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# A Midsummer Night's Dream

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## The character of Puck

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### I. Who is Puck?

Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, is a type of fairy who acts as an attendant to Oberon throughout the play. He speaks predominantly to Oberon and the audience for the entirety of the play and therefore seems to exist in a realm of his own outside the rest of drama. At Oberon's request, he puts the love juice into Lysander's eyes by accident thinking he is Demetrius. He later also applies the love juice to Demetrius' eyes which causes the lovers' spat in the forest in Act 3 Scene 2. Puck is also the character who transforms Bottom and gives him an ass's head. Whilst Puck causes much of the confusion and mischief in the play, he is also the one to restore order as he puts the antidote in Lysander's eyes causing him to rekindle his love for Hermia. At the end of the play Puck gives an epilogue to the audience suggesting: 'Give me your hands if we be friends,/And Robin shall restore amends'.

## **II. Context**

An Elizabethan audience would have been familiar with these types of fairies as they had a reputation of being mischievous and able to change into humans and animals when it suited them. Stories which contained 'a puck' were told throughout Britain, so his words at the start of Act 2 Scene 2: 'I am that merry wanderer of the night' would have resonated with an Elizabethan audience who would accept that Puck was able to fool humans and mislead those travelling in the night.

Perhaps Shakespeare also took his ideas for Puck from *The Discovery of Witchcraft (1584)* by *Reginald Scot* which as Tredell says 'gives a sceptical account of superstitions and marvels, which mentions tales about 'Robin Goodfellow' whose activities include 'sweeping the house at midnight', like Robin Goodfellow 'sweeping the dust behind the door' after midnight in the *Dream*'.

## **III. What do critics say?**

Peter. F Fisher (1957) sees Puck as providing a 'polar zenith of fantasy' in the play. He also says his actions 'represents both a unifying and transforming power which changes the wood into the depths of a a midsummer- night's dream'. He also says that Puck's actions spread confusion and reveal 'the cult of strife inherent in elemental nature'.

David Bevington (1975) suggests that the character of Puck may be a metaphor for the sinister aspects of the fairy world whilst Matthew Woodcock puts forward the view that the fairies, including Puck are meant to be ambiguous. We are never sure whether their helpfulness will continue throughout the play, which creates suspense for the audience.

#### **IV. Further reading:**

Nicholas Tredell , *Shakespeare A Midsummer Night's Dream- A reader's guide to essential criticism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pages 50

Regina Buccolla, *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Critical Guide*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2010

#### **V. Analysis**

##### **1. Act 2 Scene 1**

The audience are first introduced to Puck in Act 2 Scene 1 when he enters at separate doors at the same time as an unnamed fairy. Puck is the character who introduces the strife between Oberon and Titania- king and queen of the fairies saying: 'The king doth keep his revels here tonight./Take heed the queen come not within his sight.' It can be argued that by having Puck inform the audience that the fairy king and queen are arguing, it creates suspense and gives us an idea of the characters we are about to meet.

The unnamed fairy then puts Puck's character in context when she says: 'Either I mistake your shape and making quite,/Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite/Called Robin Goodfellow. Are you not he/That frights the maidens of the villagery/...Mislead night wanderers, laughing at their harm?' Here the fairy is alluding to an Elizabethan audience's view of pucks which were well known to play tricks on mortals. Puck confirms that he is that character and says that he 'jests to Oberon, and make him smile'. He also takes great pleasure in explaining to the fairy that he plays tricks on mortals and is able to shapeshift: 'sometimes I lurk in a gossips's bowl/In very likeness of a roasted crab'. Puck's evident enjoyment at playing tricks and being mischievous gives the audience the idea that his character will continue in the same vein throughout the play.

