

The Fantastical, Semi-Tawdry Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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Shakespeare's *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* serves the wonderful and weird book well. It is exhilarating exploration of mankind's lack of imagination. Sometimes literary geniuses pack more literary entertainment into what appear to be their off-speed larks than they do in their slam -dunk masterpieces, particularly the 16th century English literary emperor, William Shakespeare. He earned his status for his imagination of a romantic while Ben Jonson wrote satirical comedy. But there is nothing like Shakespeare when he plays hooky. My personal favourites among the Shakespearian treasure trove tend to be those that gleam with a fantastical, semi tawdry shine – there are only a few such lesser known books that I devoured with delicious delight. For centuries I thought *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* was one of the few dramas which keeps us engaged in the see-saw of revenge, entertainment, love until the final pages. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of William Shakespeare's few comedies which amused all his readers. An enlightening tale of four young teens brought in to an enchanted forest, with two running off to build a new life together, the others tracking them down in a quest for money and love. While at the same time the fairy king and queen are plotting revenge against each other on a count of their cheating ways. A fairy named Puck is assigned to turn the queen's lover against her using a magic potion leading any and all stuck in that forest that night in to an odd series of events, turning lovers and changing people's hearts. This is one of Shakespeare's best and heart warming plays, sure to get a life out of the chill of hatred.

Puck is the most perversely compelling of all characters, almost pivotal and when I learned that I would have to write about the drama, I approached with an eagerness shadowed by flickers of wariness, because I promised to concentrate on Puck.. *Puck* or *Robin Goodfellow* is one of the most popular characters in English and Celtic folklore, being a faerie, goblin or devil. In fact, "Pouk" was a typical medieval term for the devil. Sometimes Puck was pictured as a frightening creature with the head of an ass, or as a queer little figure, long and grotesque, or as a rough, hairy creature, or as the representation of the Greek god Pan, as in the above picture. As a shape-shifter, Puck had many appearances, and he used them to make mischief. The term "Robin Goodfellow" was a medieval nickname for the devil as well. Robin Goodfellow is one of the faeries known as "hobgoblins", also famous for shape-shifting and misleading travellers, but sometimes a helpful domestic sprite. The Shakespearean Puck well illustrates the traditional nature of this creature. Puck is a representative of the *Trickster* figure, which appears in most folklores. The story of the trickster being tricked is a common motif. Shakespeare used this to create his Puck, since the character gets confused in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and gives the love potion to the wrong couple of lovers. Aside from Shakespeare's famous use of Puck, many other writers have referred to the spirit as well, like Ben Johnson, John Milton, Goethe or Rudyard Kipling. In the drama *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there are constantly descriptions, thematic analysis, and literary criticism. Unfortunately one of the most interesting characters in the drama, Puck or Robin Goodfellow, is often ignored or only briefly alluded to in the schematic of other themes. However, when one looks at the character of Puck then one can see that there is

much more there than just a supporting role. Although there is little character development in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and no true protagonist, critics generally point to Puck as the most important character in the play.

The mischievous and witty sprite sets many of the play's events with his magic, through deliberate pranks on the human characters and unfortunate mistakes. Sure, he does support his master in the Fairy King Oberon, but he has his own charisma and magic that he uses not just for Oberon, but for his own purposes which are usually for his perverse pleasure. Hence it is possible to see the character of Puck in three different ways which will be discussed in this essay. The first view of Puck can be compared to the god Cupid, in the essence and bringing of love to a mortals life or at least the assistant of Cupid. If taken in the view of bringer of love, one would realize that although the concept was Oberon's, the giving of the same function to the mortals is not important enough for him to take care of himself, thus he gives the flower to Puck and tells him to take care of the mortals. Puck does his best, but his own personality wins out in that even without trying he creates havoc rather than everlasting love. Puck creates such a mess that it is up to Oberon to fix the love of the mortals, which had he done the work himself, would never have happened. The second way in which to view the character of Puck is as he sees himself; a goblin, or a fairy or thing of the night, a creature of chaos. Even though he is reminded by Oberon that he is of a different sort of fairy, Puck would not agree. He knows that his inherent characteristics are to create chaos. Oberon knows that Puck is a mischief maker and thus still relies on him to do something correct. Chaos is correct for Puck, thus the confusion of the mortal. However, it is this chaos that Oberon relies on when he seals the evening fate of Titania and her love for Bottom, whom was turned into an ass. It is also this mischief that allows Puck pretend to be the love competitor to the other mortal. The men chase Puck through the woods thinking he [Puck] is the other mortal man and challenger until they both tire and fall asleep. It is only at this point that Oberon actually takes responsibility and fixes the chaos that he has allowed Puck to create. Would this Faustian fantasia of excess retain for me the mind-blowing zing of centuries ago? Would I be disappointed with what had once captivated me as a hell of a comedy ride?

