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The Shakespearean Myth: How A Midsummer Night's
Dream Changed Fairies

Introduction

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare contains less of a plot and more of an amalgamation of plots that intertwine at random points during the play's story. Similar to Shakespeare's other works, it also features a wellspring of references to mythology and folklore, specifically those of Greek and British origin. What distinguishes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, is that the fantastical nature of the story allows the figures that these myths and stories revolve around to make physical appearances in the play as characters. This was a far cry from many of Shakespeare's other productions, in which the existence of such figures would be limited to verbal references. That being said, the author's interpretation of previously established folklore and myth was far from faithful. In fact, he took such a significant amount of liberties that it left the finished product almost unrecognizable compared to the original source material.

The Fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: A Summary

Oberon, King of the fairies, and his personal attendant, Puck, are arguably the primary driving forces of the play's story. This is because they interfere in the play's other two main plots, those surrounding the six workmen and the four lovers, respectively, and are responsible for much of the major conflict that occurs beginning in Scene Two of Act Two. Not only does Oberon unintentionally ruin the relationship between Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander, but Puck, in an act of mischief, turns the head of one of the workmen into that of a mule. This act drives the others from the forest out of fear, thus delaying their rehearsal. Yet these storylines are separate from Oberon's own conflict with Titania. Fortunately, both of these dilemmas are

resolved by the end of the play. Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius, and Helena are all happily married, and the workmen's play goes on as planned.

Fairies: What were they?

Despite what the setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may imply, the presence of Greek mythological figures in the story is limited. Instead, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focuses more on British folklore and Irish mythology, specifically fairies. That being said, Shakespeare's portrayal of fairies in the play bears few to no similarities to the fairies of myth and folklore. *Fairies Re-Fashioned in A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an article written by Farah Karim-Cooper, recognizes that the origins of fairies were far from noble.

Fairies, specifically those of Medieval and Elizabethan writings, were the scapegoats of mysterious occurrences, especially those that were indicative of misfortune upon a person or group of people. One of the most well-known instances of this surrounded the belief in changeling children: fairy infants that replaced stolen human children. Other versions of the myth supplanted the changeling with a deformed newborn, which was carried out as an act of retribution against neglectful parents. Thus, the story of replaced children was either a superstition or a cautionary tale to all domestic figures, including housewives and servants, depending on the interpretation.

However, according to *Shakespeare and the Demonization of Fairies* by Piotr Spyra, fairies were not always portrayed as evil, though their nature as tricksters was always a constant. In terms of traditional portrayals, fairies had originally been seen as a neutral party, a quality that was best demonstrated in the famous ballad of "Thomas

Rhymer". The narrative describes the road to "Elfland" as the middle ground between the roads leading to heaven and hell, respectively, as it is neither as narrow as the former, nor as wide as the latter. However, as Christianity garnered more influence beginning in the late Medieval period, there was more pressure to conform to the religion's "black and white" moral outlook. As a result, the portrayal of fairies as malicious beings became the standard for future portrayals in fiction, especially in the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Fairies, prior to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were also indistinct from humans, as noted in *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* by Dr. Minor White Latham. One of the few notable differences, albeit a minor one, was that they were "near the smaller size of men" (Latham, 66). As such, there had been multiple accounts of people being confused for fairies, simply because they were shorter than the average man. However, the definition of a fairy extended beyond the basis of height. For one thing, fairies possessed unnatural complexions, including but not limited to shades of green or gray, which they concealed under some form of mask or disguise. The reason for masks or disguises was to hide their unnatural beauty, something which not only translated to stage portrayals, but was also the reason that Queen Elizabeth I, on multiple occasions, was compared to a fairy.

However, there was one fairy character that Shakespeare did not exclusively create for *A Midsummer Night's dream* that was the exception to many of the aforementioned qualities. This was Oberon's personal attendant, and the resident trickster among the fairies, Puck, otherwise known as Robin Goodfellow. The Robin Goodfellow of seventeenth century ballad fame bore the appearance of a middle-aged

man wearing animal skins and appendages, the latter as headgear. Some drawings portray him as having the legs of a goat, similar to the satyrs of Greek mythology. Overall, this painted the image of an ugly figure that ultimately contradicted the generally held belief of beauty in fairies. As for his role, Robin Goodfellow was considered responsible for invoking celebratory rites and was often a scapegoat for three different misfortunes. The first was theft, which was implied in response to the sudden absence of goods. The second was housewives dropping things or falling over, which was attributed to Goodfellow pinching them. The third was aimless wandering, on which travelers fault Robin Goodfellow due to the belief that he had lead them off course¹.

