

The light and dark sides of the supernatural

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



As critic Ronald Miller so eloquently declared, “ The complex and subtle intellectuality of Shakespeare’s comic art was never better illustrated than by *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and, in particular, by Shakespeare’s employment of the fairies in that play” (Miller 486). It may be added that the employment of this type of supernaturalism, in general, is what distinguishes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* from any other Shakespearean work. Though many critics of Shakespeare’s time thought this work to be a “ piece of fluff,” modern critic Miller suggests that it “ is now more likely to be read as a study in the epistemology of the imagination” (486). Overall, Shakespeare’s use of supernaturalism masterfully portrays joviality. The tone is filled with mystical and whimsical elements of fantasy that produce a very happy and sprightly atmosphere. The only hint of the darker side of the supernatural world is his mention of ghosts in the third act:...Yonder shines Aurora’s harbinger; At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there, Troop home to churchyards: damned spirits all, That in crossways and floods have burial, Already to their wormy beds are gone; For fear lest day should look their shames upon, They willfully themselves exile from light, And must for aye consort with black-brow’d night.(Shakespeare 3. 2. 380-87)Critic Cumberland Clark suggests that in this passage, “ Shakespeare’s thought wandered back to the malicious, inimical fairies of folk-lore, who were held by some to be the departed spirits of men and women, and for this reason were often confused with ghosts” (Clark 400). Clark compared the somewhat negative use of supernaturalism in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Immediately after this haunting passage, Oberon, the King of the Fairies, “ dismisses the shadow on their careless joy” by stating that they

are spirits of another sort (400). In contrast, veteran educator, scholar, and theater director James Bush suggests that the actual sets used during Shakespeare's stage production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the best representation of the atmosphere the playwright intended to create. In the opening of the play, Shakespeare creates a feeling of lightness by staging the first scene in the bright early morning. Bush concludes that when the lovers run off to the woods and the fairies appear darkness sets in, both literally and figuratively (Bush). Indeed, the fairies are at the heart of creating the atmosphere that is portrayed throughout the comedy. The fairies that are a part of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are more than simply fictitious and fantastic characters that meander through the action. As E. K. Chambers stated, they are "irresponsible creatures, throughout eternal children. They belong to the winds and the clouds and the flowers, to all in nature that is beautiful and gracious and fleeting" (Chambers 396). Chambers notes that, above all, the primary characteristics that men possess and that the fairies do not is "the sense of law and the instinct of self-control" (396). Perhaps this lack of self-control and sense of law is best illustrated by the character Puck. As the fairy jester, Puck takes nothing seriously, even his own error when following Oberon's orders regarding the administering of magical love potion. Not only does he seem not to take any situation seriously, he seems to thoroughly enjoy bringing "perplexity upon hapless mortals" (396) more simply put, "he enjoys creating chaos, particularly among humans" (Greenhill 17). Jim Bush argues that it is not a matter of the fairies having not sense of law and self-control, but rather just a different type. "Fairies are totally involved in self-

gratification,” Bush stated. “ Human law is aimed at the common field culture because what works best for the group is proper. Society must be protected. Oberon is Atlantic fringe culture like the Irish and Welsh and even the residents of Appalachia. The basic premise underlying Atlantic fringe culture is {whatever is best for me is best, and to hell with society}” (Bush). According to Bush, this is the main element that causes so much conflict between the fairies and the humans in this work. Puck is again used to substantiate Bush’s claim of the self-gratification element. “ Puck is by far the most interesting, I think because he is so obviously designed to be the instigator of sexual passion,” Bush noted. “ He is the controller of although Shakespeare kept it G rated the sexual and human relations of mixing up the couples.” But above all, Puck is under Oberon’s control. This factor of control represents a mythological tie to the Zeus-Pan relationship (Bush). The best representation of the mythological connection to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is with the character Oberon. Bush compares Oberon to Zeus: “ His punitive actions and his anger against his queen are very reminiscent of Zeus’s anger with Hera.” He also explained that like Zeus was portrayed as a god, Oberon is portrayed as a jealous king (Bush). Most striking, according to Bush, is the fact that Shakespeare’s use of historical and mythological beings and occurrences are very scattered and unstructured. Bush credits the disorganization of facets of history and mythology to Shakespeare’s main goal in writing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to entertain. “ Too often people see more in the work than what Shakespeare intended.” According to Bush, there is no “ evangelism for any cause and no satanic agenda,” though many critics argue that there is.