Puck makes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* one of the great comic dramas in literature a dazzlingly demented explorations of a mankind's capacity for imagination. When Shakespeare published this romantic comedy, he was an author desperately in search of success. Dowden wrote: "Shakespeare who saw life more widely and wisely than any other of the seers could laugh" (Dowden, 338). He had just attempted the comedy as romance formula, but his revamped and reinvented approach to a popular genre gained most of him. He cast about for a supernatural story that would not only catch, but in a diabolical way critique, the reading public's jaded taste. Given the story's exuberance and invention, its fairy-tale obsession with the mechanics of desire, I would The drama reflects the ambitions of a writer who believed his imagination to be expansive enough to both capture English society and hammer out its myriad meanings. Yet the drama's vision is propelled by the necessity of restraint, a clash between the explosion and implosion, hubris and repression. "There are as many modes of laughter" wrote Dowden "as there are facets of the common soul of humanity to reflect the humorous appearances of the world" (Dowden, 338).

Roman verse satire, a literary genre created by the Romans, is personal and subjective, providing insight into the poet and a look at social mores. Invective and obscenities, dining habits, corruption, and personal flaws all have a place in it. Juvenal was a master of exposing the foibles of society, with elegance. Satire is used to draw attention to folly, shortcomings, vices and abuses by the use of ridicule or irony. The intent is usually to bring about an improvement. Satire is mostly intended to be funny although often the purpose of satire is not always to be funny, sometimes it will be an angry attack, usually on somebody or something that the author has strong feelings about, using wit as a weapon. Satire and parody can often be disturbing due to the fact it will combine anger and humour to deliver a strong statement regarding its subject matter. Viewed by many as the subtlest form of comedy it is often not appreciated by those individuals with a coarser sense of humour. Though there is little character development in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and no true protagonist, critics generally point to Puck as the most important character in the play. The mischievous, quick-witted sprite sets many of the play's events in motion with his magic, by means of both deliberate pranks on the human characters (transforming Bottom's head into that of an ass) and unfortunate mistakes (smearing the love potion on Lysander's eyelids instead of Demetrius's). More important, Puck's capricious spirit, magical fancy, fun-loving humor, and lovely, evocative language permeate the atmosphere of the play. Wild contrasts, such as the implicit comparison between the rough, earthy craftsmen and the delicate, graceful fairies, dominate *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck seems to illustrate many of these contrasts within his own character: he is graceful but not so saccharine as the other fairies; as Oberon's jester, he is given to a certain coarseness, which leads him to transform Bottom's head into that of an ass merely for the sake of enjoyment. He is good-hearted but capable of cruel tricks. Finally, whereas most of the fairies are beautiful and ethereal, Puck is often portrayed as somewhat bizarre looking. Indeed, another fairy mentions that some call Puck a "hobgoblin," a term whose connotations are decidedly less glamorous than those of "fairy" (II.i.40).

The Fairy says :

“Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
 Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
 Called Robin Goodfellow. Are not you he
 That frights the maidens of the villagery,
 Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
 And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,
 And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,
 Mislead night-wanders, laughing at their harm?
 Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
 You do their work, and they shall have good luck.

Are you not he?"

Puck replies :

"Thou speakest aright;
 I am that merry wanderer of the night.
 I jest to Oberon, and make him smile
 When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
 Neighing in likeness of a filly foal;
 And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
 In very likeness of a roasted crab,
 And when she drinks, against her lips I bob
 And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
 The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
 Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
 Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
 And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;
 And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh,
 And waxen in their mirth, and neeze, and swear
 A merrier hour was never wasted there." (2.1)

Puck serves Oberon, the fairy king. He freely admits to be "a shrewd and knavish sprite". He is sent by Oberon to find the flower "love-in-idleness" and is told to apply its juice to the eyes of Demetrius to make him fall in love with Helena. He erroneously administers the juice to Lysander, who loves Hermia, thus producing that both men fall in love with the same woman, Helena. For the sake of enjoyment, he also transforms the actor Nick Bottom's head in that of an ass, so that Titania, the fairy queen, will fall in love with him, a beast, and will forget to look after a little Indian boy, whom Oberon wants to turn into a knight. Later, Oberon realises Puck's mistakes, and orders him to produce a dark fog to lead the rival lovers within it by imitating their voices, and then to apply an antidote to Lysander's eyes.

Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* divides its action between several groups of characters, Puck is the closest thing the play has to a protagonist. His mischievous spirit pervades the atmosphere, and his actions are responsible for many of the complications that develop the main plots in a chaotic way. More important, Puck's capricious spirit, magical fancy, fun-loving humor, and lovely, evocative language permeate the atmosphere of the play. Wild contrasts, such as the implicit comparison between the rough, earthy craftsmen and the delicate, graceful fairies,

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Whereas Puck's humor is often mischievous and subtle, the comedy surrounding the overconfident weaver Nick Bottom is hilariously overt. The central figure in the subplot involving the craftsmen's production of the Pyramus and Thisbe story, Bottom dominates his fellow actors with an extraordinary belief in his own abilities (he thinks he is perfect for every part in the play) and his comical incompetence (he is a terrible actor and frequently makes rhetorical and grammatical mistakes in his speech). The humor surrounding Bottom often stems from the fact that he is totally unaware of his own ridiculousness; his speeches are overdramatic and self-aggrandizing, and he seems to believe that everyone takes him as seriously as he does himself. This foolish self-importance reaches its pinnacle after Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. When Titania, whose eyes have been anointed with a love potion, falls in love with the now ass-headed Bottom, he believes that the devotion of the beautiful, magical fairy queen is nothing out of the ordinary and that all of the trappings of her affection, including having servants attend him, are his proper due. His unawareness of the fact that his head has been transformed into that of an ass parallels his inability to perceive the absurdity of the idea that Titania could fall in love with him. The theme of love's difficulty is often explored through the motif of love out of balance—that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship. The fairies' magic, which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play, is an important element central to the fantastic atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare uses magic both to embody the almost supernatural power of love (symbolized by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. Although the misuse of magic causes chaos, as when Puck mistakenly applies the love potion to Lysander's eyelids, magic ultimately resolves the play's tensions by restoring love to balance among the quartet of Athenian youths. Additionally, the ease with which Puck uses magic to his own ends, as when he reshapes Bottom's head into that of an ass and recreates the voices of Lysander and Demetrius, stands in contrast to the laboriousness and gracelessness of the craftsmen's attempt to stage their play. As the title suggests, dreams are an important theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; they are linked to the bizarre, magical mishaps in the forest. Hippolyta's first words in the play evidence the prevalence of dreams ("Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time"), and various characters mention dreams throughout (I.i.7–8). The theme of dreaming recurs predominantly when characters attempt to explain bizarre events in which these characters are involved: "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 t'expound this dream," Bottom says, unable to fathom the magical happenings that have affected him as anything but the result of slumber. Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams, in how events occur without explanation, time loses its normal sense of flow, and the impossible occurs as a matter of course; he seeks to recreate this environment in the play through the intervention of the fairies in the magical forest. At the end of the play, Puck extends the idea of dreams to the audience members themselves. The gauzy fragility is crucial to the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it helps render the play a fantastical experience rather than a heavy drama.

The idea of contrast is the basic building block of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The entire play is constructed around groups of opposites and doubles. Nearly every characteristic presented in

the play has an opposite: Helena is tall, Hermia is short; Puck plays pranks, Bottom is the victim of pranks; Titania is beautiful, Bottom is grotesque. Further, the three main groups of characters (who are developed from sources as varied as Greek mythology, English folklore, and classical literature) are designed to contrast powerfully with one another: the fairies are graceful and magical, while the craftsmen are clumsy and earthy; the craftsmen are merry, while the lovers are overly serious. Contrast serves as the defining visual characteristic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the play's most indelible image being that of the beautiful, delicate Titania weaving flowers into the hair of the ass-headed Bottom. It seems impossible to imagine two figures less compatible with each other. The juxtaposition of extraordinary differences is the most important characteristic of the play's surreal atmosphere and is thus perhaps the play's central motif; there is no scene in which extraordinary contrast is not present. Theseus and Hippolyta bookend *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, appearing in the daylight at both the beginning and the end of the play's main action. They disappear, however, for the duration of the action, leaving in the middle of Act I, scene i and not reappearing until Act IV, as the sun is coming up to end the magical night in the forest. Shakespeare uses Theseus and Hippolyta, the ruler of Athens and his warrior bride, to represent order and stability, to contrast with the uncertainty, instability, and darkness of most of the play. Whereas an important element of the dream realm is that one is not in control of one's environment, Theseus and Hippolyta are always entirely in control of theirs. Their reappearance in the daylight of Act IV to hear Theseus's hounds signifies the end of the dream state of the previous night and a return to rationality.