The next time we see Puck is after Oberon and Titania have argued over the changeling child. He does not say much, very much acting as Oberon's attendant at this point. When Oberon asks him to collect the flower from which he will extract the love juice, Puck responds with: 'I'll put a girdle round the earth/In forty minutes!' Here we are reminded that the fairies are able to travel quickly from place to place, something which is not open to the mortal characters. Whilst Puck is away, Oberon witnesses Helena chasing Demetrius in the woods begging him to love her. Puck returns from finding the love juice and gives it to Oberon who instructs him to put the love juice on Demetrius and 'anoint his eyes'. Crucially, Oberon does not give Puck Demetrius' name but tells him he will be able to spot him by his Athenian garments: 'Thou shalt know the man/ By the Athenian garments he hath on'. This is important because it enables Puck to mistake Demetrius for Lysander in the next scene and put the love juice on his eyes. Puck ends the scene by saying 'Fear not, my lord; your servant shall do so'. This gives the audience the impression that mischief is to come later in the play, however it also absolves Puck of responsibility for the mischief which is about to be caused as he uses the noun 'servant'. This implies that he must do as Oberon wishes, and therefore the real orchestrator of the machinations in the woods is Oberon himself.

## **2. Act 2 Scene 2**

After Oberon applies the love juice to Titania's eyes, Lysander and Hermia enter the woods by themselves. Hermia requests that she and Lysander sleep apart so as not to threaten her modesty. It is in this state that Puck finds them. Because Lysander is wearing 'weeds of Athens' and sleeping apart from Hermia, Puck mistakes him for Demetrius and applies the love juice to his eyes. This is important as this is where the confusion arises with the lovers.

## **3. Act 3 Scene 1**

Whilst the Mechanicals have been rehearsing their play in the woods, Puck enters the woods and watches them. He calls them 'hempen homespuns' which is an insult as he is referring to the

country clothing they are wearing. Puck says: 'I'll be an auditor,' An actor too perhaps, if I see cause'. This is very reminiscent of Oberon's words in Act 2 Scene 1 when he says 'I am invisible'. Puck is saying he will listen and watch their play without their knowledge. Puck does not tell the audience his plans to transform Bottom's head into an ass, and it also happens offstage. Thus when the Puck enters the stage followed by Bottom wearing the ass's head, the audience are as surprised as the other Mechanicals. This creates comedy, but Shakespeare also leaves the audience to imagine HOW Puck transformed Bottom offstage. He does this as well in Macbeth when Macbeth murders King Duncan at the beginning of the play. After the Mechanicals run away from Bottom, Puck boasts about his impersonation skills: 'I'll follow you.../Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound/A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire'. This distances Puck from the mortals in the audience's mind as he is clearly able to trick them. Whilst a modern audience might find this particularly amusing, an Elizabethan audience would be intimidated by Puck's behaviour as it would resonate with their beliefs.

#### **4. Act 3 Scene 2**

Oberon begins the scene by wondering if the love juice has worked on Titania. It is his attendant Puck who takes great pleasure in telling him: 'My mistress with a monster is in love'. He also tells Oberon that he has put the love juice on 'the Athenian's eyes'. There is dramatic irony here as we as the audience know that Puck has put the love juice in the wrong lover's eyes and caused both Lysander and Demetrius to fall in love with Helena, much to her confusion. Both Oberon and Puck remain on stage whilst Hermia confronts Demetrius about Lysander's whereabouts. When Oberon discovers that Puck has made a mistake and placed the love juice on the wrong man's eyes, he orders him to correct his mistake by going to find Helena whilst he puts the love juice on Demetrius' eyes. When he arrives back, we get another glimpse of the fact that Puck may be enjoying the confusion he has caused. He says: 'Then two will woo at one-/That must needs be sport alone;/And those things do best please me/That befall prepost'rously'. In other words, he is saying he will laugh at the lovers' confusion! This is important as it fits in with the

mischievous nature of his character. As the audience, we are never 100% sure whether Puck makes the mistake on purpose although there is a strong case to argue that he did indeed make an honest mistake when he placed the love juice on Lysander's eyes. Later in the scene when Oberon accuses him of having 'committ'st thy knaveries wilfully', Puck disputes this saying 'Believe me, King of Shadows, I mistook', however he does say that he is enjoying the confusion: 'this their jangling I esteem a sport'. Oberon then commands Puck to right his mistakes and once again the audience see Puck use his transformative powers to trick the lovers. To Lysander he pretends to be Demetrius challenging him to a fight: 'Here villain, drawn and ready! Where art thou?' To Demetrius he pretends to be Lysander: 'Thou coward, thou art bragging to the starts'. He does this to lull them both to a place where they can sleep so he can put the antidote on Lysander's eyes. Interestingly, just as Puck begins the scene, he also ends it by saying: 'Jack shall have Jill/Naught shall go ill:/The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well'. This is the scene right in the middle of the play, and structurally it is important that Puck begins and ends it as it gives the idea that he is the orchestrator and resolver of the confusion in the woods along with Oberon.

