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Shakespeare

Forgotten Fairies:

Traditional English Folklore in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

One of the most popular sets of characters in Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the powerful and mysterious fairies, whose magical antics drive the action of the play. Based in traditional English folklore, the fairies stand in contrast to the upper class Athenians and the Athenian peasant players. The play, which is set in Athens, follows in part the marital discord of Oberon and Titania, King and Queen of the Fairies and their servants, which reflects the aristocratic tendencies both of the Athenian court and the patrons of Shakespeare's work. The two fairies rule over the woods outside of Athens, and yet their lives are extremely intertwined with those within the city. Oberon and Titania struggle over their jealousies, and the four human lovers - Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius - get caught in the crossfire, falling in and out of love with alarming speed and ferocity. The play's end comes when Oberon and Puck fix their magical mistakes and make peace with Titania, to bring the play to a harmonious conclusion. While the fairies shown in the play would have been known by Shakespeare's audience, there is a clear difference between the fairies of traditional folklore and the fairies that Shakespeare describes.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairies are described as the equivalent of nobles, with eloquent speech, flowery descriptions and courtly titles befitting of a royal setting, even if their court lives in an uncivilized forest. Befitting of aristocrats with unlimited time, money, and

no accountability, Oberon and Puck's schemes are convoluted and make use of rare materials as well as copious amounts of magic. These high fae have little regard for mortals and lesser fairies, as shown when Oberon and Puck meddle in the affairs of the Athenian youths for fun and transfigure Bottom to enact revenge on Titania. Shakespeare pushes this view of fairies from the very beginning of the play, creating a new view of fairies for his audience, which would have had a very different perspective of the magical creatures than what is portrayed in the play. In traditional English folklore, fairies were "made" for, and by, the middle and lower classes; their stories were most believed and the most encounters were experienced by these people. Fairies in folklore were alternately deadly and wildly helpful, giving humans who stumbled upon them presents or death. Myths of creatures like brownies, kelpies, redcaps and piskies with both fickle natures and a penchant for generosity circulated throughout English communities, but there is a clear difference between Shakespeare's characters and these stories. As Mary Ellen Lamb, author of *Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in A Midsummer Night's Dream* writes, "Shakespeare's fairies bore little resemblance to traditional fairies who were "tyrannical and dangerous beings, even in their jokes" (Lamb, 308).

Shakespeare's authorial choices when changing the folkloric characteristics of his fairies would not have gone unnoticed by his audience, and would have changed the way they interpreted the play. Shakespeare's fairies are relatively tame; they do not cause any lasting physical or emotional harm to any mortals, a common occurrence in old folk tales. They would have been easy for audience members to relate to because of their newly urban and upper class characteristics compared to the rustic traits of traditional fairies that Londoners would not have connected with. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare transforms traditional fae

characters into watered-down versions of themselves to make them acceptable for consumption in a world that was moving away from a belief in fairies and towards the norms of an early modern society.

Shakespeare made many changes to his fairies from the common people's stories that made the play not only easier to relate to for a different audience, but also more whimsical with the aim to make the fairies less intimidating and powerful. One of the most drastic changes that Shakespeare made was to decrease the size of common fae from the size of a child or small adult to miniature. As Standish Henning writes in his article *The Fairies of A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "It is commonplace for criticism to credit Shakespeare with first diminishing [fairies] for poetry from the dwarfish size they had enjoyed in most of the preceding literature to the size required of one who must "hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" (Henning, 484). Henning goes on to discuss the most popular source to cite when discussing Shakespeare's decisions on fairy size: the *Discoverie of Witchcraft* by Reginald Scot, which was published in 1549. This text is partially intended to be satirical and partially intended to debunk charlatans, but mainly discussed the "truths" of the powers, anatomy, and behavior of various magical creatures. Scot often focuses on various other magical creatures, but his descriptions of these beings is what Shakespeare used for inspiration. Shakespeare was known to have read Scot's book and relied upon it when crafting the magical creatures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This resulted in some significant changes from the prior conception of fairies to encompass Scot's descriptions, which in turn lessened the power of the fairies in question and made them easier for audiences to accept.

