

# Puck and bottom: the artist as interpreter in a midsummer night's dream

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When James Joyce was a teenager, a friend asked him if he had ever been in love. He answered, “ How would I write the most perfect love songs of our time if I were in love – A poet must always write about a past or a future emotion, never about a present one – A poet’s job is to write tragedies, not to be an actor in one” (Ellman 62). I mention this because – after replacing the word “ comedy” for “ tragedy” and allowing a little latitude on the meaning of the word “ actor” – Joyce is subconsciously giving *A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s* argument about the role of the artist. That is to say, an artist must be removed from the action, or, at least, not prone to normal temptations. This emotional distance gives the artist the type of perspective that Theseus likens to a madman’s. It also, however, gives the artist a vantage point from which he can give the other characters’ experiences meaning. Therefore, I will argue that, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare sees the artist as someone who is removed from the play’s main action, but gives meaning to the play’s experience (for both the audience and the other characters). I will show this by examining the roles of the two counterpart artists: Bottom (who supercedes Peter Quince as Every Mother’s Son’s artist), and Puck (whose art is changing people’s hearts and minds). My first four paragraphs show how Shakespeare uses Puck and Bottom allegorically to represent two different components of the artistic mind. Secondly, I show how Shakespeare leaves them emotionally distant from the main action of the play. Lastly, I will show how they end up interpreting the play, thereby, giving it meaning. It is important to show that Puck and Bottom are very similar characters. I do not mean to suggest that they are interchangeable – the way, for instance, Hermia and Helena are.

Rather, Puck and Bottom are counterparts, with each representing a different component of the artistic mind. Shakespeare gives them enough similarities to draw attention to the fact that they share a common artistic bond. For example, they both use their art to serve rulers. Puck changes people's hearts at Oberon's bidding. Even when he acts on his own – when he changes Bottom into an ass – he ends up serving his master's purposes. Bottom uses his art to serve a ruler as well. He is single-minded in his commitment to perform in front of Theseus. In fact, he is so eager to entertain Theseus that he volunteers for every role in the play. By having Bottom and Puck both serve rulers, Shakespeare is highlighting the artistic relationship between the two characters. Another way Shakespeare links Puck and Bottom is through their differences. This sounds paradoxical, but it is not. Their differences are so pronounced that the audience cannot help but contrast them, therefore linking them in the audience's mind. For example, Shakespeare makes Puck full of mischief, and misanthropy (e. g. " Oh what fools these mortals be"). The name " Robin Goodfellow" was a popular name for the devil, which gives some indication of how he would have been received in Shakespeare's time (Bloom 151). Bottom, on the other hand, is simple and friendly. His arrogance as an actor seems motivated more out of his passion to please Theseus than out of a self-congratulatory nature. The other mechanicals like him personally, and worry for him when he is missing. Moreover, he strikes up a friendship with Titania's child servants, although Titania was offering him more selfish pleasures. His name suggests the earth, or being firmly grounded (Bloom 152). This takes on special significance when contrasted to Puck, who, as a sprite, is associated with the

air and sky. The reason that Shakespeare goes to such pains to link Bottom and Puck – and I go to such pains to emphasize their relationship – is because they represent two intrinsic parts of the artistic mind. Bottom represents a visceral approach to art. He objects to the portrayal of Pyramus's suicide, for fear that the women in the audience will be overwhelmed with grief. He becomes so emotionally attached to his art that he cannot understand the rational difference between art and reality. Puck, on the other hand, represents the art of the mind. By this I mean that his art takes place within the minds of other characters. His art has such a profound impact on the minds of Demetrius and Lysander that they renounce their only distinctive characteristic (their love for Helena). Puck's art not only manipulates the innermost beliefs of his subjects' minds, it leaves them struggling to articulate their experience. In this way, Puck's art engages his subjects' minds even after he is done with them. Even Bottom's mind – otherwise inactive – is left trying to make sense out of his experience: I have had a dream, past the wit of any man to say what dream it was – . 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, not his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called ' Bottom's Dream' because it hath no bottom (IV. 1. 203-217) This is primarily a comical speech, but Bottom takes it very seriously. Puck's art has effected his mind in a very real way, and he struggles to make sense out of it. He finally labels a bottomless dream, which suggests that it was a passive, visceral experience. This is

