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**“The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen”: Multisensory Dreams in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Colonna’s Hypnerotomachia Poliphili**

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# III Materialität und Körperlichkeit im Traum



Claude Fretz

“The eye of man hath not heard,  
the ear of man hath not seen”:  
Multisensory Dreams in Shakespeare’s  
*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Colonna’s  
*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

Abstract

This chapter argues that the multisensory and synesthetic dream experiences depicted in William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595) and Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) transcend the commonplace concern with the typology of dreams by instead exploring the raw and sensorially embodied experience of dreaming. The chapter further shows how and why the depiction of dreams in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* points to a (hitherto neglected) direct or indirect influence of Colonna on Shakespeare. The chapter begins by showing how dreams were in early modern England viewed primarily as sensory phenomena. This is also seen in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the characters’ romantically (or erotically) fulfilling dream worlds are made up, above all, of multisensory and synesthetic perceptions. But the chapter suggests that Shakespeare’s representation of dreams as multisensory realisations of love, rather than simply reflecting the early modern cultural understanding of dreams, may owe much to the influence of Colonna’s dream romance *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. In addition to topographical similarities, borrowings of imagery, and comparable uses of dream frames, Shakespeare’s and Colonna’s shared interest in the raw and sensorially embodied experience of dreaming bespeaks a connection between their dream worlds.

At a first glance, William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595) and Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) seem to have little in common: composed about one hundred years apart; one written in English, the other in a hybrid of Italian and Latin; one a comic play, the other a prose romance. But a closer examination suggests a possible (and hitherto neglected) direct or indirect influence of Colonna on Shakespeare. Considering that Colonna’s romance was first translated into English in 1592 – just three years before Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – it is particularly intriguing

that both texts frame themselves as dreams and use the idea of a dream to introduce or to license richly multisensory and synesthetic experiences of love. While scholars largely continue to interpret early modern dreams and representations of dreams as prophetic, god-sent, demonic, somatic, or psychophysiological, Shakespeare's and Colonna's uses of dreams as multisensory realisations of love throw into relief an aspect of dreams that transcends this concern with typology: namely, the raw and embodied experience of dreaming, and the creative potential that it offered to writers and artists.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, some cultural historians and literary critics have begun to devote their efforts to investigating how the cultures of the past experienced their surroundings sensorially. In the introduction to a special journal issue on "Shakespeare and Phenomenology", Kevin Curran and James Kearney write:

If phenomenology as a philosophical school can be broadly characterized as the study of sense experience from the first-person point of view, then historical phenomenology can be characterized [...] as the study of sense experience during a specific historical past. [...] The way we feel sad is different from the way Shakespeare felt sad; the way we smell perfume is different from the way Queen Elizabeth smelled perfume. This is because the two experiences occur in distinct cultural, institutional, and discursive contexts. [...] [H]istorical phenomenology has [...] offered scholars of Shakespeare and his world new ways to explore visual, tactile, aural, olfactory, and emotional dimensions of early modern culture, which might otherwise resist critical engagement.<sup>2</sup>

In the study of dreams, too, there is a need to move beyond the debates about the meanings or types of dreams, and to consider how dreams were experienced visually, aurally, or tactilely in the period in which they occurred. Literary criticism is a crucial tool in this endeavour: not only does it provide cues as to how early moderns experienced their dreams, but it also reveals the creative literary and dramatic potential of dream experiences. In doing so, literary criticism sheds light on the relationship between, on the one hand, literary form and genre and, on the other hand, sensation, embodiment, and consciousness. This can be shown by briefly looking at Sonnet 16 of Lady Mary Wroth's sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621). In this poem, the persona Pamphilia addresses Sleep with the following words: "But now doe well, let me for euer sleepe, / And so for

<sup>1</sup> For examples of studies of early modern dreams, see Carole Levin: *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Sue Wiseman, Katharine Hodgkin and Michelle O'Callaghan (ed.): *Reading the Early Modern Dream: The Terrors of the Night*. New York: Routledge, 2008; Peter Brown (ed.): *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999; and Ita Mac Carthy, Kirsti Sellevold and Olivia Smith (ed.): *Cognitive Confusions: Dreams, Delusions and Illusions in Early Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Curran and James Kearney: Introduction. In: *Criticism* 54/3 (2012): Shakespeare and Phenomenology. Ed. by Kevin Curran and James Kearney, pp. 353–364, p. 354.

euere that deere Image keepe / Or still wake that my senses may be free" (lines 12–14).<sup>3</sup> In these lines, Pamphilia expresses ambivalent feelings about her beloved Amphilanthus and about the state of sleep; on the one hand, she makes a plea for a permanent sleep or dream that can gratify her longing for her idealised beloved, but, on the other hand, she also desires freedom from the suffering caused to her by her sensory perception in the transient dream state, which shows her "falsest shapes [...] oft times like [her] Love, as in despight" (lines 5–7).<sup>4</sup> It seems that it is the transience of the dream state, and the resulting oscillation between her union with Amphilanthus in the dream and her loneliness in her waking life, that causes her pain. Sonnet 16 conveys this pain by sharing Pamphilia first-person sensory experience of her dreams. Her troubled state of mind arises directly from the fact that, in her sleep, her senses are active and in thrall to the "shape[]" of Amphilanthus, leading her to wish that her senses were "free" again. In Sonnet 38 of Philip Sidney's sequence *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), the persona Astrophil experiences a similar pain because of the vividly multisensory quality of his dream about his beloved Stella. In his dream, the image of Stella "not only shines, but sings", prompting him to "start, look, heark" (lines 8–9) but leaving him with "nought but wailing eloquence" once he has awoken (line 11).<sup>5</sup>