One example of this in Scot's book is in chapter 1.4 titled "What miraculous actions are imputed to witches by witchmongers, papists, and poets", where Scot describes certain "hurtful witches" as being small enough to be able to "go in and out at awger holes & saile in an egge shell, a cockle or muscle shell, through and under the tempestuous seas" (C5). We can contrast this quotation with the passage Henning mentioned earlier; when Puck asks one of Titania's fairies what they are doing, and they reply: "I serve the fairy queen to dew her orbs upon the green. The cowslips tall her pensioners be. I must go seek some dewdrops here and hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" (II.1. ____). The change in size of the fairies was relatively unprecedented as fairies at the time were assumed to be the size of large children, or small adults. This stretched the audience's suspension of disbelief when it would have been easy for Shakespeare to simply cast short men or boys in the fairy roles. However, the imagined physical disparity between the fairies and humans makes them seem less powerful and less dangerous. Shakespeare continues emphasizing their size throughout the play in the fairies speeches to one another, specifically in Puck's dialogue with other lesser fairies. At a time when tales of fairies painted - and many older English citizens considered them - a substantial threat, the diminutive imagery that Shakespeare used decreased both their size and the perceived danger for humans, thus decreasing their folkloric characteristics.

This can be easily seen in the descriptions of Titania's handmaiden fairies who are the most conspicuous example of common fae in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Many lower-middle class English people would be most concerned with dealing with common fairies, who could cause serious damage to their person, livelihood and reputation. Nick Bottom, a weaver and aspiring actor, would have been familiar with folktales describing negative encounters with

fairies such as stories like fairies stealing children and exchanging them for infants, leading travellers off their paths, and stealing adults to dance for decades in suspended time. But upon his awakening in Titania's bower and his introduction to her attending fairies, he is at ease. A possible reason for this is that Shakespeare chose to use folk medicine as a source of inspiration for the characters' names, an idea proposed by Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer that comprehensively explains Bottom's calm reaction. As they write, "Once given the names of the fairy servants, he is no more perturbed than a man of today would be by the sight of band-aid or aspirin on the druggist's shelf" (Reynolds and Sawyer, 517). That is because each of the fairies - Cobweb, Peasblossom, Mustardseed and Moth - are named after a common folk medicine cure for various ailments, showing that they are helpful to mankind, and not hurtful like most fairies would have been considered to be. In the play, Bottom greets Cobweb: "I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb. If I cut my fingers, I shall make bold with you" (III.i.186-7). Cobwebs were commonly used to staunch bleeding from small cuts by English laypeople, and this fact would have been known to much of the audience and to Bottom. Bottom's calm reaction to Cobweb's presence comes in part from the familiarity of his name, which is helpful in comparison to the assumed nuisance that a fairy would normally be. By making Cobweb's name that of a commonly used medicinal supplies, Shakespeare rendered the fairy less dangerous and frightening than it would have been otherwise.

This is also reflected in Bottom's greeting of Peaseblossom, in which he tells the fairy that he says hello to his "parents," "Mistress Squash" and "Mister Peasecod". Bottom's knowledge of the growth cycle of the pea suggests that he would know the typical uses for the plant outside of food, as displayed by the old saying, "Peasecod time is wooing time" (Reynolds

and Sawyer, 518). As Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer also write, “If either lover were jilted, the pain of the lost love was eased by rubbing the whole body with the hay of the pea plant” (Reynolds and Sawyer, 518). This knowledge is partially ironic when we consider the circumstances, as Bottom is essentially trapped as Titania’s sex slave, so Peaseblossom’s appearance does actually signal “wooing time.” However, Shakespeare’s choice of name is the simple pea plant, which is harmless and would make the fairy Peaseblossom seem just as harmless. Like Cobweb and Peaseblossom, Mustardseed is also named after a medicinal plant - and a commonly used one at that. Shakespeare’s choice of name for Mustardseed also shows Bottom that the fairy is not a threat, and that he can relax with Titania in her bower.