Irish peasantry, meanwhile, had their own take on fairies that was similar to English folklore while still greatly distinguishable from Shakespeare's interpretation. However, as Alfred Nutt's *Presidential Address: The Fairy Mythology of English Literature: Its Origin and Nature* argues, there were still differences to note between England and Ireland, especially in terms of the fairies' social structure in each mythos. While the fairies in English folklore answered to one monarch², fairies in Irish mythology were ruled through separate tribes or families. Also, unlike fairies of English folklore, which were primarily defined as tricksters whose direct relationship with humans was almost nonexistent, fairies in Irish mythology were essentially treated as deities of life and agriculture. As such, sacrifices were made in their honor, and the act of stealing human children, one of the similarities between fairies of Irish mythology and English

¹ Farah Karim-Cooper, *Fairies re-fashioned in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: British Library, 2016).

² Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (London: Octagon Books, 1972): 180.

folklore, was not considered a misfortune, but the fairies' will as a giver and taker of life. Devotion to these sacrificial rituals was so rigid that fairy worshippers are easily likened to cults³.

Among other miscellaneous characteristics concerning fairies, they all wore multiple shades of green. They had a ritual habit of dancing and singing such that it was considered an integral trait. Fairies were at the peak of their power from late May up until the Summer solstice, and thus were never seen during winter. And they only appeared during the twelfth hour, that being both noon and midnight⁴.

How did Shakespeare change fairies?

Shakespeare's interpretation of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the first time he had portrayed them as something other than what Irish mythology or English folklore had already established. This is ironic because Shakespeare, one of the most fervent supporters of fairy belief, was ultimately responsible for the dismissal of fairies as fictional specimens through said interpretation. As such, belief in, as well as fear of, fairies had fully eroded by the end of the seventeenth century.

Instead of being portrayed as either morally grey or pure evil, fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are unquestionably benevolent beings, a first for fictional interpretations of fairy lore. Despite their shared role as the primary instigators of conflict, King Oberon and Puck's actions are free from any form of serious harm or inconvenience on any of the humans in the story, nor are they shown to have any

³ Alfred Nutt, *Presidential Address: The Fairy Mythology of English Literature: Its Origin and Nature* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1897): 29-48.

⁴ Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (London: Octagon Books, 1972): 86-102.

intention of inflicting them to begin with. The sole consequence of Puck's misguided use of the flower is that it merely drives a temporary wedge between Hermia, Demetrius, Helena, and Lysander. Meanwhile, in turning Bottom's head into that of a mule, the workman's colleagues are simply frightened into fleeing from the forest, though there was nothing to be afraid of in the first place. By doing this, Puck only delays the rehearsal of the six workmen, which turns out to be a minor hindrance. The motivations behind Oberon and Puck's actions were also void of any evil intent. Oberon has Puck use the flower on Demetrius because he felt pity for the Helena's unrequited attraction toward him, and Bottom's transformation is the product of Puck's concept of having harmless fun. Regardless of consequence or intent, Puck and Oberon both solve the problems they cause before the following morning, and everyone who was a victim of their actions receives a happy resolution by the end of the play. That being said, Oberon and Puck are not the only characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that convey Shakespeare's reinvention of fairies as well-intentioned beings.

The general role of fairies, as described in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is also a major point of deviance from what was established in both English folklore and Irish mythology. Perhaps the most notable of these differences is that their origins as tricksters, excluding Puck, have been completely ignored, as demonstrated with the play's revision of the changeling myth. The sole changeling child that is featured in the play, around which the plot between King Oberon and Queen Titania revolves, is not the offspring of a fairy, but of a human woman. Additionally, while the boy was still taken by Queen Titania, she did so because she was adopting the child as her own, and her reasons in doing so were far from violent or malicious. Titania's motivation for taking the

boy in, as elaborated in her argument with Oberon during the first scene of Act Two, was to honor his late mother, who was both one of the Queen's followers as well as one of her closest friends.

The fairies' purpose as tricksters was not the only quality to be disregarded in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Though fairies have always been portrayed as living under a monarch, English folklore portrayed fairies as strong, dynamic beings in their own right. Contrary to English folklore, the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are innocent, inconsequential, and completely subordinate to the will of Queen Titania and King Oberon. All fairies living under Titania and Oberon, including Puck, live to serve their rulers. Although Puck is established as having a mind and pursuits of his own, when King Oberon gives him an order, he not only obeys without question, but feels genuine remorse when he sees that he has failed. Titania, meanwhile, has multiple fairies at her beck and call, a power she demonstrates when she summons four to attend to the recently transformed Bottom. But the monarchy is not the only example of servitude for the fairies. All fairies, in turn, collectively live to serve humans, including King Oberon and Queen Titania, without requiring any form of compensation. This is a stark contrast to the fairies of Irish mythology, in which offerings were a necessity. In addition to Titania having her four attendants serve Bottom by bringing him "jewels from the deep," and feeding "him with apricocks and dewberries," the friction between Titania and Oberon is revealed to have a negative impact on nature in the human world, namely by causing crop decline and excessive flooding, something that Titania laments. Lastly, the end of the play sees Titania, Oberon, Puck, and a multitude of other fairies

arriving at the wedding to bless Theseus and Hippolyta's marriage and future as a couple⁵.