There is corroborating evidence that the early modern experience of dreaming was indeed an actively multisensory one, and often one of cognitive confusion, as is also suggested by Wroth's poem ("falsest shapes", "fond shadows"). The reason for this lay in the fact that the internal senses (common sense, retentive imagination, compositive imagination, estimative power, and memory) remained active in sleep even as the external senses did not. Even prophetic dreams, or dreams of visitations by the dead, by angels, or by gods – accounts of which abound in both aesthetic and factual accounts of dreams in the Renaissance – ultimately constitute a sensory experience, because they usually revolve around the hearing of a voice or the seeing of a supernatural messenger (consider the tradition of Biblical dreams in which God or an angel directly speaks to the dreamer, e.g. Genesis 20:2, Matthew 1:20–23, Matthew 2:13, Matthew 2:19, Numbers 12:6, Job 33:14–18).<sup>6</sup> The idea that dreams are sensory experiences also pervades the period's most comprehensive treatise of dream theory, Thomas Hill's *The Most Pleasante Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreams* (1559). Apart from

<sup>3</sup> Mary Wroth: Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. In: *The Countesse of Mountgomerie's Urania*. London, 1621, sig. Bbbbr.

<sup>4</sup> Wroth: Pamphilia to Amphilanthus, sig. Bbbbr.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Braden (ed.): *Sixteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 362.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Goodwin told his readers that "God sends Angels from Heaven in the night and sets them about men's Beds when asleep". Philip Goodwin: *The Mystery of Dreames*. London, 1658, p. 272.

countless visions of various objects or people, Hill records aural, vocal, tactile, and gustatory experiences such as “talk[ing] wyth a dead parson”, “dream[ing] to haue founde a birdes neaste, and [...] reaching or puttyng his hand into the neast”, and dreaming of “inwarde tastes, as of Mylke”.<sup>7</sup> Hill also explains the reason why dreams can constitute intensely multisensory experiences:

by nighte, the outwarde sences bounde in the respecte of the motions from without do perceyue the inwarde far bigger, whereof the common sence or other vertue dreamynge is deceyued, in that he iudgeth those to be of other sensible matters, then in dede they be. And *Aristotle* wryteth that the small motions in sleepe do appere bigger th[a]n in the day tyme, because the sences in this occupyed about many matters, eyther perceyue not those, or els discern them far lesser.<sup>8</sup>

According to Hill, sensory perception during the nightly state of dreaming is sharper and less diffuse than during the waking daytime period, when there are many distractions. During sleep, when external “motions” cease to be perceived, the senses are able to focus on, and to magnify, what Hill calls “the inwarde”. It was a cornerstone of naturalistic-Aristotelian thinking (upon which Hill here draws) that the suspension of the rational faculties during sleep gave the fantasy free rein to tap into impressions that had been gathered by the external senses during the day and stored by the retentive imagination, and that the fantasy could use these impressions to generate muddled or bewildering images in our dreams. As Hill notes, the content of non-prophetic and psychophysiological dreams derives from “the memorye of things seene, eyther whole or vnparfit”, and entails the “transposing and mixing of sightes”.<sup>9</sup> Due to the absence of external motions (or distractions) during sleep, these internally generated images could be more vivid than daytime sensory perceptions.

Hill’s treatise is by no means the only early modern work to register dreams as multisensory experiences. Timothy Bright’s *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) stresses the multisensory nature of the dream state when it claims: “our dreames in some sort make euident vnto vs, how the soule without instrument, lacketh not the practise of senses: in which dreames we see with our soules, heare, talke, conferre, and practise what action soeuer [...] as if the very obiect of the senses were represented unto us brode awake”.<sup>10</sup> In this passage, Bright, who was a divine and a physician, observes how sensory perception in sleep is possible not

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hill: *The Most Pleasante Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreams*. London, 1576, sigs Fiv, E8v.

<sup>8</sup> Hill: *Most Pleasante Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreams*, sig. E8r.

<sup>9</sup> Hill: *Most Pleasante Arte of the Interpretacion of Dreams*, sig. D5r. Also see Robert Burton: *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. London, 1621, p. 36; and Charles B. Schmidt, Quentin Skinner and Eckhardt Kessler (ed.): *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, pp. 470–471.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Bright: *A Treatise of Melancholie*. London, 1586, p. 118.

only because of the recycling of daytime impressions (the process expounded by Hill) but also because the soul, which during sleep is separated from the organic body, can be actively sentient even when the external senses are inactive. As Bright goes on to explain, the soul can “have sense of thinges without organically senses” – that is, it does not necessarily rely on any input from the body – and ideas or images can therefore be “sented with the mind only”.<sup>11</sup> Bright’s argument for the soul’s capacity to create images or knowledge independently of the external senses suggests that it is not just psychophysiological dreams that are experienced (multi-)sensorially, but also prophetic dreams or other non-bodily dreams “instructed of God by revelation”.<sup>12</sup>

