

Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: The Case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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Abstract

Shakespeare studies have avoided the idea of "the aesthetic," but a return to aesthetics may now be on the critical agenda. This essay argues that "impure aesthetics"—borrowing from Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin—is a promising form for the revival to take. Shakespeare himself seems to share some of the ideas of impure aesthetics, especially in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play, one of Shakespeare's fullest explorations of aesthetic ideas, is thus a meta-aesthetic drama, as well as a development of the genre of comedy to unprecedented levels of aesthetic complexity and self-reflection. The play models the relation between the aesthetic and the world in the contrasts between the play's fairy and human realms; Titania and Oberon embody important aspects of the play's aestheticizing strategy by figuring the potential harmony between the human and the natural, while displaying human foibles that disorganize the natural world.

Bottom's Dream is another figural representation of the relation of the aesthetic to the social and one that (like the play-within-the-play) highlights the material and bodily bases of art's representation of the ethereal and the spiritual.

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HUGH GRADY

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

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

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¹ Indeed, one can still find approving usage of the term in this sense in contemporary works. See Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 9; and Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), 320–21.

² John J. Joughin, "Shakespeare, Modernity and the Aesthetic: Art, Truth and Judgement in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium*, ed. Hugh Grady (London: Routledge, 2000), 61–84, esp. 61.

³ Fredric Jameson is one example, especially in his work on postmodernist aesthetics. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991). Terry Eagleton, while never as friendly to aesthetic theory as his American Marxist counterpart Jameson, wrote the appreciative if cautious *Idology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and more recently the less cautious *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). Stephen Greenblatt has consistently kept the aesthetic as an important and autonomous category for critical analysis and for understanding the interactions of the work of art and its larger social and cultural context; see, in particular, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 1–20.



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