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Musical Metamorphosis

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is widely regarded as a masterpiece, considering the mysteries and magic of human love and jealousy. However, the wider scholarly debate regards the way how the rude mechanicals, particularly Bottom, exhibit troubling behavior that shines a light upon the bleak conformity of human society; Bottom undergoes transformation into a hybrid creature with the use of a mask, leading to questions about how a mask alters both character and actor as well as how human masks might alter serve to fit someone into society itself. Yet, it is Benjamin Britten's operatic adaptation¹ of the story that seems to answer the question of who, or what, Bottom truly is; the opera allows one to see how Bottom changes from being guarded to open then back to guarded again, seeming to make a full circle back to the human he was before he encountered the magical woods. Music often serves as an indicator of change, displaying variations of character and personality more clearly than any poem could; through subtle harmonic shifts or tempo changes, music goes through the very same changes as characters might, exhibiting the same internal shifts that the characters might go through. Through careful vertical and horizontal harmonic analysis, it is possible to dissect Bottom's psychological changes that show the mask as merely an indicator of change rather than

¹ To begin looking into how the music and staging of the opera work together to display truths about Bottom, it is necessary to consider a particular performance of Britten's opera. For the purposes of this paper, I will be referring to the 2018 performance in São Paulo at the Teatro São Paulo, Brazil.

a catalyst.² A vertical harmony would be one that is considered as a “typical” harmony of sorts, with multiple voices singing different notes at the same time. A horizontal harmony, on the other hand, would be one that builds in a sort of staircase formation in sequence, with a new voice adding a new note after the previous voice has already hit its mark. Bottom’s vocals throughout the opera distinguish him as someone who flourishes away from typical human society, revealing the animalism and “otherness” that he feels within himself; the clear musical dissonance present when Bottom sings with his fellow mechanicals, exposes Bottom’s disconnect from typical human society. While all of Britten’s works hold a great deal of dissonance, though, this piece still stands apart in that the horizontal note movements also show Bottom to long for this typical society. Bottom is almost always the last one to jump into elongated musical phrases with the other mechanicals, making a conscious choice to be a part of the society that pushes him into a metaphorical box. When Bottom eventually goes through his metamorphosis, the group of mechanicals flees from him in fear, indicating that he strays from what is societally acceptable, and it is only when he returns from nature that his friends return to him. The music follows this journey from society to the greater world and back again, with Bottom’s vocal part, and the parts of those with him, shifting to exhibit how society can affect a person who feels they are alienated from other human beings. The mask, rather than being the object that causes others to flee from him, is just a representation of Bottom’s internalized shame at his own animalism. The opera’s harmonies contradict Bottom’s journey in the play in that the music shows Bottom to be longing for human interaction and society, whereas the play indirectly shows Bottom accepting his

² Yvette Hutchinson would argue with this in a historical context within her “MASKS TODAY: MEDIATORS OF A COMPLEX REALITY.” Her writing finds that masks physically alter a being, thus acting as what causes change. This is not the case within the opera, though, as Bottom’s human “mask” falling is simply his choice to join the natural world for a brief time; Bottom was always animalistic, but it was simply a question of whether he would embrace it.

animalism and his exceptionality. Ultimately this brings Britten's work into the debate regarding Bottom's existence as man or beast in that Britten himself has an opinion regarding who Bottom is and what he wants in life, creating a mixed-message opera that both follows Shakespeare's original piece and deviates from it. Ultimately, though, the opera's choice to utilize elongated harmonies shows Bottom longing for human society and thus telling a more realistic message about humans longing to be with others, even if it may cause them harm.