The idea that dreams are, in essence, sensory phenomena was not just theorised in treatises or depicted for dramatic or poetic effect in the literature of the period; it was also recorded in case studies such as those included in the medical records of Simon Forman and Richard Napier – practitioners of astrological medicine in early modern London. In an entry dated 6 July 1601, Forman and Napier report that a 34-year-old patient named Elizabeth Fox from the Hertfordshire parish of Shenley was “[t]aken with a feare in a wood thinking shee h[e]ard a voice”, and has “[e]ver sinc[e] [been] out of her wits”.<sup>13</sup> On 16 September 1631, furthermore, the 49-year-old Alice Sturch, described as “a tall strong wench” by Napier (Forman had died in 1611), presented with complaints about “see[ing] strang[e] things in the ayer”, and feared “bewitching”.<sup>14</sup> Sturch’s suspicion is not unsurprising: it was common belief that the devil could invade the minds of sleepers and manipulate their humours and passions in order to deceive or tempt them with false or sinful dreams (involving things like murder, sexual encounters, witches’ sabbaths, flying, or visits to the underworld).<sup>15</sup> Dreams could also stimulate more than one sense at a time. On 5 February 1630, the 20-year-old Elizabeth Buncher sought Napier’s help following a strange visual and tactile dream experience. She reported having seen “a light twice”:

<sup>11</sup> Bright: *A Treatise of Melancholie*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Bright: *A Treatise of Melancholie*, p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Forman and Richard Napier: Case 19541. In: Lauren Kassell, Michael Hawkins, Robert Ralley, John Young, Joanne Edge, Janet Yvonne Martin-Portugues and Natalie Kaoukji (ed.): *The Casebooks of Simon Forman and Richard Napier, 1596–1634: A Digital Edition*. <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk/cases/CASE19541> (accessed: April 22nd 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Forman and Napier: Case 72942. <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk/cases/CASE72942> (accessed: April 22nd 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Levin: *Dreaming the English Renaissance*, pp. 72–75, 86–91; Thibaut Maus de Rolley: *A World Within: The Devil, Delusions and Early Modern Cognition*. In: Mac Carthy, Sellevold, and Smith (ed.): *Cognitive Confusions*, pp. 71–88.

it lay upon her as she thought & she kicked it down & then it leapt up again & struck in the head & made her lightheaded & then with her arm struck it down & it went down the stairs lumping.<sup>16</sup>

The dream accounts recorded in Forman and Napier's casebooks reveal primarily a number of strange visual, aural, and tactile experiences, sometimes ascribed to demonic possession. These dreams, which were reported by real people, reveal that some early moderns were not just concerned with what a dream signified or symbolised but were perturbed enough by their oneiric sensory perceptions to seek medical help.

The understanding of dreams as multisensory or synesthetic phenomena would not have reached Shakespeare only via medical and philosophical cultures, though, but also via literary channels, too. While it has been shown that Shakespeare adapted dream devices from diverse sources including classical literature, medieval poetry, and native English dramatic traditions, it has been neglected that Shakespeare's interest in dreams and the senses, particularly in his comedies (where the characters' sensory perception is often erroneous or disordered), may also have been inspired by Colonna's influential *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*.<sup>17</sup> In 1592, the first book of Colonna's narrative (roughly two-fifths of the whole work) was translated into English by the author and courtier Robert Dalington. The translation was dedicated to Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and to the memory of Philip Sidney (who had died in 1586). In the *Hypnerotomachia*, the narrator and protagonist Poliphilo ("lover of Polia", but also "lover of many things") is at first tormented by insomnia as he ruminates on his unrequited love for Polia. Poliphilo eventually falls asleep and seemingly wakes in a dark wood. Having been scared by wolves, he begins exploring his dream world and traverses many strange, labyrinthine places with classical ruins, pyramids, obelisks, orchards, gardens, fountains, palaces, and temples. On his oneiric journey, he is also chased by a dragon and tempted by nymphs. In what follows, I explore the similar multisensory and synesthetic experiences that define dream states in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and reinforce the case for Colonna's influence on Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* are alike in that they self-consciously frame themselves as dreams. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare's desire to imitate the dream state is apparent not only from the play's title, but also from the epilogue in which the fairy Puck offers the audience the option of viewing the entire play as a dream:

<sup>16</sup> Forman and Napier: Case 70026. <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk/cases/CASE70026> (accessed: April 22nd 2021).

<sup>17</sup> For Shakespeare's adaptation of dream devices from classical, medieval, and early modern sources, see Claude Fretz: *Dreams, Sleep, and Shakespeare's Genres*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; and Brown (ed.): *Reading Dreams*.

If we shadows have offended,  
 Think but this, and all is mended:  
 That you have but slumbered here,  
 While these visions did appear;  
 And this weak and idle theme,  
 No more yielding but a dream,  
 Gentles, do not reprehend (5.1.414–420).<sup>18</sup>

In the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Colonna declares a similar kinship between his story and the state of a dream. The first part of Colonna's title, for example, derives from the Greek words *hypnos* (sleep), *eros* (love), and *mache* (strife); Dallington translated this as "Strife of Love in a Dream". The head title of the *Hypnerotomachia*, furthermore, specifies (in Dallington's translation) that the author "sheweth, that all humane and worldlie things are but a dreame, and but as vanitie it selfe" (sig. B1r).<sup>19</sup>

Shakespeare was likely familiar with Colonna's dream narrative. Indications for this are found in his comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, which is conjectured to have been written at around the time the *Hypnerotomachia* appeared in English (c.1591). For a start, Colonna's trope of life as a dream could have influenced the induction to *The Shrew*, in which the tinker Christopher Sly is tricked by a lord into thinking that he is himself a lord and that his previous life has been a dream. In addition, Stuart Sillars's erudite study of the parallels between Shakespeare's writing and the visual imagery of the period has proposed a nexus between, on the one hand, a conversation about paintings between Sly and the second servingman in *The Shrew* and, on the other hand, one of the woodcuts in the *Hypnerotomachia*.<sup>20</sup> In the second induction to *The Shrew*, as part of the efforts to convince Sly that he is a lord, the second servingman tells Sly:

Dost thou love pictures? We will fetch thee straight  
 Adonis painted by a running brook,  
 And Cytherea all in sedges hid,  
 Which seem to move and wanton with her breath,  
 Even as the waving sedges play with wind (Induction 2, 47–51).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> All references are to William Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. by Peter Holland. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all references are to Francesco Colonna: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*. Transl. by Robert Dallington. London, 1592. Joscelyn Godwin's modern English translation of Colonna's work renders the head title as follows: "The Hypnerotomachia of Poliphilo, in which it is shown that all human things are but a dream, and many other things worthy of knowledge and memory". See Francesco Colonna: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*. Transl. by Joscelyn Godwin. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Sillars: *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 40–47.

<sup>21</sup> All references are to William Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew*. Ed. by H. J. Oliver. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

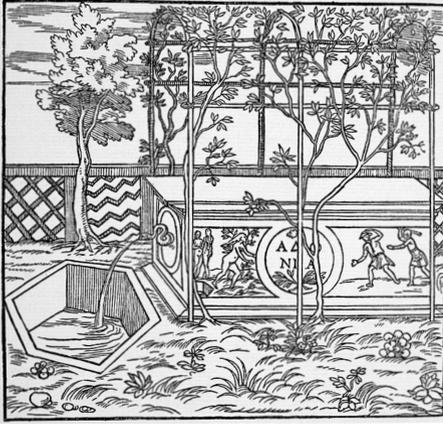


Abb. 9.1: Francesco Colonna: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Paris, 1546, sig. 130r. Warburg Institute Library, London. Classmark CKN 10.

According to Sillars, Shakespeare's conflation of the images of Adonis "by a running brook" and of the goddess Venus hiding in sedges – Venus is evoked by her epithet "Cytherea" (Induction 2, 49), which refers to the Greek island of Cythera near to which she sprang from the sea – might be explained by a figuration in chapter six of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Fig. 9.1).<sup>22</sup> The said figuration shows a catafalque that contains the body of Adonis, its side adorned with images of Venus trying to protect Adonis, who is being chased by Mars. Adonis's catafalque is surrounded by grass and trees, while the image pictured on its side shows the nude figure of Venus amid sedges and other grasses and plants. The vegetation depicted here may well be the equivalent of the "sedges" described by the servingman in *The Shrew* (Induction 2, 49). But there is more to this. The possible relation between Colonna's dream narrative and the induction to *The Shrew* gains further weight from the fact that a later passage in Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* describes over some thirty pages the foliage or "sedges" around the shores of the island of Cythera, where Poliphilo and Polia visit the fountain of Venus – Shakespeare, it will be recalled, uses the island's adjectival form as an epithet for Venus (Induction 2, 49). While the Cythera passages and the illustration of Adonis's catafalque are not included in the English 1592 version, they are found in the French editions of 1546 and 1561, for which the original images were copied. In addition to Dallington's translation, Shakespeare could have known one of these very popular French translations, or even an Italian version (Ben Jonson owned a copy of the 1545 Venice edition, and Edmund Spenser is assumed to have been familiar with an Italian version).<sup>23</sup> It is significant that Venus is in both *The Shrew* and the *Hypnerotomachia* referred to by, or associa-

<sup>22</sup> Sillars: Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> For the circulation of editions of the *Hypnerotomachia* in Elizabethan England, see Michael Leslie: *The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and the Elizabethan Landscape Entertainments. In:

Abb. 9.2: Francesco Colonna: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: The Strife of Love in a Dream. Transl. by Robert Dallington. London, 1592, sig. K3v. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Call number 12922.



ted with, the island near to which she was born, because the epithet “Cytherea” (*Shrew*, Induction 2, 49) is not a normal Shakespearean use, at least not at this early stage in the playwright’s career. Other than in *The Shrew*, the word appears in just two other plays: the much later *The Winter’s Tale* (1609) and *Cymbeline* (1610). It is notable that Shakespeare does not employ the term (or any other direct reference to the island of Cythera) in any other of his early comedies, nor in the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593) – despite the fact that Book Ten of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the source for Shakespeare’s epyllion, refers to Venus as “*Cythereia*”.<sup>24</sup> This makes it a plausible inference that the epithet “Cytherea” in the servingman’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Shrew*, like the “pictures” that the servingman offers to show to Sly, is inspired by the *Hypnerotomachia*.

In his study of Shakespeare’s visual imagination, Sillars also highlights similarities between an engraved illustration in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* – representing a semi-nude sleeping woman and three satyrs (Fig. 9.2) – and the fairy queen Titania’s sleep in her bower between 2.2 and 3.1 in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.<sup>25</sup> There is certainly a lot of resemblance between these moments. In both cases, a woman sleeping under a tree is spied upon or watched over by fantastical beings: while the semi-nude woman in Colonna is spied on by satyrs,

Word & Image 14 (1998), pp. 130–144; Sigmund Méndez: *The Faerie Queene’s Three Sages and the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. In: Notes and Queries 67/2 (2020), pp. 214–217.

<sup>24</sup> For the reference to “*Cythereia*” in Ovid’s Book Ten (which contains the story of Venus and Adonis), see Ovid: *Metamorphoses*. Ed. by Hugo Magnus. Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1892, 10.529.

<sup>25</sup> Sillars: Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination, pp. 177–180.

Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is sung to sleep by fairy attendants (2.2.1–30) just instants before the fairy king Oberon applies a magical potion to her eyes (2.2.32–40). In addition, Shakespeare's Bottom, who has been transformed into an ass and wakes Titania with his singing in 3.1, shares with the satyrs the human-animal hybridity and the oversized phallus. But there is more to this. The pages leading up to the image of the woman and the satyrs in the *Hypnerotomachia* describe Poliphilo's arrival in a "wooddie Countrie" (sig. K1v); this calls to mind the *selva oscura* to which the lovers flee in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Indeed, the similarities between the topography of the *Hypnerotomachia* and that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are quite conspicuous at times. Earlier in Colonna's text, Poliphilo reports finding himself in a "darke wood of thicke bushes [and] sharpe thornes", which he describes as being inhabited by "savage and hurtfull beasts, as the tusked Bore, the furious and bloud thirstie Beare, the hissing serpent, and invading Woolfe" (sigs B2r–v). It is striking how closely the flora and fauna in Poliphilo's dream world here prefigure the threatening forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is populated (according to the fairies) by "snakes with double tongue", "[t]horny hedgehogs", and "[n]ewts and blind-worms" (2.2.9–11) as well as (according to Oberon) "lion[s], [...] wol[ves], [...] bull[s], [...] monkey[s]" (2.1.180–181), "ounce[s]", "cat[s]", "bear[s]", "pard[s]", and "boar[s]" (2.2.36–37).

The kinship between Colonna's and Shakespeare's emulations of the dream state is not just suggested by topographical and zoological similarities. The two authors also employ comparable dream frameworks. While Poliphilo's experience consists of a series of dreams within dreams, Bottom's and the lovers' dreams or dreamlike adventures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* occur within the audience's dream of the dramatic action (see 5.1.414–420). Colonna and Shakespeare also draw upon, and adapt, a shared literary and philosophical inheritance. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, as Rebekah Smick notes, is written in the tradition of the "philosophical dream vision[s]" composed by Cicero, Boethius, and Macrobius, which revolve around the dreamer's pursuit of "moral perfection" (defined as "the soul's release from the material confines imposed by the body").<sup>26</sup> In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare, too, draws on the dream-vision tradition, which he knew primarily from late-medieval dream poetry like that of Chaucer.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Colonna, though, Shakespeare actively satirises this tradition when he makes Bottom and the lovers believe that they have

<sup>26</sup> Rebekah Smick: Touch in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: The Sensual Ethics of Architecture. In: Elizabeth D. Harvey (ed.): *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2003, pp. 205–223, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Ann Thompson: *Shakespeare's Chaucer: A Study in Literary Origins*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978; David G. Hale: *Bottom's Dream and Chaucer*. In: *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985), pp. 219–220; and Peter Brown: *Chaucer and Shakespeare: The 'Merchant's Tale' Connection*. In: *Chaucer Review* 48 (2013), pp. 222–237.

had a dream (4.1.145–150, 191–192, 201–215) when in fact they have been tricked and manipulated by the fairies: Puck fixes “[a]n ass’s nole [...] on [Bottom’s] head” (3.2.17); Oberon’s application of a magical potion to Titania makes her fall in love with the transformed Bottom; and Puck’s administration of the same potion to the eyes of Lysander and Demetrius plays havoc with their respective relationships with Hermia and Helena.

Perhaps the most significant (and unique) common denominator between Shakespeare’s and Colonna’s conceptions of the dream state, though, is the authors’ interest in the (multi-)sensory and synesthetic quality of dreams. When Shakespeare’s Bottom attempts to retell his “dream” – that is, his transformation into an ass and his subsequent love affair with Titania – he notably describes it as an experience that eludes both the capacity of human reason and that of normal sensory perception:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to 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 patched 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, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was (4.1.201–210).

An editor will hasten to point out that Bottom comically botches 1 Corinthians 2:9, which is concerned with the ineffability of sublime experience and with the distance between the things of this world and those of God (“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him”). But there is more than that to this passage. In his theorisation of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of the process of “disassociation”, which consists of the “destruction of any absolute bonding of ideological meaning to language”.<sup>28</sup> This concept is useful to understanding Shakespeare’s adaptation of biblical language in Bottom’s speech, because the playwright here appropriates scriptural language, divests it of its original meaning, and gives it a new function and purpose. Even though both 1 Corinthians 2:9 (part of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians) and Bottom’s mangled recitation of it are concerned with the subject of opposite modes of knowing, their contexts are different: while Paul contrasts human or material wisdom with God’s wisdom, Bottom contrasts reason with imagination and dream. Indeed, Bottom is less concerned with biblical echoes than with the boundless imaginative power of the dream state; his speech suggests that his dream is incomprehensible to the tools of interpretation available to us in our waking lives, and that it is beyond the limited understanding of the denizens of Athens

<sup>28</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. by Michael Holquist and transl. by Carly Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: Texas UP, 1981, p. 369.

in the play. In making this point, Bottom makes the understanding of his dream contingent on sensory and synesthetic (rather than rational) perception, prompting Jennifer Waldron to describe the passage as “exegesis-by-synaesthesia”.<sup>29</sup> Bottom posits his dream as a synesthetic and multisensory experience that transcends the impressions normally produced by sight, hearing, touch, and taste. Through its transcendent quality, Bottom’s sensory and synesthetic dream has led to a higher knowledge that is inaccessible to the power of reason alone (“past the wit of man”).