Mustardseed, the next fairy Bottom addresses, also has a corresponding plant used both in folk medicine and as a popular condiment in cooking. It was used medicinally “in a plaster or poultice to ease a sore back or aching muscles,” Ren writes, as well as in cuisine on beef, as Bottom mentions (Ren 519). The fourth fairy, Moth, whom Bottom does not address, is often cut from productions, but when folk medicine is consulted, he definitely belongs in this scene, as common night moths were “made into a plaster to treat old sores and was also used to prepare a diuretic for kidney and bladder ailments” (Ren 520). The roots that the names of the fairies have in folk medicine were a specific decision by Shakespeare to make the fairies easy to know and trust, as they are already named after something helpful and well-known. After this peaceful introduction, the audience would have been put at ease even though Bottom’s situation - kidnapped by fairies - was normally a cause for great concern, as he would normally end up dead, or returned to his friends after decades without having aged and without his sanity. However, the name choice of Titania’s attending fairies prevents both Bottom and the audience from worrying about the potential dangers of interacting with fae. While this tactic was

successful for lesser-known fairies, Shakespeare was also faced with the challenge of domesticating a far more famous fairy where this would not work: Robin Goodfellow.

In traditional English folk tales, Robin Goodfellow was well known and occupied the liminal spaces that fairies normally do; outside of conventional society and equally capable of helping and hurting. Shakespeare's transformation of Robin Goodfellow from the well-known rural trickster to an aristocratic courtier is shocking in its extent and significantly changes the way his actions can be interpreted in the play. Shakespeare does not just alter his name, and instead goes straight for Robin Goodfellow's rural roots. As Mary Lamb says, the play's "transformation from the hairy Robin Goodfellow of ballad tradition to a courtly Puck" is one of the most drastic changes in the play (Lamb 281). Shakespeare changed several aspects of Robin Goodfellow's personality, as well as his name, like the attending fairies. In fact, Robin Goodfellow was not popularly referred to as "Puck" until *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Traditionally, Robin Goodfellow's "primary role appears to have been the performance of particularly onerous household tasks... grinding mustard and sweeping in exchange for a bowl of milk... dressing and spinning of rough hemp fibers" (Lamb, 295). In addition, Goodfellow's pranks included "misleading travelers, shapeshifting, grinding malt, spinning hemp... pinching maidens, stealing newborn babies... petty theft and con artistry" (Lamb 297). Most of these activities are mentioned in Puck's conversation at the beginning of Act II, Scene 1, to one of Titania's attending fairies, but this version of Puck does much more than housework. It is interesting to note that most of Robin Goodfellow's tasks were assigned to poor women, and his pranks targeted people in the countryside; this illustrates that his "target audience" of rural Englishman and women were very dissimilar to Shakespeare's clientele.

Traditionally, both his good and his bad deeds were relatively domestic, and rarely involved anything as glamorous as finding “a little western flower, before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound” and causing all manner of chaos for both humans and fairies in the forest (II.1.151-152). Robin Goodfellow went from a household nuisance to one of the most important characters in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* because of Shakespeare’s decisions to transform the fairy characters into elegant, noble versions of themselves. Scot called him one of the fairy “bugs” told about in childhood by “our mothers maids,” a relatively insignificant bother that was not worthy of true belief in the same category as “spirits, witches, urchens, elves, hags... satyrs, pans, faunes” (Scot, C6). Robin Goodfellow’s lower class origins were incompatible with the aristocratic fae that Shakespeare wanted in his play, and so he created a Puck in the image of English courtiers that would fit into his imagined fairy court. This was necessary so that the fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* would parallel the other aristocrats in the play, though many audience members would have associated them more with the players - and not Theseus and Hippolyta - if not for Shakespeare’s changes.