From the very first time Bottom joins his fellow mechanicals onstage in a song, there is dissonance that shocks and disgruntles the audience. With the exception of Peter Quince, who is the one calling out names, the mechanicals build a chord as they show themselves to be present that is made up of an F# Major triad and an augmented fourth, or tritone. This chord on page 85 of the score is made up of an F#, an A#, and a C# in the F# Major triad with a G# and a D making up the augmented fourth. It is important to mention that an augmented fourth may also be called a tritone, or the Devil's Interval; Britten's use of such an interval in this moment points toward the message of the mechanicals, that society can be toxic in its push for conformity, and thus the society they live in is equated with the Devil and pure evil. The dissonant chord is unsettling, mimicking the unsettling nature of humans journeying into nature, with which they are unfamiliar. Within this chord, Bottom is the last to join in; this is significant because he becomes the mechanical on which the story focuses, and he join in the chord to create the C# of the triad. This means that he is part of the pleasing and put together sound of the group; however, he is unfortunately still adding to the dissonance by simply being a part of the overall chord. Not only is Bottom a part of the major triad, indicating that he is somewhat more at peace within the forest than some of the others, but it is his note that adds a spooky tone to the overall chord. This spookiness implies a magical undertone to the moment, as though it were spiritually significant,

and of course it is. This moment gives Bottom a momentary outsider's look at his place in society, hearing firsthand how the dissonance of his human role doesn't belong within the world he lives in. The act of being present in the forest at this moment allows Bottom to feel a little spooky, understanding for a moment that he truly belongs within the forest more than he ever did within Athens society. The dissonance finally gives Bottom a moment of shock, showing him that the human world is not the end all be all of life; yet, Bottom in this song chooses to commit to the dissonance. He continues to follow his friends in their vocals that are full of accidentals³ and prolonged chords, understanding that he would be shunned from society if he did not continue to do what is expected, even if it leads him to feel spooky and unhappy within the forest. This begins Britten's direct opposition to the original work, showing Bottom to be one of the group as opposed to being an outsider as he attempts to distance himself from the mechanicals in the play. Bottom constantly seeks validation that he truly belongs with the humans around him, his musical stylings mimicking those of the other mechanicals; Bottom's style sometimes strays from that of the other mechanicals, but it always makes its way back to that original style, seemingly hoping that the act of going astray would be forgotten by the others. Bottom will often begin singing alone, cutting off the other mechanicals; when he does this, Bottom's notes have fewer accidentals and generally fewer jumps in intervals. He will sing for a bit, almost as though he is on a tangent, before suddenly returning to a more dissonant and accidental-filled vocal line, as though he suddenly remembered where he was and hoped that none of his friends noticed. In a way, Bottom's constant chatter now has a purpose: he sings and speaks without relent so that he might prove himself to be just the same as his friends, attempting to hide any musical idiosyncrasies he may have. The mechanicals throughout the show constantly

³ An accidental is a sharp or flat present on a note, therefore not a pitch typical of the key signature.

sing out of the key signature, and Bottom's solo pieces within mechanical parts always start in this style before becoming less dissonant and then eventually returning to this dissonant style; when Bottom goes from dissonant to consonant, the change occurs over the course of several words or phrases, but the consonant to dissonant jump happens very quickly. This change in time frames shows that Bottom seems to be aware of his "human" shortcomings and attempts to hide them through constant speech, though he might fall short in failing to have more accidentals in his vocal lines. Within the play, Bottom constantly chatters as his friends attempt to speak, making himself the center of attention; while this does also happen in the opera, Britten composes the work so as to ensure Bottom's musical lines follow the same stylings as the others, making him stand apart only with word, not note. This allows Bottom to somewhat blend in with the other mechanicals, hiding him in the group in a way that the play does not; with every line sung and every movement made on the stage, Bottom is making a clear choice to be just another man in Athenian human society as opposed to standing as the attention seeker he likes to be in the original play. He constantly finds himself blending with the dissonant harmonies of the mechanicals, though that may seem an oxymoron; this ensures that Bottom is choosing to be part of that group, choosing to be an Athenian man, allowing himself to be fit into the box labelled "human" rather than embrace his unique truth.