What is remarkable is that if we look closely at Bottom’s dalliance with Titania, we find that it is indeed multisensory. Upon their first encounter, Titania becomes both aurally and visually attracted to Bottom: her “ear is much enamoured of [Bottom’s] note” (3.1.131) and her “eye enthralled to [his] shape” (3.1.132). Titania’s perception of Bottom is arguably also gustatory, as when she calls him “sweet” (4.1.30) right before he asks for “dry oats” (4.1.32). When Titania sets out to seduce Bottom, moreover, she focuses on stimulating his various senses. Bottom is fed with “apricots and dewberries, / With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries” (3.1.157–158); and “night-tapers” made of “honey-bags” are lit “at the fiery glow-worms’ eyes” (3.1.159–161). Bottom also has his head scratched by fairies (4.1.7) and is invited to listen to rural music (4.1.29.1). Meanwhile, Titania “stick[s] musk-roses in [Bottom’s] sleek smooth head, / And kiss[es] [his] fair large ears” (4.1.3–4). Titania’s erotically tactile kissing of Bottom’s auditory organ is emblematic of the wider synesthetic nature of Bottom’s dream. It is also one of the various staged instances of synesthesia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; elsewhere in the play, vision is supplemented with touch when Oberon and Puck use their hands to apply the magical love potion to the eyes of Titania and Lysander, making them fall in love with whomever they first descry after waking (2.2.32.2, 85.1). These examples show how Shakespeare’s characters experience their different dreams and dreamlike adventures in the play in synesthetic or sensorially embodied ways.

There are indications that Shakespeare’s theme of multisensory and synesthetic dreams may have been inspired by the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. In Colonna’s work, Poliphilo narrates his dream by focusing on his multisensory perception in remarkably similar ways to Bottom. Repeatedly, Poliphilo abandons rational discourse and instead reports raw impressions of smell, taste, touch, vision, and sound; he observes and experiences, but does not theorise or explicate. A case in point is Poliphilo’s vivid description of the *locus amoenus* of fertile fields into which he escapes after he has been frightened by a “fearefull and

<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Waldron: “The Eye of Man Hath Not Heard”: Shakespeare, Synaesthesia, and Post-Reformation Phenomenology. In: *Criticism* 54/3 (2012): Shakespeare and Phenomenology. Ed. by Kevin Curran and James Kearney, pp. 403–417, p. 405.

horrible Dragon” (sig. H4v). Setting out to explore “the commodiousnesse of the cuntry where-into hee was come” (sig. I4r), he describes, for example,

greene and sweete smelling Orenge, Lymons, Citrons, Pomegranettes, their water boughes bendyng downe within one pace of the ground, covered with leaves of a glassie greene colour, of a great height and turning downe againe their toppes, laden with the aboundance of their floure and fruites, breathing forth a most sweet and delectable odoriferous smell (sigs K4r–v).

When Poliphilo subsequently encounters an enchanting group of singing damsels, he experiences auditory-gustatory synesthesia, leading him to remark on the “incredible sweetness of hir musically and consonant voyce, conveyed in the roriferous ayre, and spreading it selfe abroad with the aunswerable sounde and delectable report of a warbeling harpe” (sigs K4v–L1r). As with his account of the smell of fruits and flowers (“most sweet and delectable odoriferous smell”), Poliphilo’s use of the term “delectable” here emphasises his sensorially embodied reception of the damsels’ singing. In addition to Poliphilo’s aural and gustatory response (“musically”, “consonant”; “sweetnesse”, “delectable”), his comment on the “roriferous ayre” (dewy air) might even allude to a further, visual or tactile, sense impression. It is fitting that, later in his dream narrative, Poliphilo meets five nymphs who are actual representations of the five senses (sig. L3v): Aphea (touch), Osfressia (smell), Orassia (sight), Achoe (hearing), and Geusia (taste).<sup>30</sup> This is a popular allegorical trope that reaches back to medieval literature; in the Renaissance, it was dramatised by Thomas Tomkis in his play *Lingua, or the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority* (1607), and was visually represented in a set of collaborative paintings by Jan Brueghel and Peter Paul Rubens (*The Five Senses*, 1617–1618).

As with Shakespeare’s integration of synesthesia and dream in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Colonna’s emphasis on Poliphilo’s multisensory and synesthetic experiences is tied to the broader dream logic of the *Hypnerotomachia*. Poliphilo’s dream is characterised not just by surprising sensory perceptions, but also by counterintuitive conceptions of time and space. In his dream, Poliphilo implausibly travels through different places including a desert, a coast, a forest, a valley, a city, and several palaces; and he witnesses various classical architectural wonders such as pyramids (sig. C1v) and an “Obelisk” with “ingraven Egiptian c[h]aracters” (sig. E2v). The narrative’s oneiric logic allows for encounters with distant pasts, exotic countries, and “fragments of strange histories” (sig. C2v). Principles of temporal sequentiality and spatial determinacy here collapse into oneiric formlessness. The only unifying principle behind the *Hypnerotomachia*’s labyrinthine distortions, narrative improbabilities, fantastical creatures, artistic marvels, boundless extravagances, and (in Colonna’s original text) baffling use

<sup>30</sup> Each nymph’s name is based on the Greek term for the corresponding sense.

of a combination of Italian syntax and Latin vocabulary, is that of the text's imitation of the dream state. As George D. Painter has noted, Colonna "felt that [...] only perplexing symbols, labyrinthine narrative, and intentionally impenetrable prose-style can express the night-world of the unconscious mind".<sup>31</sup> Colonna's description of Poliphilo's raw sense perceptions and synesthesiae is an integral part of these efforts to imitate the state of a dream.