Puck is the mischievous sprite who serves Oberon, the Fairy King. In Elizabethan folklore, Puck (a.k.a. Robin Goodfellow) is a household sprite who, depending on his mood, plays annoying tricks on people or helps them out with their chores. This explains why Shakespeare's Puck brags to us about all the times he's been a pest to local villagers by sabotaging vats of ale and ruining the batches of butter that housewives spent all morning churning. Puck is the heart and soul of the play. Puck loves a good practical joke more than anything else. After transforming Bottom's head into that of an "ass," he gleefully declares "My mistress with a monster is in love" (3.2.1). Because of his fun-loving spirit and willingness to prank anyone and everyone, he's often considered the heart and soul of the play. His antics and his sense of humor inject *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a playful and topsy-turvy spirit that creates much of the play's fun atmosphere. It's no wonder that literary critic Marjorie Garber describes Puck as the "principal actor and agent" in a "world of enchantment, magic, music, and mischief." If Puck creates the play's fun and rowdy atmosphere, then he's also the character that makes things happen in the play. He whizzes around the globe (in forty minutes no less) to fetch Oberon's magic love juice (2.1), and when he accidentally squeezes it in Lysander's eyes (2.2), he sets in motion all the comical misunderstandings that arise from the young lovers' chase through the woods. After turning the young lovers' world upside down, Puck is also the figure who helps restore order and sets things right. By giving the young lovers the antidote to the love juice (3.2), Puck removes the obstacles they've faced and ensures the play's happy ending. According to scholar Stephen Greenblatt, this aligns Puck with the Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus, which feature a "crafty slave" figure. Greenblatt tells us that this "stock character [...] sometimes seems to enjoy and contribute to the plot's tangles but [also] manages to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the young lovers."

We also want to say that Puck embodies the play's theme of "Transformation." He famously transforms Bottom's head into that of a donkey, and he's also fond of shape-shifting himself. At one point, he brags that he often pretends to be a stool and then disappears so that old ladies will land on their "bum[s]" (2.1.3). He also terrorizes the Mechanicals in the woods after turning their friend into a human-donkey hybrid:

*Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire;
And neigh, and bark, and grunt, and roar, and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn.* (3.1.2)

Puck's ability to transform himself isn't limited to shape-shifting. He can also change his voice, as when he leads Lysander and Demetrius around the wood by mimicking the men's voices and calling out to each of them. In some ways, Puck parallels Philostrate's position as Theseus's "master of revels." (In Elizabethan England, the Master of the Revels was an important guy in charge of all the entertainment at court – basically a royal party planner. Eventually, the position involved determining which plays could be performed on public stages.) Think about it. Philostrate's job is to make sure Theseus and his court are entertained. This is why Theseus orders him to "Stir up the Athenian youth to merriments" (1.1.2). Later, Theseus turns to Philostrate for his entertaining options:

*Say, what abridgement have you for this evening?
What masque? what music? How shall we beguile
The lazy time, if not with some delight?* (5.1.4)

Even though Puck may not go around organizing plays and planning parties like Philostrate, his main function as Oberon's go-to guy is to entertain the Fairy King. As Puck says, his duty is to "jest to Oberon and make him smile" (2.1.3).

By setting in motion the events that send the lovers into chaos, Puck also ensures that we, the audience, have a good time as well. In this way, Puck is also a kind of "lord of misrule" figure (one who was appointed to reign over carnival festivities, which included drinking, eating, and raucous theatrical productions). It's fitting, then, that Puck should close the play by delivering the Prologue. He is also the only character with the credibility to tell the audience that he *knows* the play is unreal, like a "dream," and he promises that, if we didn't like the play, he'll soon make it up to us with another one.

