

Shakespeare: magic and supernatural occurrences



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Magic and supernatural occurrences in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard III*, and *The Tempest* are used to create a surreal world to confuse and resolve conflicts in each play. Magic provides the audience with an escape from reality and the comfort of the play's unrealistic nature.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a love potion from a magical flower is used and misused to provide comic relief and resolution to love's difficulties, supernatural ghosts are used to condemn a horrific murderer in *Richard III* to ensure his downfall and deserved death and finally, magic from Prospero's book in *The Tempest* is used for his righteous revenge and harmony amongst the characters. The Duke of Athens, Theseus, states, "the best in this kind are but shadows; and the / worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" providing Shakespeare's use of magic in his various plays is a real participant in the entertainment and structure in them.

Magic and supernatural occurrences are used by Shakespeare to create illusionary situations to resolve bigger conflicts, such as love's difficulties, revenge, and justice. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, magic appears in several dimensions. The title of the play suggests that the play itself is a dream and the heat from a midsummer night causes the imagination to wander. The next dimension is character bound in Shakespeare's use of fairies in a mythical forest. The fairies then discover a magical object, a flower that contains a love potion. Magic provides coincidences and mistakes to form a complex plot filled with confused characters.

Robin Goodfellow or Puck is Oberon's (the fairy king) jester who sets many of the play's humorous, conflicting, and balanced events in motion through his use and misuse of magic. Lysander tells his love Hermia that, "the course of

true love never did run smooth" (I. i. 134) foreshadowing Puck's misuse of magic on Lysander to confuse the lovers. Oberon tells Puck to retrieve the magical flower to spread its juices on Titania's eyelids for her to see Oberon and to spread it on Demetrius' eyelids in order to love Helena. Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius and Lysander falls in love with Helena.

Puck attempts to undo this mistake and Demetrius and Lysander both end up in love with Helena. Puck then confused the young men by mimicking their voices in order to prevent a fight amongst the two Athenians. Earlier in the play, Puck transformed Bottom's (a craftsman) head into that of an ass. Titania wakes and the first creature she sees is Bottom. Puck's careless use of the love potion has caused chaos and Oberon uses the magic potion to resolve the play's tension and restore love's balance among Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, Helena and Titania.

Magic is used to display the supernatural power of love, symbolized by the love potion, and to create a surreal world. Dreams are also apparent in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Hippolyta provides the introduction to the play as, " Four days will quickly steep themselves in night, / Four nights will quickly dream away the time" (I. i. 7-8) suggesting her four day marriage celebration will be coupled with the escape from reality through dreams. After Bottom wakes up from his dream in which he is beloved by Titania as an ass-headed monster, he renders it merely a bizarre dream.

He says, " 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," unable to fathom the magical happenings that have affected him as anything but the result of a dream. Shakespeare uses dreams as explanation for the

impossibility of magical characters and objects to solve love's difficulties. Puck supports this argument by telling the audience that " If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended: / That you have but slumbered here," (V. ii. -3) rendering the play as a sensational experience rather than a heavy drama. Richard III introduces a malicious, power hungry, and bitter deformed man who will do anything, including murder, to become the King of England.

Richard ends up manipulating and killing 11 innocent people who got in the way of his plan to become king. In Act V, scene v, the 11 ghosts whom he has murdered bombard dreaming Richard. Each ghost stops to speak to him to condemn him for his or her death and the ghost of Buckingham tells Richard of his soon fate of, " d[ying] in terror of thy guiltiness! (V. v. 124). The ghosts then proceed to sleeping Richmond, telling him that they will be by his side and he will rule England and be the gather of a race of kings. Terrified, Richard wakes up and presents a soliloquy displaying his first presence of humane thoughts and feelings. Revealing self doubt, conscious, and regret for his horrendous actions, he states, " what do I fear? Myself? There's none else by. / Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I. / Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am" (V. v. 136-138).