While Shakespeare’s appropriation of Robin Goodfellow to create a courtier Puck was certainly drastic, the arguably greatest change over time from the traditional folklore are the modifications that Shakespeare made to the power dynamics of the fairy rulers of the Athenian woods. Scholars have often taken the patriarchal structure of the wooded fairy kingdom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at face value in their analyzations; for example, Mary Lamb writes, “patriarchy is restored as Oberon overcomes Titania’s brief rebellion against his wishes” (Lamb, 309). Especially in a time period like the late 1500s, a patriarchal government was to be expected

as it was the reigning model of government. However, “Recent developments in the study of folklore have demonstrated that, for an early modern audience, fairy land would have been recognized as a domain where the *queen* had exclusive sovereign authority” (Walters, 157). Recently, Shakespearean scholar Regina Buccola (among other female scholars who have recently begun studying this subject such as Lisa Walters) argue that “Fairyland” was actually a matriarchy, and that an early modern audience would have been familiar with the “unquestioned centrality” of the fairy queen’s authority” (Buccola, 74). Once we take this into account, Oberon’s plotting and scheming no longer seems like the whims of a ruler, which Shakespeare may have intended, but are now treasonous; in fact, under early modern law, Oberon “could be designated as a sodomite or at least as causing sodomy” (Walters, 158). Walters goes on to say, “It would be more historically accurate to perceive Oberon’s actions not as a husband asserting authority and restoring patriarchy, but instead as an unruly subordinate creating chaos within a matriarchal realm” (Walters 158). Even though Oberon is classically played as the king putting his disobedient wife in her place, this interpretation was not most accurate to English folklore, even if Shakespeare did not intend it to be seen as such.

The audience members can see these roots in scenes like Oberon and Titania’s confrontation in Act II Scene 1, where Titania says, “And this same progeny of evils comes from our debate, from our dissension. We are their parents and original.” (II.1.103). This quote shows the responsibility and maturity that Titania has when discussing the natural misfortunes that have overtaken her forest. It stands sharply in contrast to Oberon’s response; “Do you amend it then. It lies in you. I do but beg a little changeling boy, to be my henchman” (II.1.105-106). This blatant selfishness does not sound like the wise words of a leader, and instead is befitting of a secondary

figure. Titania's speech throughout the play reflects the responsibility of a true leader, even if the power dynamics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not played off as such.

Even through Titania's drugging and pranking, she would not have been entirely humiliated in the eyes of an Englishman who was familiar with folklore. As Buccola says, "An early modern audience would most have been familiar with an omnipotent fairy queen who captured human babies, provided mortals with healing powers, and detained mortal men as sexual hostages" (Buccola 60). Shakespeare's attempts to shift the power balance towards Oberon were not total but made enough of a difference for later audiences to be unable to tell that Titania is actually the most powerful ruler of the woods. In traditional folklore, the idea of a king "putting her in her place" would have been downright laughable, but the lack of information about fairy traditions has significantly changed interpretations of all of Titania and Oberon's scenes. Now, modern scholars most often paint Oberon as a strong, if duplicitous, king who returns to unquestioned power and the end of the play. This was not the case according to fairy lore, but Shakespeare's authorial choices to not highlight Titania's power rendered the text unable to support a matriarchal reading over time as traditional folklore is no longer taken into account when conducting an analysis of the play.

The changes that Shakespeare made to traditional English folklore in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* unintentionally created a subtly, but distinctly, changed the fae mythology of the day to make it easier to consume for urban London audience members. Through name changes, breezing over lower-class associations, and ignoring patriarchal power structures, Shakespeare mainly chose to change his characters through omission. These exclusions have changed the way fairies are currently perceived, especially concerning their size;

the play “popularizes a tradition that literally takes away the fleshliness of their bodies” (Lamb 308). However, when reading and viewing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we should take into account the actual stories that Shakespeare based his characters off if we want to see the play in the way that Shakespeare’s actual audience would have seen it. By doing this, we can also understand the power that these deletions had in the eyes of Shakespeare’s audience and to the people whose stories he was erasing.

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