### **5. Act 4 Scene 1**

Puck does not feature much in this scene, except to remove the ass's head from Bottom saying: 'Now when thou wak'st, with thine own fool's eyes peep'.

### **6. Act 5**

Just as Puck begins and ends many other scenes, he is also the last character on stage at the end of the play. He offers an epilogue to the audience which can also be considered as an apology for the play. The most important lines are: 'If we shadows have offended/Think but this and all is mended:/That you have but slumber'd here/Whilst these visions did appear.' Essentially he is telling the audience that if they are displeased by the play, they can consider the play a dream like the four mortal lovers. This also relates to the title of the play. Interestingly he also calls



himself 'honest Puck', perhaps in an effort to distance himself from his mischievous actions earlier in the play. His very last lines ask the audience to applaud the play: 'Give me your hands, if we be friends,/And Robin shall restore amends'. This speech is also important as it is meta-dramatic: it calls attention to itself as a work of art by telling the audience they may consider what they have watched as 'no more yielding than a dream'.

## **VI. Summary - the character of Puck**

Key points to remember:

- 1) Puck is Oberon's attendant.
- 2) He is the character who causes the most confusion in the play as he mistakenly puts the love juice on Lysander's eyes instead of Demetrius'.
- 3) Puck begins and ends many scenes.
- 4) Perhaps Shakespeare also took his ideas for Puck from *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) by Reginald Scot.
- 5) Elizabethans believed that fairies were malign and mischievous figures that would plague mortals.
- 6) Puck is the character who transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass.
- 7) Puck exists outside realms of the rest of the drama as with the exception of an unnamed fairy in Act 2 Scene 1, he only speaks to Oberon.
- 8) Puck has involvement with all three plot strands in the play: he orchestrates the confusion between the lovers in the woods; is involved with the disagreement between Titania and Oberon by collecting the love juice; and tricks the Mechanicals when he transforms Bottom's head.
- 9) David Bevington (1975) suggests that the character of Puck may be a metaphor for the sinister aspects of the fairy world

10) Puck ends the play by speaking directly to the audience in the epilogue and therefore is the last character on stage in the play.



# Personal Assessment

(Some questions may have more than one correct answer)

- 1) Who is Puck?
  - a) Oberon's attendant
  - b) Titania's attendant
  - c) A mischievous fairy
  - d) A device to further the plot.
- 2) Matthew Woodcock argues that Puck represents the \_\_\_\_\_ aspects of the fairy world.
  - a) happy
  - b) sinister
  - c) kind
  - d) helpful
- 3) We first meet Puck in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Act 1 Scene 2
  - b) Act 3 Scene 2
  - c) Act 4 Scene 1
  - d) Act 2 Scene 1
- 4) Who does Puck speak directly to in the play?
  - a) Oberon
  - b) Titania
  - c) Bottom
  - d) an unnamed fairy
- 5) Who does Puck have involvement with in the play?
  - a) King and Queen of the Fairies
  - b) The lovers
  - c) Bottom and the Mechanicals
  - d) Theseus and Hippolyta
- 6) What word does Puck use to describe how he views the confusion between the

lovers?

a) 'fun' b) 'sport' c) 'cricket' d) 'torment'

7) Where does Puck transform Bottom's head?

a) Offstage b) Onstage c) In front of the Mechanicals d) near Titania's bower

8) What does Puck transform Bottom's head into?

a) an ass's head b) a wolf's head c) a dog's head d) a mouse's head

9) What is Puck's speech at the end of the play called?

a) an apologia b) an epilogue c) a dramatic monologue d) a rhyming speech

10) What does Puck suggest the audience do if they have not enjoyed the play.

a) Get up and walk out

b) Boo and hiss

c) Consider the play a dream

d) Pretend it didn't happen.

### **Answers**

1) A, C, D

2) B

3) D

4) A, D

5) A, B, C

6) B

7) A, D

8) A

9) A, B

10) C