster that did beare / The shape of man and Bull”¹⁵ haunts the play, even though it is never explicitly mentioned. Both the provocation in the fairy world (Titania insisting on keeping the Indian boy for herself) and its punishment (Oberon making her lust wildly after the ass-headed Bottom) recall the origins of the Minotaur, in which King Minos insists on keeping for himself the bull sent by Poseidon, whose revenge is to make Minos's wife Pasiphaë lust wildly after a bull, which union generates the bull-headed monster. And North's Plutarch, which Shakespeare also read, speculates that Pasiphaë's mate was actually a man named Taurus rather than a real bull. Commenting in

¹⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Golding (1567), p. 98v.

1605 on Theseus's escape from that monster's lair by following a thread provided by Ariadne (the minotaur's half-sister), Michael Drayton observes, "Some have held it to have beene an Allegory of mans life, true it is that the comparison wil hold, for what liker to a Labyrinth then the maze of life?"¹⁶ Shakespeare's Theseus is still in that maze, and still assailed by human-animal hybrids, even if he cannot see them. Now the only thread belongs to Bottom the weaver—twice called "bully Bottom" (III, i, 8; IV, ii, 19)—who in his tragic role as Pyramus says his thread is being cut. A popular 1578 text refers to Ariadne's saving thread as "a bottome of Twist"¹⁷ (Walter Raleigh called it "a bottome of thred"¹⁸) and immediately links that bottom to the same myth of the Fates cutting the thread of life.¹⁹ It is all, again, a wonderful tangle—a kind Shakespeare loved at this stage of his career, a whole ecosystem of allusion (though my reading of it may strike some readers as at least half bull). Again the choice is finally between existing, in a linear fashion, as a mere monofilament, or instead participating in the full tapestry of life.

Common grazing lands may not have been the only zone of shared life threatened by linear enclosures in Shakespeare's England: class arrogance in agronomics resembled a broader human presumptuousness. The insularities of Coriolanus, determined to "stand as if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (V, iii, 36–7), are so perfectly the opposite of Bottom's receptivities that they confirm what is at stake (in Shakespeare's vision) for the self and the community of life. Coriolanus is determined to destroy, with purging fires, anyone who threatens to compromise or complicate his strict definition of his martial identity and the corresponding Roman-imperial body-politic. The opening scene prominently explores the role of the digestive system in that macrocosm, and from that moment forward, Coriolanus insists on denying all the intestinal functions of his body, repeatedly condemning the common people as germs and pathogens occupying the body politic (to be ejected as gas and feces), and as non-human animals of all sorts. He not only refuses to be implicated in "the appetite and affection common / Of the whole body" and "the common muck of the world" (I, i, 104–5; II, ii, 126; the word "common" appears far more often here than in any of Shakespeare's other works); he also refuses to be controlled by passions. Instead, he repeatedly seeks to identify with the metallic solidity of his sword, nursed only on the blood of others. The only penetration of his identity he tolerates

¹⁶ Michael Drayton, *Poems* (1605), sig. M4v (p. 4).

¹⁷ Thomas Blenerhasset, *The seconde part of the Mirrour for magistrates* (1578); from "The Authours Epistle unto his friende" (n.p.).

¹⁸ Sir Walter Raleigh, *The history of the world* (1614), book 2, ch. 13, p. 433. Mary Ellen Lamb's admirable "'A Midsummer-Night's Dream': The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 21 (1979): 480, reports that "Caxton's translation of the *Aeneid* uses the exact phrase 'a bottom of threde' in the description of Theseus's adventure with the minotaur."

¹⁹ "O Fates, come, come, / Cut thread and thrum" (V, i, 285–6); "O Sisters Three ... you have shore / With shears his thread of silk" (V, i, 336–41).

is by the god Mars and the demi-god Hercules; the only erotic merger he desires is with his martial mirror-figure Aufidius. He is determined to live within the glorious cognomen “Coriolanus,” achieved by (the play repeatedly emphasizes) what he did “alone.” The tragic conclusion shows this artificially isolated identity humiliated by stubborn reminders of its place in the procreative order and then torn to pieces (like Ovid’s Pentheus) by the multitudinous population he disdained.²⁰

In fact, insularity is an important instance of hubris throughout Shakespeare’s tragedies. Hamlet envisions the mutual consuming of bodies, in sex and in feeding, with obsessive revulsion. Macbeth’s murderous determination to be “perfect, / Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,” leaves him “cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d, bound in” (III, iv, 20–23). Even before Cordelia’s army fails to cleanse the agents of evil from the body-politic, King Lear’s pride has been punctured by a virus: “they told me I was every thing. ’Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (IV, vi, 104–5). As Lear’s world and world-view collapse, he seems especially bitter about the failure of the boundaries around personal identity, the refutation of his assumption that his body is (as he thought his kingdom) integral and proprietary. He tells Goneril,