When Bottom is alone, it is impossible to have harmonic dissonance,⁴ and yet he also lacks much interval dissonance, or at least interval dissonance that is meaningful. Bottom doesn't continue to sing the exact same note throughout the entire piece, yet he doesn't make any interval jumps that are significant; rather, he moves in step-wise motions or makes jumps that are pleasant to one's ear. As a hybrid creature, Bottom's vocals are far more relaxed, usually slower

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will not be exploring any dissonance between Bottom and the orchestral music; the dissonance I look at will be purely vocal.

in tempo as well as with fewer accidentals. When he first transforms, he sings a lot of back to back eighth notes,⁵ but he then begins to sing far more quarter notes and even half notes as he relaxes into his hybrid form (Britten 196-197). Bottom eventually does begin to jump note intervals frequently, but none of the intervals have much prominence (Britten 198-199); rather, the relentless, unceasing jumps in intervals seem fueled by his introspection and investigation into the new body in which he finds himself. There is still a restlessness in Bottom vocals, but it seems to stem from a newfound joy as opposed to from nervousness. Bottom jumps up and down across many different notes, but he sings slower and there is a distinct lack of accidentals or prominently dissonant intervals; this exhibits Bottom's newfound freedom to sing what he likes to sing as opposed to what society determines he must sing. Bottom finally finds himself able to delve into his feelings about his animalism and the society that shuns it, finding his true self to not be so terrible or limiting. The fact that Bottom sings without accidentals or dissonance implies that he is choosing to branch out and try new vocal styles in his loneliness, and his decision to continue this open singing vocal line implies that he enjoys it. The vocal style relates to Bottom's animalism in that it is Bottom's transition into a hybrid creature via a mask that allows him to be alone and thus experiment with new notes and intervals; the continual lack of accidentals and leisurely pace of the solo displays how Bottom embraces this wild creature within himself that would be normally shunned. Bottom lets go of human societal standards and, in doing so, finds himself more carefree and happy than he was when with the mechanicals who pushed him into a dissonant box. Bottom then finds his way to where the fairies are with a sleeping Titania, continuing his relaxed vocal pace as he explores. There is a warmth within the

⁵ Musical notes are named by how much of a measure they take up. A measure is a small amount of music based on the time signature, which specifically exists to explain how many of which notes will be utilized within a score. An eighth note in common time would take up $\frac{1}{8}$ of a measure, whereas a whole note, for a contrasting example, would have taken up the entire measure.

music when Bottom meets Titania, leaving behind almost all accidentals in favor of natural notes (Britten 198-199). The natural notes make the song feel very open, bringing in this so-called warmth by allowing the music to remove the shackles of the dissonant societal standards. This mimics how Titania sings especially, as she has very few accidentals when she sings to Bottom, clearly making him feel safe enough to drop the dissonant facade. Britten writes Bottom as more free and joyous with the fairies, mimicking the bard's work in the original play, but he chooses to bring Bottom back to the human world in such a way that Shakespeare does not.

Bottom's song after he transforms back into a man from his hybrid creature is full of diminished fourths and thirds, but there is one moment in which he has an especially unique and therefore prominent note change: on page 355 of the score, just after he first starts his solo, Bottom sings an augmented fourth on the word "Pyramus." This stands out because the tritone interval emphasizes Bottom's return to his human role by mentioning his role in the play within the play. However, the use of a tritone in particular as the interval brings Bottom back to the dissonance of Athenian society; there is a sort of dread within the song in that moment as a result of the Devil's Interval, showing that Bottom seems reluctant to return to his old home, and yet he would eventually return anyway. This exhibits how Bottom feels deeply connected to his role as a human, even though he has, since his physical transformation, realized that he fits in happily with the natural world; the tritone dissonance is almost nostalgic, bringing Bottom back to the dissonant harmonies he built with his friends.

