

Puck, as the dark middle man

Literature, William Shakespeare



The character Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, is most often associated with the mischievous little hobgoblin fairy in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even before Shakespeare's interpretation of Puck though, the little imp had been one of the most popular characters in English folklore. Puck appears to be a minor character, and quite a nuisance with all his tricks and pranks in the play, but his role is necessary and even monumental.

Shakespeare uses Puck as the intermediary in the play, connecting the play and the audience, the fairy world and the human world. Puck is also the only character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who addresses the audience directly, thus raising important questions about the play concerning love, fairies, the lovers' images of themselves, and whether they are real, or only a dream. Puck as a trickster has both a comic and a darker role in the play. The origin of his various names exist in ancient languages mostly with the original meaning of demon, devil, or evil spirit, these names include " Puka in old English, Puki in Old Norse, Puke in Swedish, Puge in Danish, Puks in Low German, Pukis in Latvia and Lithuania, (Edwards, 143)." Puck is responsible for mocking humans, " what fools these mortals be" (Shakespeare, 163) performing mischievous deeds and causing much disorder in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he is ultimately portrayed as a good-natured and generous creature. A fairy in Act Two, Scene One describes Puck's sneaky pranks: Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite / Called Robin Goodfellow: are you not 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 bare no barm; / Mislead night wanderers laughing at their harm? (Shakespeare, 156) Tricksters are

often marginal characters because they are controlled by nature, rather than society. Puck's physical characteristics are portrayed as animal-like and reflect the naturalistic instincts that control his actions. Even before Shakespeare, the character Puck was known as a "shape shifter" who would transform himself into a horse, an eagle, an ass, an old man, a brownie or a hobbit usually in order to carry out his tricks: I'll follow you; I'll lead you about around / Through bog through bush through brake through briar; / 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." (Shakespeare, 161)" Tricksters are considered primitive, naïve, even ignorant...but sometimes they possess a wisdom others do not" (Wright, 4). Puck is responsible for turning Oberon's plan to make Demetrius fall in love with Helena into a disaster. Oberon ordered Puck to go out into the woods and find the pansy, a flower that was allegedly hit by cupid's arrow after accidentally missing Queen Elizabeth. By dropping the juice of the pansy into Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius', Puck reveals his foolish side, but he also creates a dark and satiric question in the play (whether he knows it or not) regarding love between humans. When Hermia discovers that Lysander no longer loves her, she is struck with anger and bewilderment at how quickly love can reverse itself. In Act Five, Scene One upon hearing the young lovers' tale, Theseus gives his explanation stating that: Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / such shaping fantasies that apprehend / more than cool reason ever comprehends / the lunatic the lover and the poet / are of imagination all compact: / one sees more devils than vast hell can hold; / that is the madman: the lover all is

frantic, / sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt: / the poet's eye, in a fine
frenzy rolling / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, /
And, as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet's
pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and
a name. / Such tricks hath strong imagination, / That, if it would but
apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy; / Or in the
night / Imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear?

(Shakespeare, 169) The problem that Puck creates reveals the absurdity of love. Theseus compares the lover to the madman and the poet explaining that each doesn't see the world as it is, but constructs it through their own minds or imagination rather than reason. Puck not only connects the human world to the fairy world by rubbing the potion on the Athenian's eyes, he also interrupts Thisbe, Quince and Pyramus rehearsing their play and he leads Lysander and Demetrius away from each other so they won't fight over Helena and Hermia. No other fairy in the play comes this close to the human world. Both the evil and good side of Puck's nature is revealed in these two scenes. He gets great joy out of frightening the actors in the forest, who are so overcome by the sight of Bottom and Puck that they run for fear of their lives. " O monstrous! O strange! We are haunted. Pray, masters! Fly masters ~~to~~ help!" (Shakespeare, 161). Although Puck finds humour in other people's woe, he also has a tender heart. Rather than seeing Demetrius and Lysander battle with each other over Hermia and Helena, he leads them astray and uses ventriloquism on them, in order to spread the love potion on their eyes and reunite them with their lovers, " Follow my voice, we'll try no manhood here" (Shakespeare, 166). Puck's mischief affects the fairies in