Shakespeare's main purpose was to write "an acting vehicle for a stage company to make money" (Bush). "He wants to give the audience a cheap thrill and by bringing in all the characters and realms, he achieves entertainment" (Bush). Though they seem as entertainment, the supernatural elements that Shakespeare incorporated into the main action and plot of his play do not bring about anything that would have been impossible or improbable without their presence. The play's main course of action is clear: the tale of the unraveling of the love relationships of four Athenian youth. The plot is merely enhanced and corroborated by the presence of supernaturalism. E. K. Chambers noted in his book *Shakespeare: A Survey* that "the magical love in idleness really does nothing more than represent symbolically the familiar workings of actual love in idleness in the human heart." Chambers continued, "Boys in love change their minds just so, or almost just so, without any whisper of the fairies to guide them." The interaction with love and the inevitable results of that interaction is the function of the various supernatural elements used throughout the play (Chambers 396). His use of magic, the dream world, and fairies stemming from ancient folklore are simply ingredients that he uses to give people an entertaining production. Bush compared Shakespeare's romantic comedy to Neil Simon's Broadway works: "The reactions are real. There is nothing unreal except the fairy overlay of magic." What is so special about Shakespeare's fairies that they would inspire 400 years of their stories and pictures and even create the now-famed Disney fairies? (Friedlander, www.pathguy.com). Though many credit Shakespeare as having created a fairy frenzy that has lasted since the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream, Bush argues that the credit belongs to the sources. Bush suggests that the commonality of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and those of famed stories, pictures, and now Disney films, is due to the sources that they all have used. Ancient sources of whimsical, pint-sized winged creatures date back to Shakespeare's time and have undoubtedly been used numerous times since, including in the work of J. R. Tolkein. The fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are, according to Ronald Miller, simply "literary ornamentation" (Miller 487). The way that Shakespeare presents the fairies, whose "very artificiality of their language keeps us from ever being truly caught up in Titania and Oberon as dramatic characters," suggests that they are merely stage-figures with artful speech (487). According to Miller, the fairies also appear to possess a mysterious element as well. "The intellectual implications of the fairies...have scarcely been exhausted once the puzzle of their metaphysical status has been explored," Miller commented. "No doubt," he continues, "there is [emphasis Miller's] a certain fugitiveness to these beings." According to Miller, Shakespeare "lets us have our fairies and doubt them too" (487). Miller also noted that Shakespeare's art, though allegorical, is not as much about the fairies per se as "the mystery [emphasis Miller's] of the fairies the very aura of evanescence and ambiguity surrounding their life on stage that points to a mysteriousness in our own existence, and specifically in such ambivalent earthly matters as love, luck, imagination, and even faith" (487). These earthly matters, all of human experience, seem to occupy the fairies' attention throughout the play. Shakespeare's use of the combination of supernaturalism and mystery cause the reader to continually ask