However, after this tritone Bottom returns to his mostly accidental-free singing; his first moments singing without accidentals, though, have Bottom calling out for his friends, perhaps showing that Bottom's free, animal self is not the one which his friends seek to spend time with (Britten 356). The accidental-free portion of his solo is much like Bottom's hybrid time when he

is surrounded by nature; yet, he is attempting to make his way back to society. This lack of accidentals along with the begging for his friends starts to show Bottom that he can't have both worlds at once and instead must choose which part of himself he deems to be more important. This section of the score also lacks any especially distinct intervals, often staying on one note for some time or changing in seconds or thirds. This openness within the notes brings the piece far from the dissonant gloom of the human world. The openness and gloom emphasizes the direct contrast between Bottom's human societal self and Bottom's self within the world of nature, showing his natural self as more open and free, away from the closed off tones of the vocals when Bottom is with his mechanical friends. When his friends finally appear after this solo, though, even they are able to find that open peace for but a moment: on page 373 of the script, the rustics all unite to greet Bottom by singing a C, completely in unison. For this shining moment, Bottom seems to have united his friends with nature, using the natural, animal part of himself to fight back against the cage of society, there is vocal unison and thus vocal consonance for several bars of music, exhibiting that perhaps even the other mechanicals sometimes wish to break out of their societally-allocated boxes. However, Bottom and mechanicals will again cage their inner animals just after, as the mechanicals, Bottom included, move into a prolonged phrase of a second and a diminished third⁶; this again closes off the music and falls back into the dissonance of society within the opera. Here Britten made the choice in his composition to have Bottom fully embrace the human way of singing and thus the human way of life by having Bottom join this very dissonant harmony; this choice to be part of the human world is almost entirely unlike the original play text, in which Bottom exclaims that "no man can tell what" his dream explained, seeming to embrace that his understanding of his dream marks him as separate

⁶ The chord is built up of an A \flat , a B \flat , and a D that becomes a B, a C, and an E.

from other humans (Shakespeare 4.1.211). The contrast of harmonic consonance and dissonance in this song is especially prominent, marking how Bottom chooses to move away from his happily animal self in nature to the human world, likely ashamed of his internal self. He brushes off his momentary freedom to follow his friends into the dismal world from which there is no further escape.

As mentioned previously, when Bottom sings alone there is no way for him to be dissonant, as he is the only one singing. Even when he is finally joined by the fairies and Titania, they never sing at the same time. This allows Bottom to entirely lack harmonies and any chance of dissonance, instead giving him free reign to exist as he sees fit. This draws a clear line between the Bottom who is a mechanical and the Bottom who lingers happily in nature. When Bottom is alone or with the fairies, his vocal sound is more open, directly resulting from the movement from dissonance to solo song; this makes Bottom seem more comfortable away from other humans, implying an unhappiness that he has with the human world from which he comes. Only when Bottom is in nature is he able to feel as though he belongs, rather than feeling closed and emotionless in the stagnant and limiting city of Athens. Bottom sings that he “will not stir from this place, and [he] will sing that they shall hear [he is] not afraid,” taking a stand against the typical assumption that humans should fear the unknown of the magical forest in which Bottom finds himself (Britten 196). Bottom, when alone, gives in to the beauty and slow nature of the woods, stepping further and further away from the guarded and fast-paced world of man. His tempo when he allows himself to be one with nature is far slower and more relaxed, and there are fewer accidentals than when he is with mechanicals or even thinking about the Athenian world. This relaxation of the music, present in the slower tempo and consonance as a result of fewer accidentals, as well as Bottom’s outright dismissal of human fear in the moment

exhibits how he begins to embrace his own animalism; Bottom begins to see that the human world must not be so correct about everything or else the beauty and leisure of the woods would not be so apparent.

As Timothy Wong mentions in his dissertation *Shakespeare's Political Zoology: Creature Life and the Rise of Constituent Power*, Bottom in a way represents the common man within the play, and therefore the opera as well. He acts as a worker within a hierarchical structure of society in which he has little control, making him a sort of animal among human beings. This discontent with his role in society, exhibited through his dissonance with the mechanicals, creates the image of Bottom as the lowest part of society, as he is not only a peasant, but he is a peasant who internally shuns the society he comes from. The change, then, from dissonance to open solo song allows Bottom to, somehow, become less animal by embracing the animal within himself.