Some of the focus on Poliphilo's senses in the *Hypnerotomachia* arises from the Aristotelian doctrine that all knowledge derives from sense perception. Poliphilo's quest for Polia in the dream is not just romantic, but also philosophical and epistemological, because it "doubles as his personal search for a knowledge capable of releasing his soul from the exigencies of the flesh".<sup>32</sup> The character's senses play a pivotal role in his quest. It is significant that it is the nymph Osfressia, standing for the sense of smell, who predicts that Poliphilo "shal[l] finde [...] *Polia* againe" (sig. M2r), because Poliphilo's quest progresses by means of his sensory perception. For Poliphilo, the dream is a felt and embodied experience, rather than a form of detached (self-)reflection. On his instructive quest for Polia (as well as for moral perfection), Poliphilo must, for example, learn to resist "unlawfull desires of the fleshe" (sig. N1r), as when he encounters the five nymphs (described as "sweete objects") and, overcome with a "violent desire", does not know at first whether he can "bridle and restraine [him]selfe from catching of [*sic*] one of them, like an eager and hotte Falcon comming downe out of the ayre, upon a couie of Partriges" (sig. M4v). In the end, though, Poliphilo always perseveres in, and renews, the pursuit of his love of Polia. As with Shakespeare's Bottom, Poliphilo's multisensory experiences are crucial to his ability to access the epistemological quarry that is his dream. In both dream narratives, the physical does not inhibit or corrupt the spiritual and epistemological, but rather acts as a gateway towards it.

In both Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the dreaming characters acquire forms of understanding and knowledge that lie beyond the tools of reason and logic available in the waking world. The overpowering sense impressions that the characters experience in their dreams force them to abandon rational discourse, thought, and narration, causing them in turn to become receptive to new modes of knowledge. On Poliphilo's journey through his dream world, for example, his senses are treated to the sight of classical architecture and stupendous gardens, delighted by seductive nymphs, and stimulated by copious banquets. In the course of his dream, indeed, Poliphilo pictures at great length a banquet even more lavish than the feast Bottom is served by the fairies:

<sup>31</sup> George D. Painter: *Studies in Fifteenth-Century Printing*, London: Pindar Press, 1984, p. 173.

<sup>32</sup> Smick: *Touch in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, p. 208.

[T]here was cast vpon [the tablecloths] the sweete flowers of Cedars, Orenge, and Lymons [...] And when we had well tasted and eaten of the [...] delectable meat, there was delivered to us a goodly cup [...] Within the drinking cup they had infused a precious Wine, so as mee thought that the Gods of the Elysian fieldes had transformed their power into the sweetnes of the lyquor [...] And presently new wayters brought in sixe pieces of bread cut for every one, tossed and dressed with refined marrow, sprinckled over with Rose water, Saffron, and the juice of Orenge (sig. Q1r).

This passage is one of countless many that lend credence to Joscelyn Godwin's observation, in the introduction to his modern English translation of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia*, that the text is "saturated with the desire to gaze, to taste, and to consume".<sup>33</sup> The engrossing multisensory temptations that Poliphilo encounters in the dream lead to his painstakingly minute descriptions of rich banquets, architectural wonders, sumptuous artworks, and splendid landscapes and gardens, which effortlessly displace the actual plot.<sup>34</sup> In fact, these descriptions take up around ninety percent of the text, with the rest devoted to the action of the story and to its dialogues and monologues. The recurring concern with Poliphilo's erotic gaze only adds further to these digressions from the plot. When Poliphilo meets a group of maidens in his dream, for example, he describes at length why they "please [him] well" (sig. V4v):

Their countenances were so lascivious, their breastes naked and intycing, theyr eyes flattering [...] their shapes most excellent, their apparell rich, their motions girlish, theyr regards byting, theyr ornaments, sweete and precious, no part counterfeited, but all perfected by nature in an excellent sort, nothing deformed, but all partes answerable one to another (sig. X1r).

Poliphilo in this passage peruses the women's bodies as if they were works of art. The sensual delights described here and elsewhere in the *Hypnerotomachia* are likely to have offended some of Dallington's Puritan contemporaries, including his patrons, the Buttes family of Norfolk, who terminated their association with Dallington at around the time he translated Colonna's work.<sup>35</sup> The text's innumerable digressions into visual, gustatory, olfactory, aural, and sensual pleasures

<sup>33</sup> Colonna: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, transl. by Godwin, p. viii.

<sup>34</sup> Scholarship has often treated the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* as a Renaissance architectural or botanical encyclopaedia. See Liane Lefaivre: Leon Battista Alberti's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: Re-Cognizing the Architectural Body in the Early Italian Renaissance. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997; Alberto Pérez-Gómez: Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited: An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992; Dorothea Schmidt: Untersuchungen zu den Architekturphrasen in der *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Frankfurt am Main: R. G. Fischer, 1978; and Roswitha Stewering: Architektur und Natur in der *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Hamburg: Lit, 1996.

<sup>35</sup> C. S. Knighton: Dallington, Sir Robert (1561–1636x8). In: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7042> (accessed: November 20<sup>th</sup> 2020).

are about more than just titillation, though. Rather, they are integral to Colonna's imitation of the dream state, because they form part of an oneiric sequence of raw sensory and synesthetic impressions that is less concerned with providing a logically structured narrative than it is with offering alternative modes of knowledge, narration, and experience.