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter—
Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a bile,
A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood. (II, iv, 221–5)

A tragedy is certainly brewing here, though it features some standard comic acknowledgments: of shared bodily life, and hence mortal frailty, and hence a personal humiliation counter-balanced by the promise of generational renewal. As with every bite we eat and every breath we draw, the trick is to distinguish between a promise and a threat. If Lear is every thing—if he is anything alive—he must contain multitudes, even at the viral scale. The lie was the praise of perfect sovereignty.

III

At the edge of the wild, Duke Theseus halts, apparently planning to observe the uncoupled hounds, half-liberated from their human bondage, hunting in the valley, much as Oberon observed the harmony of culture and nature from his promontory. Theseus twice calls for the forester—his agent charged with managing the interplay between the human world and the woodland-dwellers that humanity cherishes in order to consume them. When he sees the four young aristocrats in some state of

²⁰ Robert N. Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 142–221, details many of these points.

nature, he struggles (often comically, in performance) to recapture them on behalf of civilized ritual: “No doubt they rose up early to observe / The rite of May; and hearing our intent, / Came here in grace of our solemnity” (IV, i, 132–4). Faced with the embarrassingly obvious, he then teases them about yielding to their bestial appetites: he has “the huntsmen wake them with their horns,” and calls them “wood-birds” coupling too late in the season (lines 138–40). Cancelling the hunt, he commands everyone back to civilization: back to Athens to “feast in great solemnity” (line 185)—and to watch a play.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is told by the daughters of Minyas to while away the time while they dangerously ignore the festival of Bacchus occurring in the woods nearby, where worshippers release their inner beasts while draped in animal skins.²¹ The ruling class of Shakespeare’s Athens watches the same story to “dream away” the gap—a gap between culture and nature, as well as a gap of time—between the wedding and sexual consummation (I, i, 8). They are a little too quick to disdain the acts of their fellow-creatures (as Theseus and his avatar Pentheus to disdain the natural and imaginary worlds) as irrelevant and inferior to themselves.

The “dainty duck” Thisbe is also partly a vegetable love and a mineral-lover: “My cherry lips have often kiss’d thy stones, / Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee” (V, i, 281, 190–91). So even the wall she kisses, as a surrogate for Pyramus, is itself partly made of body parts—a point confirmed just a few lines later when Pyramus mangles Leander’s name as “Limander,” making the human a part of the inhuman part of the wall whose part is being played by a human (and implicating Lysander in another tragic lover). Thisbe’s eulogy makes Pyramus vegetable as well:

These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, are gone!
Lovers, make moan;
His eyes were green as leeks. (V, i, 330–35)

Again we confront an Arcimboldo portrait—but those portraits are, in both the technical and the general sense, grotesque. Shakespeare is far from complacent about the interpenetration of our selves with external nature.²² A man’s body is his castle, and Puck reminds us that it needs its towers and moats and gates to exclude nature’s real threats to its survival:

²¹ David Marshall, “Exchanging Visions: Reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” *ELH*, 49/3 (1982): 543–75.

²² See Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 2006), pp. 77–107.

Now the hungry lion roars,
 And the wolf behowls the moon
 Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
 Puts the wretch that lies in woe
 In remembrance of a shroud.
 Now it is the time of night
 That the graves, all gaping wide,
 Every one lets forth his sprite,
 In the church-way paths to glide. (V, i, 371–82)

Death is a reality too, and the gaps in the body's defenses against mere nature and its entropic forces (and the culture's defenses against the psychic threat represented by the dead) must be guarded, lest our apertures turn instead into a path for pathogens, a dreadfully yawning gate between life and death.

John Donne's *Devotions* points out that the enemies of human life—which sound very much like the invaders against whom the fairies were protecting the sleeping Titania—are all already within us:

And then as the other *world* produces *Serpents*, and *Vipers*, malignant, & venomous creatures, and *Wormes*, and *Caterpillars*, that endeavour to devour that world which produces them, and *Monsters* compiled and complicated of divers parents, & kinds, so this world, our selves, produces all these in us, in producing *diseases*, & *sicknesses*, of all those sorts; venomous, and infectious diseases, feeding & consuming diseases, and manifold and entangled diseases, made up of many several ones.²³

Perhaps an effort to isolate such vermiculation in corpses helps to explain the medieval fascination with *transi* tomb-sculptures.