fitting for an artist who becomes emotionally attached to his art, but cannot think rationally about it. It is also a far cry from Puck – an artist who deals with the mind, but seems unable to experience human emotions. For these reasons, I contend that Puck and Bottom represent two necessary, but opposite components of the artistic mind. If, as I have said, Puck and Bottom represent the role of the artist, it is important to discern exactly what Shakespeare is trying to say about that role. Firstly, they are both emotionally distant from the main action of the play. I have said earlier that Bottom is an emotional character, and that is true inasmuch as he feels that art is a purely emotional experience. When it comes to his own actions, however, he remains oblivious to emotions of any kind. When the other mechanicals run away from him, leaving him stranded in the woods, he does nothing but sing silly songs. His composure comes across as somewhat shocking, considering that his friends have just run away screaming. It hints at an inability to feel the proper emotion for a serious time. The most striking example of Bottom's emotional detachment comes across in his relationship to Titania. Although he may have consummated his relationship with the beautiful fairy queen, it is fairly clear that he does not share her enthusiasm for the relationship. A good example of this comes in one of their early exchanges: Titania. Thou art wise as thou art beautiful. Bottom. Not so neither; but if I had wit enough to get out of this wood, I have enough to serve my own. Titania. Out of this wood do not desire to go; Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.(3. 1. 147-153) Even after flattery (which, I assume, happens rarely for Bottom) she has to essentially threaten him to stay in the woods with her. What is the audience supposed to make of

Bottom's lack of interest in Titania – It becomes more complicated, considering the fact that he was anxious to star in a grand love story. By all accounts, it appears as though Bottom would rather play a lover, than actually be a lover. This is because he is an artist, and he has to distance himself from the action he is trying to portray. This emotional distance from love gives him the perspective he needs to portray love in the final act. In that way, Shakespeare is suggesting that the role of an artist should be distanced from the main action. Puck has a similar attitude of emotional detachment. This is not to say that he does not take pleasure in his work – he has the same sort of maniacal love of mischief that Falstaff has for laziness – only that he has no interest in his own product. The audience never sees him using his art to his own ends (with the exception of his turning Bottom into an ass). He appears to have no romantic desires at all, which is strange for a fairy whose art deals with love. Moreover, we know that fairies can experience such feelings. Titania and Oberon are in love, and their early banter indicates that they are rather lusty characters. Why does Shakespeare put a character without any romantic desire at the center of a play about romantic love – I offer the same answer that I gave about Bottom – Puck, unlike Titania and Oberon, is an artist and therefore has to distance himself emotionally. This emotional distance gives him a perspective where he can interpret the play's experience, and give it meaning. In this respect, Shakespeare is again saying that an artist must be emotionally distant from the play's main action. The goal of emotional distance – and, in fact, the goal of all art – is to bring meaning to experience. In the final act, Puck and Bottom interpret the meaning of the play in different, but not opposing,

ways. The mechanicals' play represents the culmination of Bottom's art, and it is also the one area where the actions of the Athenians are given meaning. The play represents the ridiculousness of true love. Although the irony is lost on the Athenians – and probably on the players themselves – they have just undergone a ridiculous experience ending in true love. Even the language highlights the similarities between the play, and the Athenian's experience. For example, when Bottom, as Pyramus, says: Sweet Moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams; I thank thee, Moon, for shining now so bright For thy gracious, golden glittering gleams I trust to take of truest Thisby sight. (5. 1. 272-275) It seems characteristically ridiculous that Pyramus would put his trust in something as precarious as the moon. At the same time, it sounds remarkably similar to Hermia's speech in the first act, where she swears her love to Lysander on "Cupid's strongest bow" (1. 1. 169). (Hippolyta had just compared the moon to cupid's bow 160 lines earlier). Bottom is interpreting the character's experiences for their own benefit. In doing so, he is giving their experiences meaning. It is appropriate that it is a ludicrous interpretation, because the Athenian's had just had a ludicrous experience. Puck also gives meaning to the play's experience, but he does so for the audience, not the other characters. His final speech suggests a way for the audience to accept the play: If we shadows have offended, Think of 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 (5. 1. 423-428) Puck is speaking directly to the audience, and interpreting their experience as playgoers. It is not a coincidence that the responsibility falls on Puck. He is an artist, and it is his duty to bring meaning to the audience's

experience. In this manner, Shakespeare shows that one of the roles of an artist is to interpret an experience, and in doing so, bring it meaning. In the beginning of act five, Theseus says: 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. (5. 1. 13-17) Theseus takes this dismissive attitude largely because he has no need for art. He is a warrior, and therefore sees no virtue in distance. His experiences as a warrior are so intense that it seems unlikely that he needs anyone to bring extra meaning to them. But Theseus does not emerge as the favorite character of the average reader (I assume this was also true in Shakespeare's time). The average reader is more likely to be charmed by Puck or Bottom, than Theseus. Part of this is because of their humor, and part of it is because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy with no need for a warrior. Part of it, however, is because those two characters speak most directly to the reader's immediate concerns. By distancing themselves from the action, and interpreting the play's final meaning, they embody the artistic experience. In doing so, they insure that the play's artistic merit will take shape, and not remain "airy nothing." Works Cited Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books. New York. 1998. Ellman, Richard. *James Joyce*. Oxford University Press. 1959. Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston. New York. 1997.