Richard is seized with the renowned horror when he realizes that he is the most dangerous person he could be left alone with. He then recalls upon an interesting idea after he discovered a way to flee from the situation, " Why? / Lest I revenge. Myself upon myself? " (V. v. 139-140). After second guessing himself due to supernatural ghosts, he is visited again by a mysterious inner demon from which even he is not safe. He then moves past this thought by

stating that he loves himself, but realizes that it is an impossible thought because he has never done any loving acts, just hateful, villainous murders.

In the first speech of the play he declares that he is determined “ to prove a villain” (I. i. 30), but now, towards the end of the play he declares that he has become one, “ I am a villain” (V. v. 145). Instead of being joyful that he has achieved his goal, he is filled with moral loathing and regret. This psychological undermining caused by the ghosts and his recognition of his inner demon is the very reason that caused his downfall in battle. Furthering Richard and Richmond’s differences, Richmond asked his men to remember the beauty of the land that they are protecting from a tyrant.

Richard on the other hand, told his nobleman that might makes right, and that “[c]onscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe” (V. vi. 39-40), even though he, himself has been recently tortured by his corrupted conscience. Shakespeare’s use of the 11 ghosts and psychological measures to shake up and torment a villain shows the power of the supernatural and human thought. The 11 ghosts served as an equivalent to 11 curses on Richard to ensure his downfall, but his uncertainty with whom he is inside was what ultimately shook him and uncovered the inescapable fact that the end is near.

The Tempest, in my opinion, presents the most magic and supernatural forces out of all of Shakespeare’s works. Prospero, the protagonist, is a very clever, intelligent, and reasonable man contrasted with his ability to control characters and situations through his magic. Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been trapped on an island for 12 years after his brother, Antonio, conspiring with Alonso, usurped Prospero’s position as the Duke of

Milan. Prospero uses his magic to bring a great tempest upon a ship carrying Antonio, Fernando, and Alonso among others.

Prospero's injustice seems very one-sided and hypocritical because even though his throne was overtaken, he has enslaved Ariel (a fairy) and Caliban in order to achieve his own ends. As the play progresses, however, these ideas become more and more faded and Prospero's seek for justice becomes more prudent. Since Prospero is the puppeteer of all of the characters and events, the play is very morally ambiguous in comparison to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, more playful and *Richard III*, more sinful.

In this sense, magic and supernatural forces are used as tools for Prospero to achieve justice while slowly resolving the ambiguities surrounding his methods. Prospero shows an immense and deep love for his daughter, furthering a sense of sympathy for him. He asks Ariel to call forth spirits, Ceres, Juno and Iris to perform a masque for the joining of Ferdinand and Miranda to celebrate the rites of marriage and the bounty of the earth. After this celebration, Ariel reminds Prospero of the plot against his life and Prospero delivers an epilogue about his magical powers.

Prospero states that, " We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" (IV. i. 156-158). These lines indicate that his magic and their escape from reality on the island was beautiful, but he is filled with sadness of the fact that this world is in many ways meaningless because it is a kind of dream completely removed from anything substantial. In the end, Prospero forgives his enemies, releases his slaves, and relinquishes his magic power.

Prospero's life and use of magic relates to a director and the special effects of a play. Once Prospero gives up his magic, the play will end, and the audience, like Prospero, will return to real life. The moral value of attaining a happy ending can originate from nowhere but the imagination of the artist, in this case Prospero through his use of magic. Overall, magic and supernatural forces are used to dramatize the effects they can cause on certain characters and situations to construct a complex play.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a magical flower containing a love potion is the force that increases the complexity of love and then ultimately resolves it. In *Richard III*, supernatural ghosts and his conscience resolves a mass murderer's wrongs in his fight to power. In *The Tempest*, the protagonist achieves justice and happiness for himself and others through his manipulation of events by his magic powers. Shakespeare uses magic to find a balanced and entertaining end to various circumstances and issues.