In analyzing the dissonant harmonies in the opera, however, it is important to consider Britten's tendencies to craft musical intervals in his compositions that do not follow "typical" chordal structures. Britten, as noted by David Forest in his "Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten" explores how Britten builds up intervals horizontally rather than vertically, creating chords and progressions that are "neither tonal functional nor easily explained" (Forest 4). This is to say that Britten built the harmonies so that voices add to each other after previous voices have sung and started holding their notes, differing from traditional harmonies in which characters would all sing at one time. The harmonies are built differently from traditional ones, yet they remain constantly dissonant; this ensures that the discomfort of the dissonant, accidental-filled music of the mechanicals is meant to be normal within the society Britten created in his opera. The idea of disharmony being normal in human society could perhaps prove

that Bottom's interactions with his friends is not a dysfunctional human within society because the failed harmonic structures are intended as a stylistic feature of the rustics. Even so, the atonal and dissonant harmonies are not pleasant and still imply, stylistic purpose or otherwise, that Bottom and the mechanicals are exhibiting questionable features of society. The harmonies may prolong to create a staircase effect, but there is no escaping the clash underneath the grandeur that simply begs the audience to wonder what the group is hiding. Forest's work induces one to again consider the chord from page 85 of the score. If the chord is condensed to just the treble clef, the shape that the notes create is a mountain of sorts, as the notes build upwards then fall back down again. This is fairly anticlimactic, and it very much shows how the rude mechanicals seem lost, circling back to what is familiar when trying to branch out. This definitely plays into their lack of comfort regarding the natural world as a whole. Perhaps though, one would wish to consider the chord in its true form: spanning both the treble and bass clefs. The first two notes that make up this stepping stone of notes create a tritone, which, as mentioned previously, is also the Devil's Interval. The use of this interval may even imply hidden meanings within Britten's work, such as that capitalist human society is a devil that will bring the downfall of all men. To continually utilize an interval named for a creature known to be so devious and cruel shows that Britten is injecting new definitions of society into this work that goes along with Shakespeare's original messages of fighting our patriarchal and patronizing human society. Bottom's tritone illustrates the evils of conformity within human society, which is a theme also present in the original play; in the play, though, this theme is seen more through the young lovers' resistance to the rules of Athens, which is a plot point conveniently omitted within Britten's work. This omission details that Britten's composition seeks to utilize Bottom as the "outsider" of the opera in an attempt to exhibit the mechanical corruption of desires for conformity. The tritone is also

positioned in the bass clef, making it a sort of underscore to the next three notes that form the F# Major triad. All three notes that are sung next are also all in the same octave, making them truly together, apart from the torment of the lower underlying augmented fourth. This brief horizontal analysis shows that there is still a great deal of significance in the atonality and dissonance versus consonance within part of the opera, and therefore it can still be used to consider how Bottom differs from his fellow rustics. Further, the horizontal analysis gives insight into the discomfort of the mechanicals within nature, the tritone and other dissonance showing that they are not necessarily pleased to be within the spooky forest for their rehearsals. Therefore, this new look into analysis of Britten's work actually in fact brings more perspectives to the table regarding the music's meaning; by considering the horizontal aspects of Britten's harmonies, one can see how the mechanicals truly represent the ghoulish society they live in; a tritone and its uncomfortable dissonance refers back to the uncomfortable conformity of human society itself. Yet these horizontal harmonies also display how Bottom makes his choice to remain chained by said society, with Bottom actively singing these uncomfortable intervals when referring to his life in Athens. Britten's horizontal harmonies may be very different from typical harmonic compositions, but they arguably show more about the characters' desires and flaws within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