The fairies finally stand on guard against inward corruption, including misprints in the genetic alphabet that misshape human bodies and hence human lives:

And the blots of Nature's hand
 Shall not in their issue stand;
 Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar,
 Nor mark prodigious, such as are
 Despised in nativity,
 Shall upon their children be. (V, i, 409–14)

The specific instances of deformity cited—"mole" and "hare-lip"—explicitly associate the partial invasion of other-animal characteristics into the human. "Hare-lip" may even stir subliminal memories of the earlier references to "oxlips" and

²³ John Donne, *Devotions upon emergent occasions* (1624), Fourth Meditation, pp. 68–9.

“cowslips”—flowers whose names (despite their etymology) suggest a mixture of flora and domesticated fauna.

Procreation epitomizes the indeterminate boundaries between identity and otherness; the death of the votaress in childbirth (II, i, 135) emphasizes the dangers. Eating and eliminating foodstuffs, even experiencing emotions and memories, also trouble the distinction between the internal and external universes, which were recognized as not just figuratively analogous, but mutually formative.²⁴ Remaining too closely sealed up in the self—whether by failing to purge, or by failing to merge—meant disease and barrenness. Unless “the wall is down that parted their fathers” (V, i, 351), procreative survival will be tragically impossible. Not long ago, cell biologists discovered a pair of genes in fruit-flies that had to be closely linked or else the fly’s heart would literally be broken. They coded these genes as PYR and THS—short for Pyramus and Thisbe.²⁵

IV

Shakespeare did not know, when he composed Ariel’s song about bones sea-changed into coral (*The Tempest*, I, ii, 398), that orthopedic surgeons in the twenty-first century would find coral an extraordinarily suitable material for replacing human bone-mass. Presumably he merely saw a dreamy likeness. Is it worth performing what Freud would call “secondary revision” to bring the dream-work into touch and congruence with the realities to which modern science has awakened us?

The ecological imperatives of the twenty-first century may change our ideas about which scholarly traditions best serve progressive politics. With the emphasis shifting from issues of racial equality to issues of environmental protection, the iconic anthem “We are the world” must be understood in a very different way. The key to developing the individual and collective selflessness needed to avoid an ecological catastrophe may be the recognition that we are already largely selfless. Lovejoy and Tillyard’s model of the “Chain of Being” has been discussed in recent years mostly as an excuse for chaining human beings. Yet—if we can bracket some implications of its verticality—that model may now begin to look like a helpful anticipation of what we increasingly and indispensably understand as ecological networks, whereby each kind of creature shares part of its nature with others, and

²⁴ This interweaving is a persistent theme in Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr (eds), *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (Hampshire, 2007); in this volume, Julian Yates connects it to eating (and, in his doctoral dissertation, to defecation), Gail Kern Paster to passions (with Spenser’s Amavia and Pyrochles contrasted as I contrast Bottom and Coriolanus), and John Sutton to memory (attributing to Early Modern theorists something like the externalist philosophy of Mark Rowlands).

²⁵ Henry Turner, *Shakespeare’s Double Helix* (New York, 2008), p. 21.

upsets the structure of those networks at its own peril.²⁶ This lesson could hardly be addressed any more directly and vividly than Shakespeare does in *Macbeth*, where those who violate (by seeking to dominate) the regenerative cycles of nature are punished by exclusion from those cycles.²⁷

Shakespeare's characters are neither insular nor unitary—not only because they are threads in a dramatic fabric rather than actual persons, but also because actual persons are neither insular nor unitary. Elizabethan culture understood human beings as often occupied by forces meaningfully alien to their conscious personal will.²⁸ As he explains in apologizing to Laertes, Hamlet is and is not the melancholy that sometimes possesses him (V, ii, 232–9). To recognize that these passions were understood much as modern micro-biology understands parasites and pathogens, we need only recall Iago's definition of jealousy as “the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on,” leaving Othello so “eaten up with passion” (III, iii, 166–7, 391) that his very identity dissolves. The passionate man was a cell hijacked by a virus.

The dominant psychological theory in Shakespeare's time claimed that four humors, matching the four elements that make up the world, dictate human character by their proportions within us. A corollary to that theory—until recently, mostly dismissed as both naïve and racist²⁹—insisted that persons were therefore not separable from the forces of climate, leading to different tendencies among people from regions where they were adapted to different conditions of heat and humidity (Desdemona resists evidence of Othello's jealousy because “the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him”; III, iv, 30–31). This proto-Darwinian insight that we are creatures of our environments has been sequestered by a legitimate modern fear of Social Darwinism. Indeed, Elizabethan naturalists were aware that seemingly minor shifts of temperature could throw the entire biological system out of balance (for example, by generating more male than female births). That they were rightly anxious about such phenomena may have been merely fortuitous—true opinion, rather than knowledge—but it may instead indicate that they had a better template for describing our place in nature, even if the details were not yet ready to be filled out.