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Some commentators say that Nick Bottom, the weaver, is based on Shakespeare himself. While at first glance this seems incredible - Shakespeare was an actor and playwright whose work is still widely read more than 400 years after his death, while Bottom is a boastful weaver - the parallels are there to be seen. love Shakespeare's plays, and my favourite comedy has to be 'A

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The seduction of Puck is under the purview of feminist interpretations of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and it lends credence to the charge that the said group wants to attach mythological importance to the celebrated work, thus giving a historical and literary legitimacy to their over-all movement on the one hand. On the other hand, there are those who charge Feminists with trying to de-legitimize the significance of the Bard's work on the grounds that it served to perpetuate the negative stereotypes of women as servile, passive, weak and utterly subservient to men, particularly as the play alludes to the ancient Greek legend of Theseus's triumph over the Queen of the Amazons, not to mention the Dark Lord Oberon's subtle handling of Titania, Queen of the Night, who is just gullible and susceptible enough to fall for Bottom after having taken the form of an Ass. While it is true that there are many allusions to the charms and chicanery that men, be they heroic, like Theseus, phantasmagorical, like Oberon, provocative, like Puck, plain annoying, like Lysander and Demetrius, or pathetic, like Nick Bottom, most fans of Shakespeare would disagree with the contention that he was perpetuating negative stereotypes of either men or women. It is not the fault of the author that there remained little for women to worry about than who their lover or future husband might be, it was just a fact of the times, everyone's role in society was predetermined. The foibles and fights between couples and the madness of erotic love are viable facts of life today as they were in the 16th Century.

To the contrary, the fact that women play a significant role in the play makes relevant the case for the recognition of women as forces for persuasion, of influence and intercession, all of which goes well beyond passivity and subservience. Even Amazon Queen Hippolyta's accession to Theseus is mostly amiable, and the figures in their court, equally presided over by the two, accede to the revelry of the occasion as equal partners, and both Puck and Oberon are as much seduced by the charms of Titania and her fairies as Demetrius and Lysander vie for the affections of Hermia. In the end, after everyone has been freed from the spell of the moonlit night, they all laugh and realize how foolish is this contest between sexes for the favor of the opposite sex.

More to the point Feminists seem to be making, however, is the fact that Shakespeare makes the women in his play the arbiters of the plot's resolution

At the end of the play (in the epilogue), Puck makes a speech explaining his actions that serves to trivialize the play itself if it has offended the audience:

“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.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I'm an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call:
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends." (4.2)

These lines essentially connect the audience with the play and compares them to the lovers who in the play did also awake from the mad happenings of the fairy world as if from a dream. So, we can estate that Puck's function in the play is crucial, since although he appears to be a kind of secondary character in some way, all the plots develop around him. Puck represents the difficulties of love, the power of magic, the nature of dreams and the relationships between fantasy and reality.

One of the aspects that may draw attention is that although Puck seems to appear with most of the characters, he only interacts with Oberon, his master. In fact, all the dialogues in which Puck is present deal with Oberon, except in act II scene I, where Puck presents itself to a fairy, and in act III scene II, where he pretends to be Lysander with Demetrius and vice-versa. But in this case he is not present for both young men, as they just hear Puck's voice. So, we can estate that Puck's relationship and interaction with other characters is practically inexistent, but at the same time, his actions are essential for the development of the relationship between the other characters.

Puck sees himself as a naughty “master” that plays with mortal people as if they were puppets. He takes advantage of one of humankind’s weakness, love. For Puck, love is either a nuisance (played more evil than good) or just a funny thing that humans and other beings stupid enough to fall into it do to show him a laughing good time. As he puts it,

“Up and down, up and down

I will lead them up and down:

I am fear’d in field and town;

Goblin, lead them up and down.” Act III sc ii

In fact, one of the most famous quotations in the play is Puck’s statement: “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” because it captures the exaggerated silliness of the lovers’ behavior; second, because it marks the contrast between the human lovers, completely absorbed in their emotions, and the magical fairies, impish and never too serious.

Regarding Puck’s presence in the play, the most interesting question remains, how a character that is not present in most of the play can be regarded as the main one. The answer is really easy and simple: because without his mistakes, the plot is lost and senseless. Because without his mischief, the play would not be a comedy. Puck is the one who ties and unties, deforms and creates as he pleases. And although he has created all that chaos, at the end he resolves his mistakes by restoring the love balance in the two couples of lovers, impossible without his intervention.

Finally, is Puck who in a way carries the main message of the play and maybe “disguises” all the possible attacks to society or personal offences in his last speech. As Puck is magic, all happened was magic too, and as he is Puck, everybody will be given good luck! Shakespeare beautifully maintains the equilibrium between the laughter of passionate indignation of Juvenal, huge buffoonery of Rabelais, refined Castilian air of Cervantes, laughter of unerring good sense of Moliere, the exuberance of philanthropy in Dickens’s laughter and the gracious gaiety of Fielding. Or may we feel that he accommodates them all in the character of Puck? The answer is left to the posterity to answer.

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