While Britten's music is quite impressive in detailing new layers for Bottom, it may seem to have no connection to the wider scholarly debate at hand; however, the music does in fact connect to what purpose Bottom's mask holds within both original play and opera. Within the play, the mask is debated as to its purpose is transforming Bottom as a character and as an actor. Masks as art objects allow actors to explore their emotions and inner self beyond what humanism allows, hiding the human being and thus giving permission for the actor to sculpt their

body in the image of the mask creature.⁷ Masks as literal objects act more as costumes, becoming one with who, or what, the actual character is representing in the show. For the opera, though, Bottom's mask functions more as a metaphorical indicator of revelation; it is Bottom's vocal change in the tale that provides material evidence for his unhappiness, and yet the donkey mask turns Bottom's physical body (ie. hoof hands and bare chest) into a metaphor for his mental state. Britten's music echoes Bottom's mental revelations, changing tempos and lengths of notes to emphasize how Bottom is experiencing the world through a new lens in the woods. The vocal shifts Bottom goes through show him to be more open when in his hybrid state, making the mask and costume change Bottom has in that state more prominent; the music makes the effects of the metamorphosis more obvious to the audience's ears, but it is the physical changes in clothes and mask that show how Bottom's mind is shifting in a more tangible form. Bottom is not physically a donkey in the story, but rather the mask he has, and the hybrid he seems to appear as to other characters, is merely a result of Bottom finally allowing himself to be seen as he truly is: someone who flourishes when far from the labor of traditional society. He allows himself to be open vocally and therefore mentally, placing himself more into the animal world by throwing off the musical closedness of the mechanicals and Athens as a whole. Bottom gives in to his animalistic instincts by throwing off the shackles of human living, the mask exhibiting how the dissonance not only in music but also between Bottom and the other mechanicals has built to a breaking point. The mask, then, is simply a reflection of how Bottom views himself within society: he finds himself as an abject animal, even an ass, who stands out for his inability to live in constant discontent. The mask, then, is a sort of nonsensical object that merely exists to restate

⁷ This is explored within the *Behind the Mask* documentary by Cheryl Shepard, with historical evidence detailing how masks came to be an integral part of the theatrical world. While this paper does not focus on the dramatic theory of a mask and how it alters an actor, the documentary offers a great deal of insight into the topic.

what is found within the music. David Pollock explores something similar in his work,⁸ finding that identity is largely constructed from the society in which we live; after analyzing masks from several cultures, Pollock determines that masks are “no more (and no less) enigmatic than conventional, everyday representations of identity,” thus making a mask in itself simply a figure of how society chooses to treat a given trait or ideal (Pollock 592). If identity, then, is formed based on how society sees us, then Bottom’s mask would indeed reflect his views of himself as a horrific creature who doesn’t belong to anyone. Masks are obviously a human creation, so, should identity also be formed from humans themselves, it would make sense that they reflect the views of the human who formed it into being. This idea is directly supported by the music: Bottom’s vocals go from more guarded and dissonant to being more open when Bottom is fully alone, showing that the mask and music alike are exhibiting Bottom’s truer, animal self within the forest; the music is mirroring how Bottom sees and feels about the world, and the mask as well shows that Bottom is embracing the animal within himself to exist as he always was. Then, toward the end, Bottom again dips back into the dissonance music typical of the mechanicals, choosing to lose the mask and the freer music to again face the struggles of Athenian society. In a way, Bottom’s mask is also a representation of his embarrassment and shame at his inability to fit in with the other humans around him. Bottom is more comfortable in the open woods, and yet he hides the animal within himself and tries to hide his shame to return to where humans are expected to be. Bottom’s shame infuses itself into a creature that makes an ass of itself in human society and thus should be viewed as such by all who happen to gaze upon it; the mask he wears

⁸ Pollock utilizes an anthropological perspective in his “Masks and the Semiotics of Identity,” investigating how masks influence human identity. He argues that masks are a hypocritical entity in that they seem to change one’s identity, yet identity can only be considered to be changed if it is known as a fixed object; Pollock sees identity as something culturally constructed, thus perhaps unable to change with a mere physical art object.

then, could also be seen as how he assumes others see him usually, though the open music in conflict with the pathetic ass mask make it clear that it is simply how he looks upon himself as a disgrace that makes Bottom into the physical representation of his internalized humiliation.

