

## DID SHAKESPEARE BELIEVE IN FAIRIES?

Fairies appear only twice in Shakespeare's plays, first in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, an early play, his first masterpiece, then in *The Tempest*, his last. The plays have a lot in common.

Both are about wrongs done or threatened, about magic and magicians. Both take place in a world where, for a limited period of time, the normal rules of time and space are suspended, so that past wrongs can be righted, as if they never happened, as if you could wake up and find that it was just a dream.

The wrongs that are to be righted happen in real places, Athens and Milan. The righting of the wrongs happens respectively in a wood inhabited by fairies and an island ruled by a magician.

The rights and wrongs in both concern the exercise of power, a father's over his daughter or a man's over his brother. To Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the matter is simply one of law, as he informs the disobedient daughter.

*To you your father should be as a god;  
One that compos'd your beauties; yea, and one  
To whom you are but as a form in wax,  
By him imprinted, and within his power  
To leave the figure, or disfigure it.*

Prospero's story in *The Tempest*, as told to his daughter, Miranda, is more complicated. He admits that, by neglecting his duties in favour of his studies, he did to some extent bring his troubles on himself.

*I thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicate  
To closeness, and the bettering of my mind  
With that, which, by being so retired,  
O'er-prized all popular rate, in my false brother  
Awaked an evil nature.*

He dwells so long on this that his daughter falls asleep and it becomes increasingly obvious that his problem is as much with his own conscience as with his brother's betrayal.

Ariel is Puck by another name, Prospero another Oberon. Puck says,

*I'll put a girdle round about the earth  
In forty minutes.*

Ariel, travelling faster, says,

*I drink the air before me, and return  
Or e'er your pulse twice beat.*

Both spirits stand up for themselves against their masters. Ariel demands his freedom.

*Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains,  
Let me remember thee what thou hast promis'd,  
Which is not yet perform'd me.*

When Oberon takes Puck to task for his mistake over the love potion, Puck defends himself.

*Did you not tell me I should know the man  
By the Athenian garments he had on?  
And so far blameless proves my enterprise,  
That I have 'nointed an Athenian's eyes.*

Oberon accepts Puck's excuse and sends him away to put things right. Prospero on the other hand threatens Ariel with the most cruel punishment.

*If thou more murmur'st I will rend an oak,  
And peg thee in his knotty entrails, till  
Thou hast howl'd away twelve winters.*

In both plays, a play is performed to celebrate a marriage. Prospero conjures one up for Ferdinand and Miranda, but has to abandon it before it is finished.

*I had forgot that foul conspiracy  
Of the beast Caliban and his confederates  
Against my life; the minute of their plot  
Is almost come.*

The 'rude mechanicals' succeed in performing the whole of their 'tedious brief scene', though Theseus draws the line at hearing the epilogue and the play ends with their bergomask or 'dance of clowns'.

Both plays are dreams in themselves and a character in each has a dream of his own. Bottom, the weaver, has one.

*I have had a dream - past the wit of man to say what dream it was.*

Still wearing the ass's head that Puck put on his shoulders, he tries anyway.

*Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was, and methought I had, -  
But man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had.*

In the end, he decides to leave the task to someone better able to do it justice.

*I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom.*

Bottom's dream is made by Puck's magic. Caliban's dream is made by Ariel, whose music frightens the shipwrecked sailors, Trinculo and Stephano.

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds, methought, would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me: that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again.*

Methought I was... methought I had... the clouds, methought...

When Helena and Hermia wake and meet each other in the morning, they describe their confused feelings in the same way, using the same word.

*Methinks I see these things with parted eye,  
When everything seems double.*

*So methinks:*

*And I have found Demetrius like a jewel.  
Mine own, and not mine own.*

Both plays are unusual in having no single source. Drawing inspiration from many sources, they are essentially the work of Shakespeare's own imagination. It was an imagination that seems to have been capable of believing in the best and the worst of humanity without losing hope. It seems also to have seen truth in the old beliefs, religions or superstitions, as well as in the new.

But dramatists don't have to believe in fairies to make good use of them in their plays. Who but a fairy like Puck could see the world from outside and say, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" Who but a dainty spirit like Ariel could represent the mysterious working of an artist's imagination, the essence of which is doubt and ambiguity, when everything seems double, mine own and not mine own.