Renaissance humanists recognized that studying literature was valuable partly because it allows people to take some distance on their own cultural assumptions,

²⁶ Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (New York, 2006), proposes a rehabilitation of Tillyard along these lines; also see Watson, *Back to Nature*, p. 32.

²⁷ Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, pp. 83–116.

²⁸ Lily Bess Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, 1930), demonstrates this point, which has been updated and sophisticated in Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (eds), *Reading the Early Modern Passions* (Philadelphia, 2004), and in Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body* (Chicago, 2004).

²⁹ Several essays in *Environment and Embodiment* deploy geohumoralism more positively.

and apply the lost wisdom of the past to seemingly unsolvable problems of the present. So my argument that *Midsummer Night's Dream* can be useful in our ecological crisis is presentism with an apt historical grounding. Shakespeare's plays offer a storehouse of alternative perspectives, inoculated against the predictable reactionary reflexes by their high-cultural prestige as well as their durable beauty, and capable of being renewed by the knowledge, and in the vocabulary, that a new era makes available. Precisely by seeming to be just a nice little story about lovers and fairies in the forest on a moonlit summer night, this comedy can slip into our heads something it is otherwise hard to get our heads around: the fact that our insularity as individuals and as a species is a destructive illusion, an enclosure crisis of the human self. Some of the greatest benders of mind and shapers of history in the twentieth century—including Einstein³⁰ and Gandhi³¹—and now some leading voices of eco-cultural studies, converge on this point. What Bakhtin discusses as the grotesque body—which he associates especially with the Renaissance³²—what Merleau-Ponty calls the engaged body, what Donna Haraway ponders through cyborgs and companion animals, what Buddhists describe as “inter-being,” are all versions of this permeable, eco-systematic self.

Human beings have long felt besieged by an adversarial nature, and have fought to push back the wilderness; the reading of Genesis that urged humanity to subjugate the planet had practical foundations.³³ Though hardly gone, that destructive legacy has been fading. What caused the deepest damage was the conjunction of these traditions with an emerging sense of human beings, as a group and as individuals, as essentially separate from other forms of life. In this version of the story, Descartes—who cast all non-human animals as mere mechanicals—plays the arch-villain. Equating identity with self-consciousness, and humanity with reason, devalued our shared physicalities. The increased valuation of human individuals (a longstanding scholarly commonplace about the Renaissance) and

³⁰ “A human being ... experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of a prison for us ... Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures”; Albert Einstein, quoted in Suzuki, p. 46.

³¹ When Mohandas Gandhi called his chief goal “self-realization,” he meant the “universal Self—the *atman*—” which requires “‘selfless action’ ... Through the wider Self every living being is connected intimately, and from this intimacy follows the capacity of *identification* and as its natural consequence, the practice of non-violence”; Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” in *The Deep Ecology Movement*, ed. Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 22–3.

³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1936); trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984), pp. 23–9; see also pp. 315–67, contrasting the grotesque with a self-contained classical body like that endorsed by Theseus.

³³ Forty years ago, Lynn White, Jr., observed that a particular reading of Genesis set Western civilization on the path to a self-destructive ecological tyranny; see “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, 155/3767 (1967): 1203–207.

an emerging reliance on subjective interiority (which was intensified by the Reformation) produced a determination to see ambient nature as the not-me.

So does Bacon's empirical project, as it tries to view nature objectively, perhaps colonially, as a project of exploitative control. As long as these Cartesian definitions and Baconian aspirations remain in force, the ecosystem will be under multiple-front attack, and any retreat of the assumption that nature is our enemy may be neutralized by an ever-increasing sense (under the spell of consumerism and industrial technology) that we exist and identify ourselves by the ways we are not-nature.³⁴ Freud's "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis" (1917) identifies a further difficulty also obstructing ecological thinking: the twin blows to human narcissism comprised by the Darwinian message that we are kin to other animals, and the Freudian message that "*the ego is not master in its own house*"³⁵ (any more than Theseus finally is)—that we are sometimes controlled by the unconscious instincts that animal kinship produces. *Midsummer Night's Dream* may help us around this costly narcissistic resistance.