Not even Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, who was meant to be the antithesis to typical fairy portrayal, was immune to the adjustments Shakespeare made to fairy lore. Portrayals of Robin Goodfellow in English folklore described him as an older, demonic entity similar in appearance to a satyr. However, during his first dialogue with another fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he is described as a child-sized figure whose appearance is reminiscent of a domestic servant, given that he is in possession of either a broom or threshing flail. Such an appearance is indicative of how he would sweep the entrances of mortal houses in exchange for cream⁶. Although his trickster nature remains, Puck's pranks over the course of the play are minimal, and what he does commit, namely transforming Bottom, does not inflict any significant harm and is easily reversible. Overall, when adapting Puck, Shakespeare removed all signs of his existence as a threat to humans.

Finally, the overall appearances of the fairies are arguably one of the most drastic changes Shakespeare made while writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Instead of beings that were practically the same size as humans, albeit somewhat shorter, fairies are reduced to such miniscule proportions that they can use the thigh of a bumblebee as a torch and snakeskin as suitable material for their coats. Instead of the broader connection they had to grasslands, along with hills and wells, fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are firmly associated with flowers, dew, and butterflies. This

⁵ Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (London: Octagon Books, 1972): 176-188.

⁶ Farah Karim-Cooper, *Fairies re-fashioned in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: British Library, 2016).

is not only accomplished through comparisons to flowers, but their duties also involve tending to them, such as those in the fairy ring. As for the monarchy, Titania sleeps on a bed of flowers, and uses them to express her love for Bottom, while Oberon cannot help but feel sentimental over witnessing dewdrops on top of blossoms⁷.

Why did Shakespeare change fairies?

There are multiple theories regarding Shakespeare's motivation for altering the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One indicates that Shakespeare was conforming to the vast majority in an effort to pay tribute to Queen Elizabeth I, who was frequently considered a being of myth. The Queen's recognition as a deity, in part, came from her common title of Titania, another name for the Greek goddess of the moon. In endorsing the Queen, Shakespeare was simultaneously endorsing the social and political structure of the time⁸. Meanwhile, others suggest that the author was attempting to endorse Catholicism through *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While Shakespeare seemingly portrayed the fairies' use of dew as similar to that of holy water, he also described them as "straying" through Theseus' palace. Regardless of context, "stray" carries many negative connotations, namely that of losing focus. Since there is no consistency regarding the supposed parallels between fairies and Catholicism, whether Shakespeare was driven by religion or not is ambiguous⁹. Alternatively, it is suggested that Shakespeare had no ulterior motive in altering the fairies' origin but did it to improve his narrative quality. By purposefully turning them into idealized beings, fairies are better

⁷ Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (London: Octagon Books, 1972): 185-187

⁸ Farah Karim-Cooper, *Fairies re-fashioned in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: British Library, 2016).

⁹ Piotr Spyra, *Shakespeare and the Demonization of Fairies* (Lodz: University of Lodz, 2017): 208-210.

associated with the fantastical setting established in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Given that one of Shakespeare's chief influences in writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was Arthurian romance stories¹⁰, there is at least some validity behind this reasoning. However, Shakespeare's general ambivalence when it came to his stance on fairy portrayal, especially after writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, means that whatever motivation he had for reimagining the fairy mythology is inconclusive.

Result and Conclusion

While Shakespeare's reasons for reinventing fairy mythology were, if anything, vague, one thing is clear: Shakespeare's adaptation of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* marked a turning point for how the beings were portrayed in subsequent fiction. By 1651, approximately fifty-four years after the play was published, Shakespearean fairies were rigidly considered the model for all English fairies. As a result, their diminutive size was established as a valid characteristic and belief in their existence was dissolved. One particular example is present in *Robin Goodfellow; his mad pranks, and merry Jestes*, which marked the first work of fiction besides *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to characterize fairies as "harmlesse spirits called fayries" (Latham, 215).

The idea that fairies are miniature beings persisted in the early eighteenth century, when works such as *Orpheus and Eurydice* by William King described fairies as "small enough to dance around a mortal hat" (Latham, 214). By 1725, the diminutive size of Shakespeare's fairies was regarded as the accepted norm. This continued for the rest of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. Throughout both,

¹⁰ Alfred Nutt, *Presidential Address: The Fairy Mythology of English Literature: Its Origin and Nature* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1897): 35-37.

fairies were not just considered tiny beings of England, but also ones that represented delicateness and beauty¹¹.

Although the change was not immediate, Shakespeare's sudden reinterpretation of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gradually redefined the fairy mythology portrayed in many works of fiction thereafter. This particular play provides a powerful example of how one subversion of previously established literary archetypes can result in a new norm for generations afterward. That same phenomenon is so universal that it can take place even today.

¹¹ Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (London: Octagon Books, 1972): 213-218.

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