Shakespeare may have taken inspiration from Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia* when he adapted the theme of multisensory dreams as a form of enlightenment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is suggested by the fact that Bottom's and the lovers' dreams in this play, similarly to Poliphilo's, are not just realisations of love but also, as I have shown, channels of instruction founded on the experience of a sentient interiority (rather than on reason and reflection). In Shakespeare's comedy, dreams also reach over into, and provide lessons for, the characters' and spectators' waking realities. This aspect is brought into relief when Bottom concludes that he has had a true *oneiros* and undertakes to "get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream", which he will "sing [...] in the latter end of a play, before the Duke [and perhaps] at [Thisbe's] death" (4.1.210–215). The value of dreams for the characters' waking lives is again emphasised when Hippolyta responds to Theseus's dismissal of the lovers' reports as "[m]ore strange than true" (5.1.2) by remarking on the "constancy" of their stories:

But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images,  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But howsoever, strange and admirable (5.1.23–27).

For the ostensible dreamers (the lovers and Bottom) as well as for the more perceptive denizens of Athens (such as Hippolyta), imagination and sensory experience constitute legitimate avenues to understanding; for them, dreams are a form of reality. Hippolyta's and Bottom's moments of recognition resemble what Colonna's Poliphilo experiences when he reports towards the end of Book One, in the presence of a nymph described to us as Polia:

I was brought from these long and doubtfull thoughts and phantasticall imaginations, and remembring all those marvellous diuine shapes and bodies which I had personally seene with mine eies, I then knew that they were not deceitfull shadowes, nor magicall illusions, but that I had not rightly conceived of them (sig. Bb3r).

At this point, Poliphilo comes to acknowledge the significance of even his most outlandish experiences; rather than his sensory perception deceiving him, he has not correctly interpreted what he has seen. Eventually, Poliphilo also overcomes his doubt about whether the nymph he sees before him is indeed his beloved Polia. Whereas he is initially "suspicious thereof" (sig. Bb3r), he ultimately recognises her as "the Nymph Polia" (sig. Cc4r). But Poliphilo's claim that he has

entered a state of lucidity (sig. Bb3r) is rendered ironic by the fact that he is still dreaming at this point; Poliphilo does not wake up until the end of Colonna's Book Two – and when he does, Polia has vanished. Since Book Two was not translated by Dallington, the character is actually left in an eternal dream state in the English 1592 version (which to many unsuspecting English readers must have represented Colonna's entire work). Even though Poliphilo's inference that his visions are not "deceitfull shadowes" or "magical illusions" dovetails with the dream's broader epistemological importance, the irony of it could not have escaped readers, especially since dreams were in early modern discourse frequently described in precisely those terms: Shakespeare's Oberon calls dreams "fruitless vision[s]" (MND, 3.2.371); the *Hypnerotomachia* itself equals dreams with "vanitie" (sig. B1r); and the moralist Owen Feltham declared dreams "full of doubt, full of deceit".<sup>36</sup>

In his comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare offers a picture of the dream's sensory and epistemological dimensions that is much more consistently and overtly satirical than what we find in the *Hypnerotomachia*. Here, Bottom reads his experience as a quasi-Chaucerian vision of epistemological significance (4.1.201–210), but an audience knows that he did not actually dream and was instead manipulated by the fairies. The same goes for the lovers' adventures in the forest. But at the same time, Shakespeare's satirical treatment of the trope of the dream is not altogether different from Colonna's; it may even constitute a creative appropriation of the technique used by the latter. While Bottom's dream might well be philosophically and spiritually less serious than Poliphilo's, the weaver's reading of his dream is cast in the same mould as Poliphilo's interpretation of his own dream as a form of reality (rather than as a series of "deceitfull shadowes" (sig. Bb3r)). In both texts, in fact, the dreamer's metaphysical interpretation ironically clashes with the more mundane perspectives that readers or audiences may adopt – and which Shakespeare and Colonna never dismiss.

To brand Poliphilo and Bottom as fools, though, would be to oversimplify and even to misunderstand Colonna's and Shakespeare's works. In the *Hypnerotomachia*, the dream has a clear instructive, epistemological, and spiritual value; and even in Shakespeare's comedy, Bottom's words express a broader truth about the gulf between logic and experience, and between reason and imagination, by suggesting that reason is unable fully to account for lived or imagined experiences. Through Bottom's synesthetic account of his ineffable dream, Shakespeare celebrates the creative capability of the human imagination. He advertises this capability throughout his play, showing us fairies, metamorphoses, and seemingly impossible romances, all of which make the play fundamentally dreamlike. Not unlike Chaucer's dream poems, where the dreams serve as

<sup>36</sup> Owen Feltham: *Resolves: A Duple Centurie*. London, 1628, p. 282.

metaphors for the poems themselves – with both requiring interpretation and allowing for almost endless creative potential – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* points to the shared imaginative quality of dreams and drama. That Shakespeare was thinking along those lines is also suggested in *The Tempest* (1611), where Prospero describes theatre and life as “such stuff / As dreams are made on”, “rounded with a sleep”.<sup>37</sup> Shakespeare’s intertwining of drama and dream is nowhere more evident than in the comedy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where it is facilitated by a disintegration of verisimilitude and logic in favour of dream-like multisensory and romantic experiences. As I have argued, this may owe much to the influence of Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which supplied some of the most important blueprints for tropes, techniques, and images of dreams in the European Renaissance.

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<sup>37</sup> William Shakespeare: *The Tempest*. Ed. by David Lindley. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, 4.1.156–158.

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