So this is, in both senses, a gut-check of the human race. Like most oracular advice, *nosce te ipsum*, Know Thyself, is far more complicated than it may sound. Shakespeare was not alone in intuiting this buried complexity. "There are in things," commented the occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa some sixty years before Shakespeare's play, "besides the elementary qualities which we know, other certain inbred virtues created by nature, which we admire, and are amazed at, being such as we know not, and indeed seldom or never have seen."³⁶ Some sixty years after the play, the naturalist John Beale would try to reconcile that mysticism with science, speculating "Whether there bee not some kinds of spirits (whether they may all at all times bee properly called Angells, or not) That run parallel & have their offices in & over every part of the Creation"—spirits "soe small & soe invisible, that with our best Micropticks we cannot find it Hence it did not misbecome the phansy of Paracelsus to call the seede of animals, & vegetables a sprite; & to devise the strange & newe names" for entities much smaller than "mustard seed."³⁷ About the same time, a manuscript poem praising the microscope warns "pretty sprit's & fairy Elves / that hover in ye aire Looke to your selues. / For with such prying Spectacles as these / wee shall see yow in yr owne essences."³⁸

³⁴ For a recent, heavy-theory-heavy argument (based in Romanticism) that the very concept of "nature" is environmentally costly because it separates us from the ecosystem, see Tim Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Works*, standard ed., trans. James Strachey (London, 1955), vol. XVII, pp. 136–44; italics in original.

³⁶ Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake (St. Paul MN, 1993), 32, quoted by Turner, 40, originally published in 1651.

³⁷ Quoted by Michael Leslie, "The Spiritual Husbandry of John Beale," in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 159–60.

³⁸ Thomas Cowles, "Dr. Henry Power's Poem on the Microscope," *Isis*, 21 (1934): 73.

The unseen is not necessarily the unreal—some snakes can see infrared, some insects can see ultraviolet—and the not-us is not necessarily the enemy of us. Pride may still be, as it was commonly deemed in Shakespeare's time, the deadliest sin: it starts looking like an inflammatory immunological disorder mistakenly attacking essential elements and functions of our own bodies. Epidemiologists suspect that excessive cleanliness may be contributing to the rapid growth of autoimmune diseases (such as asthma and diabetes) among children, as well as to the emergence of untreatable bacterial infections. Rather than serving our inner Theseus when we wipe the kitchen counters and close up our houses for the night, perhaps we should simply allow Puck's straw broom to "sweep the dust behind the door" (V, i, 390). Faith (according to Hebrews 11:1) requires the evidence of things unseen; and faith in the biosphere may earn us its version of Grace. As the *American Scientist* piece concludes, "our ecological sensibilities seem to stop at the edge of the visible Our overuse of antibacterials and antibiotics and the common belief that all microorganisms are harmful reflect our obsession with destroying the unseen I argue instead for a new take on the world of the unseen—one that acknowledges the vital and subtle relationships that all plants and animals have with microorganisms. Without the microbial worlds that accompany us, human life would not exist. We should honor these relationships."

Shakespeare honors that hidden symbiotic universe in his *Dream*, even while acknowledging that he cannot quite articulate it. Pondering his encounter with the fairy world and his altered self, Bottom muses that "Man is but an ass, if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patch'd fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen . . ." (IV, i, 206–12). To expound this *Dream* is to know yourself as only partly human, and as a patched fool: to know that you do not know exactly what you are or what you have. Scholars commonly link this soliloquy to a passage early in First Corinthians: "The things which eye hathe not sene, nether eare hathe heard." But a passage later in that book engages directly with Bottom's wonderful confusion:

If the whole bodie were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? . . . those membres of the bodie, which seme to be more feble, are necessarie . . . God hath tempered the bodie together, and hathe given the more honour to that parte which lacked, Lest there shulde be anie division in the bodie: but that the members shulde have the same care one for another.³⁹

These notions of need, honor, and care, within the comedy of life, within the microcosmic body or the macrocosmic world, are the keys that can release us from

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:17–25, Geneva Bible (1560 edition); Annabel Patterson cites this more distant reference in "Bottom's Up: Festive Theory," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, New Casebooks Series, ed. Richard Dutton (London, 1996), p. 191.

the autonomous human self, which we suppose ourselves guarding while actually holding ourselves prisoner. Our boasts of identity entail too tragic a role: “for the more better assurance, tell them that I Pyramus am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver” (III, i, 19–21)—or, Bottom the woven. In Ovid, Pyramus’s blood colors the mulberry forever after, much as the love-in-idleness flower is stained “purple with love’s wound” (II, i, 167); and Pyramus’s ashes are mingled with those of his beloved Thisbe. As in the theology of Grace, so in the biology of earthly life: the porous self may be, not erased, but enriched.