

# Shakespeare's use of magic



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Shakespeare has used all sorts of magic - from sorcery, witchcraft to black magic - to show how some characters are tempted to manipulate the natural world by this supernatural power. Other characters are prone to its evil influence. Belief in magic or witchcraft was widespread in Shakespeare's age. Christopher Marlow created Dr Faustus, a demonologist who sold his soul for supernatural power. But skepticism grew with the publication of Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) and Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603) which is reflected in Banquo's attitude to the Weird Sisters.

In the *Midsummer night's Dream* he uses magic to reinforce the idea of the absurdity of romantic love. In *The Tempest* he shows how magic can be used to counteract the power of evil. In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* magic has been used for mischief as well as good. We have characters and situations which are supernatural. Here "Puck" which etymologically means devil or demon, is a mischievous sprite named Robin Goodfellow. Oberon, the fairy king, applies the magical power of flower juice to make Titania fall in love with the person she sees first, with a view to teaching a lesson for her stubbornness.

Oberon orders Puck to pour love-juice on Demetrius' eyes so as to make him amorous of the woman he scorns. While Oberon's magic juice works wonder for Lysander and Helena who revive their love, it works eerily for Titania. Next, Puck transforms Bottom's head into an ass's while he is rehearsing his play. Titania wakes up, sees Bottom and falls head over ears in love with his ass-head. Curiously, while his co-actors flee, love-smitten Titania employs four fairies to attend him and lead him to her bower.

Bottom is surprised to find that Titania has suddenly fallen in love with him prompting him to comment, " Reason and love keep little company together nowadays. " The magical world of the enchanted moon-lit night in the wood with its dreams, fairies and the absurd behavior of the lovers are conducive to and reinforce the romantic theme of love as an irrational emotion. Every character is also deeply moonstruck by the magic of Shakespeare's poetry -- " the lunatic, the lover and the poet,/ are of imagination all compact. "( Midsummer. . 1. 7)

More confusion follows as both Lysandar and Demetrius chase Helena who believes they are making fun of her. The rivals in love cannot settle their dispute and decide to fight a duel. Meanwhile, Oberon suspects Puck's mischief and he promises to undo what he has done mistakenly.

Arrangements are made to clear the confusion with the help of magic and reconcile the mismatched lovers. Titania agrees to part with the changeling boy, and the spell of the fairies, dance, music and strange lovers is broken with the daybreak.

Bottom awakens with no ass's head on him, and is ready to stage his play on Pyramus and Thisbe, the silliest of tragedies. The magical play ends happily with the blessings on the bridal couples. Thus magic is used in this hilarious comedy for fun, impishness and the final beneficence. In Macbeth (1606) the witches use black magic to tempt the ambitious tragic hero, but have no effect on Banquo.

As incarnations of evil they represent the sinister philosophy of " Fair is foul and foul is fair:" (1. 1. 1) In sharp contrast to Midsummer, the magic as

witchcraft in Macbeth (taken from Holinshed) is essentially evil. It represents power that tempts the greedy soul and gradually leads him to their destruction. But such power can be resisted is proved by Banquo who refuses to pay heed to their prediction saying, " The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,/ And these are of them. "(1. 3. 78-79) and later, " What! Can the devil speak true? "(1. 3. 107) He stands in the play for the voice of reason and expresses his misgivings: " Often times, to win us to our harm,/ the instruments of darkness tell us the truths. (1. 3. 124-25)

The Weird Sisters with their funny antics appear in the opening scene, and then in Act 1. 3 to hail Macbeth as future king and Banquo as the begetter of king. In Act 4. 1 they show him three apparitions with ambiguous messages and warns him of Macduff. Though they are agents of evil, they cannot be held responsible for Macbeth's tragedy. If he truly believed their prophesy, he should have waited for the prediction to come true without choosing the path of conspiracy and murder.

After the materialization of the Witches' first prediction, Macbeth's " vaulting ambition" compels him to work towards the fulfillment of the rest. Lady Macbeth, regarded by many as the fourth witch, is another agent of the evil who goads her husband to the path of crime. Macbeth later commits more blunders because of his overconfidence in the prophesy that no man born of woman can slay him and he would not be vanquished till Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane. So the witches initially dismissed as " vain fantastical illusion" shape the course of the play.

But their evil nature is also revealed in tormenting of the ship of a sailor whose wife has refused to give chestnuts. They may have power over nature, but their power is not absolute. They cannot sway the mind of Banquo, but easily influence Macbeth who executes the murders of Duncan, Banquo and Macduff's family. Hence, they are not synonymous with fate; they only help create an atmosphere of mystery and horror suitable for this tragedy. The world of *The Tempest* (1611) consists of magic, monster and the enchanted island.

It is again the power of magic that brings the goddesses Ceres, Iris and Juno to earth to celebrate the wedding. Prospero uses magic to control both Ariel and Caliban to serve him, but he finally breaks his magic wand to show its futility. Ariel, the good spirit, is used by Prospero who liberates him from the curse of a witch but uses him as a servant and a spy. On the other hand, Caliban, the crawling animal-like native of the island is enslaved by the Prospero's magical power because of his attempt to molest his daughter, Miranda.

Caliban is engaged in manual labor while Ariel, the bright musical spirit, acts as a spy. Prospero uses his magic to raise the tempest to sink the ship of the king of Naples but ensures that no one is injured. He uses Ariel as his servant but keeps his promise of releasing him in the end. Caliban rebels against carrying wood and water under the spell of his master's magic and plots to smash his skull, burn his books and seize his daughter. But his conspiracy is foiled by the invisible Ariel.

It is also the good spirit Ariel who foils the wicked plot of Antonio and the brother of the king of Naples to murder the sleeping king. The play ends in a mood of forgiveness and reconciliation. On the whole the good spirit prevails over the evil as is evident from the beautiful speech: Our revels are now ended.... And like this insubstantial pageant faded, Leave not a track behind. We are such stuff As dreams are made on, and our little life Is rounded with a sleep. (4. 1. 148-57) As this is his last solo work, many critics are tempted to identify Prospero with Shakespeare.

In the end he says: " But this rough magic I abjure. " and promises to break his staff and bury his book. (5. 1. 50-57) and gives the long-coveted freedom to both Ariel and Caliban. Shakespeare's use of magic has a wide range. But in the three plays discussed its effect is from the simple fairy-tale like hilarity in *Midsummer Night's Dream* to the witchcraft in *Macbeth* which has serious consequences. Finally, in *The Tempest* it raises magic to fine art and leaves the audience breathless.