Britten's musical work in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adds new layers to the already complex source material. His music shows the failures of human society and the freedom of nature, yet it still exhibits how Bottom makes a physical choice to be in the human realm, as much as he could choose to part from it. Britten's work complements what Shakespeare already had within the play, focusing on new topics to add depth as opposed to attempting to change the bard's intent. Christina Burrige agrees with this in her "Music, Such as Charmeth Sleep": Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in which she considers how Britten thoughtfully omits certain sections of text in favor of using contrasting worlds to exhibit human deficiencies rather than attempting to build the world of human politics into his opera. While she takes a very detailed look into Oberon's purpose rather than Bottom's, Burrige finds that Britten's musical themes and particular attention to detail in terms of notes, intervals, and harmonies allows him to expand the world of the play into something more relatable in an almost primitive way. Mervyn Cooke⁹ agrees with this as well, exploring how Britten's omissions of play text actually brought it more cohesion, as it allowed Britten to place more contrasting consonance and dissonance within his score for the purpose of defining the line between the human and natural worlds. Cooke's analysis of the humanity present in the script concurs with Bottom's conscious choice to shun the natural world, showing that the juxtapositions of tonic and diatonic notes shatter the bonds between the worlds of the play, and opera, as it goes on; this,

⁹ Mervyn Cooke explores Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within his "Britten and Shakespeare: Dramatic and Musical Cohesion in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'," in which he uses historical and musical analysis to contrast Britten's opera with the original play text.

ultimately, presents an opera truly about how humans constantly seek out reaffirmations from fellow humans that they are following the correct societal path, even if any given person would find happiness in going their own way.

Though this Shakespeare work may technically be a comedic one, it has a truly tragic ending for Bottom. The man looks down upon himself in shame, and, even when finding peace and light within the natural world, cannot help but to return to what is familiar even if it causes him distress. Bottom leaves the world of open, light, consonant music to return to the dismal battering of the mechanicals, happy to find himself within the pain of vocal dissonance. He loses his metaphorical mask when he returns, showing that he gives up his animal instincts and therefore his freedom, instead embracing the cacophony of musical notes that makes up human society. He gives in to his hybridity for a brief time, allowing his mask of humanity to fall; the animal within him does away with the accidentals and frenzy of tempo changes, instead forcing Bottom to take a slower path that ultimately makes him feel more free. His mask causes chaos, as it brings him happiness, but it brings fear to his fellow mechanicals; Bottom, constantly searching for validation, chooses to view the dropped human “mask” as a horror like the other rustics, making the mask a sort of necessary evil.¹⁰ Britten’s music follows this, documenting Bottom’s journey from dissonance to consonance and back again, crafting prominence in both the vertical and horizontal intervals within the vocals. Though Bottom gives in to the freedom away from accidentals and tritones, he ultimately finds himself longing for human society, even if it means giving up the natural, animalistic person he had become. In a way, this shows that

¹⁰ Charles Edgeley and Ronny E. Turner take a socially scientific look at the value of masks, particularly in a dramatical sense, within their work “Masks And Social Relations: An Essay On The Sources And Assumptions Of Dramaturgical Social Psychology.” They find that objects only have a given value if the object provides the same reaction to both giver and receiver; in this opera, Bottom gives into how his friends view his humanity “mask,” thus giving the abstract object a meaning of necessity.

Bottom has somewhat circular character development within the opera. He begins as a closed off human who seeks more, before finding that “more” within nature, then eventually realizing that he does thrive off of the validation of other human beings. Bottom’s mask becomes a sort of pathetic object, then, forever reminding Bottom that he did not have the strength to shrug off human society for a better life. This would mean Bottom’s mask is truly a representation of who he wishes to be, as the mask within the play ends up revealing itself to be the human one rather than the donkey one; Bottom’s donkey self may be how he sees himself within society, an outcast, but it is the human mask he wears with his friends and within the human world that pushes him into a box he could never hope to escape from.

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