unanswerable questions as to the existence of such supernatural beings and their role in the moral experiences with which the fairies of Shakespeare's play are linked. With the enormous volumes of fantasy and science fiction available even today, it is clear that something in human nature wants magic, possibly an innate subconscious human desire to create and ponder the effects of the supernatural world. Bush stated, "[People] need the marvel of a unicorn, the wonder of giants and beanstalks. I think Shakespeare recognized consciously or subconsciously that basic need." One of the most interesting components of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural creatures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the manner in which they interact with the human characters. Cumberland Clark noted that unlike the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, his "light and airy beings" are not kept separate from his mortal characters (Clark 400). Rather, the fairies mix freely among the mortals though they live in two separate worlds governed undoubtedly by different laws. G. Wilson Knight notes that not only the fairies but also the fairyland "interpenetrates the world of human action" (Wilson 401). Furthermore, the fairies' action is not limited to only one location or to one group of mortals. Rather, they intersperse themselves among the courts of Athens, the woods where the craftsmen are rehearsing, and the deeper woods where the young Athenians found themselves for the night. Though they are considered creatures of the woods whose primary existence is of and in the natural world, they are not limited to any boundaries established by mortals, whether physical or social (Greenhill 17). Another remarkable and usually unnoticed aspect of Shakespeare's fairies is their individual meter and form of verse. The fairies seem to have their own pattern trochaic

tetrameter. This light, skipping quality creates the feeling of joviality that is idiosyncratic of the fairies themselves. Puck, in the final scene (two) of the final act (five), enters with a jolly statement representative of the trochaic tetrameter: Now the hungry lion roars, And the wolf howls the moon; Whilst the heavey ploughman snores, All with weary task fordone. Now the wasted brands do glow, Whilst the scritch-owl, scritchng loud, Puts the wretch that lies in woeln remembrance of a shroud.(Shakespeare 5. 1. 1-8)The King and Queen Fairy (Oberon and Titania) use the trochaic tetrameter as well as fuller measures when speaking of Theseus and Hippolyta. Their use of more blank verse and pentameter couplets create a more regal sound than the jovial tone of the trochaic tetrameter (Young 453). The other characters of the play have their own style and meter. In general, blank verse is associated with Theseus and Hippolyta, and the courtly world of Athens. The lovers use a couplet, especially during their dialogue in the woods. Prose is the language of the mechanicals, despite their attempts at doggerel verse. The stylistic changes that occur in the tone, pattern, and meter of the various characters allow the listener or reader to acclimate with each turn of events and with each of the rapidly changing scenes. In addition to the buoyant meter, another component is reserved only for the fairies, primarily Titania. Much of the dialogue of the supernatural creatures is comprised of conversations of dancing and music. By including the discussion of such topics as “ fairy dances and piping winds” (2. 1. 86-7) and “ dainty songs” and the joining together of the little voices “ in the soothing lullaby chorus” (2. 2. 9), Shakespeare creates an enchanting, visionary, and idealistic fairy atmosphere (Clark). By implementing a world of nature-loving

supernatural creatures and love-induced youth, Shakespeare creates an undoubtedly dreamlike atmosphere. Part of the fantastical atmosphere of the fairies and their magic is created by a suggestion made in the title a dream. This dream element is itself half the fantasy. Ronald Miller noted that the fairies serve as a continual and unavoidable reminder of a certain indefiniteness in the world of the play, similar to the feeling after waking from a dream. The briskness of the entire play is representative of the final suggestion made by Puck that the entire play may be best understood as nothing other than a dream: “ If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended, / That you have but slumb’red here / While these visions did appear. / And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding than a dream...” (5. 2. 54-9). The very essence of Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a comedic look at love and the worlds that affect it. The young Athenians, the sprightly fairies, the regal Theseus and Hippolyta, and even the Athenian craftsmen are all secondary characters to the biggest fantasy of all love. Just as many critics so question the validity of supernaturalism, the same question could be asked of the very theme of the play itself: Is love a reality? Love itself, like the entire play, is a fantasy. The answer is, in the words of Puck, love and fantasies are both illusions and are “ No more yielding than a dream...” (5. 2. 59). Works Cited Bush, James. Personal interview. 29 January 2003. Chambers, E. K. “ A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” *Shakespearean Criticism*. Vol. 3. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Mark W. Scott. Detroit: Gale, 1986. 495-6. Clark, Cumberland. “ Midsummer Night’s Dream.” *Shakespearean Criticism*. Vol. 3. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris and Mark W. Scott. Detroit: Gale, 1986. 400-1. Friedlander, Ed. “ Tid-bits

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