negative and positive ways. Bringing the magic flower to Oberon in order that he may turn Bottom into an ass is a cruel and nasty joke, but it helps restore Oberon and Titania's relationship and enforces the 'absurdity of love' theme in the play. In Elizabethan times, the male donkey was proverbial for generous sexual actions, which makes Titania's love for Bottom seem even more comic. Earlier in the play Helena states "things base and vile, holding no quantity, love can transpose to form and dignity. Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind, and is therefore wing'd cupid painted blind" (Shakespeare, 155). This statement truly foreshadows the events in the play, which will reveal how love has the ability to die without warning, and arise without reason. Bottom is in disbelief when Titania seems to fall in love with him, he states, "And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together these days" (Shakespeare, 161). Puck wants to see the world as it should be, or could be. By transforming Bottom into an ass and allowing Titania to fall in love with him, Shakespeare is using Puck to metaphorically present the audience with a dream world in which it is not out of the ordinary for a beautiful woman to fall in love with a hideous beast. At the end of the play, Puck speaks directly to the audience. He is the only character in the play to do this, thus reinstating his authority and reality over the other characters. Puck presents some curiously powerful statements in his speech, which imply that the entire play was a dream and the characters within it were only "shadows." This atmosphere is also created earlier in the play when Demetrius states upon waking, "Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream" (Shakespeare, 168). Puck also implies that the play was not only a dream, but that the audience was

actually dreaming during the performance. The significance of using this idea is to challenge the audience to ponder over what they perceive to be real, and what is only a construction within the imagination. An interesting fact is that Puck finds and uses the most important symbol in the play, the pansy. The meaning of pansy is “love in idleness,” therefore, Puck is not rubbing the Athenians’ eyes with a true love potion, he is actually rubbing idleness in their eyes. Knowing this, the whole play takes on a very satirical tone defining love as vain, empty and having no value or significance. Puck remarks in the play, that only one male human in a million keeps his promises, “Then fate o’er-rules, one man holding a million fail, confounding oath to oath” (Shakespeare, 163). It should be noted that it is the males in the play that do not keep their promises, and they are also the ones quickly led astray by Puck’s mischief. Puck states that “Cupid is a knavish lad, thus to make poor females mad” (Shakespeare, 166). This statement puts females on the suffering end of the love union, for Shakespeare could have easily replaced the word “females” with “humans.” Although this play is a comedy at times, the dark undertones expose themselves more and more as the play progresses. In his end speech, Puck uses a mysteriously eerie tone that reflects the darkness hiding beneath the comic surface of *A Mid Summer Night’s Dream*. Before Puck’s speech, the fairies and humans had gathered to watch Piramus and Thisbe’s ridiculous play, which Hippolita refers to as “The silliest stuff that ever I heard” (Shakespeare, 170). The seriousness of Puck’s speech is accentuated because it follows directly after this comical production. Puck states: Now the hungry lion roars, / And the wolf behowles the moon; / Whilst the heavy plowman snores, / All with weary task fordone. /

Now the wasted brands do glow, whilst the scritch owl, scratching loud, /
Puts the wretch that lies in woe / In remembrance of a shroud. / Now it is the
time of night / That the graves, all gaping wide / Everyone lets forth its
sprite, / In the church-way paths to glide: / And we fairies, that do run / By
the triple Hecate's team, / From the presence of the sun / Following darkness
like a dream, / Now are frolic; not a mouse / Shall disturb this hallo'd house: /
I am sent with broom before, to sweep the dust behind the door.

(Shakespeare, 173)Puck seems to be speaking of the running down of human life. As night and darkness approaches, the “ graves are gaping wide,” the “ plowman snores”, and the “ wretch lies in woe.” The idea being presented here is that humans are considered real, but ultimately, they grow old and die whereas fairies live in the imagination, and the imagination will never die. This forces the audience to ponder over what is more real, our dreams, or reality as we know it. Shakespeare brought fame to Puck, who was known in mythology as being two separate creatures, Puck and Robin Goodfellow. Shakespeare's Puck has since been reproduced in paintings by William Blake, Henry Fuseli, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and even in modern comic book drawings. It has also been questioned whether Robin Hood took his name from the fairy Robin Goodfellow. Both characters have very much in common, they were known to give travellers a hard time, Puck was a shape shifter and Robin Hood was a master in disguise. Gillian Edwards notes that, “ The Goodfellow in Robin Goodfellow's name could either mean a boon companion or a thief (Edwards, 143).” Although Puck is not a central character in the play, he holds the most important role. His interconnection with the human world has a direct negative and positive effect on the lives of

the Athenians. By changing Bottoms head into an ass, Puck restores Oberon's and Titania's relationship while sending out the message to the audience that 'love is blind' at the same time. Puck's knowledge and wisdom is made visible through his mocking of how serious humans regard love and friendship, while turning around and betraying it a moment later. He states at the end of the play, " And this weak and idle theme, no more yielding then a dream" (Shakespeare, 173) implying that the theme of the play is weak and idle, this theme being love. Puck truly succeeds at carrying out Shakespeare's dark and lingering question, what is love but a mere fantasy, a poet's imaginary paradise, a madman's frantic vision... a woman's momentary disillusionment? Works Cited Shakespeare, William. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Crown Publishers Inc. United States of America, pages 153-173