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“King of Shadows”: Patronage and Performance in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the scenes in which a group of “rude mechanicals” perform a play for Theseus, the Duke of Athens, should remind modern audiences that, in Shakespeare’s time, acting companies were often sworn to serve particular noble patrons (III.2.9).[[1]](#footnote-1) As the mechanicals rehearse their play, they agonize over how their audience will react to each scene not only because they want to please, but also because the duke has the power to “hang us, every mother’s son” (I.2.70). The anxiety of the mechanicals is a comic exaggeration of the real danger in performing plays for a patron, who might interpret an unflattering character as their own caricature and be motivated to retaliate against the performers. The mechanicals are not, however, the only characters involved in the play’s exploration of the relationship between theatrical performers and their patrons. When Oberon instructs Puck to interfere with Demetrius and Helena, he begins to act as patron, with Puck as his performer. As the play goes on, Puck’s antics give him more and more power, as he directs not only the interactions between the human lovers, but events affecting Oberon and Titania as well. Through Puck and Oberon’s relationship, Shakespeare suggests that part of the appeal of theater is that it provides its patrons with a mirror of their own internal conflicts and desires. But Puck’s resolution of the conflicts within the play and concluding speech suggest that in order to serve this critiquing function safely, playwrights and performers need to convince their audience that the experience and interpretation of a play derives primarily from the viewer’s own imagination, like a dream.

Oberon and Puck’s relationship begins resembling that of a player and a patron when Oberon asks Puck to place love-in-idleness on Demetrius’ eyes, an action that transforms the human lovers into a spectacle Oberon particularly desires to see. Oberon’s request might at first appear to be born out of charity, but the way Oberon phrases it betrays another motivation. Referring to Helena, Oberon comments, “Fare thee well, nymph. Ere he do leave this grove / Thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love” (II.I.244-245). Oberon’s use of the word “nymph” recalls Ovidian stories of chaste nymphs fleeing from lustful gods. He also twice expresses a desire that Demetrius will not only return Helena’s love, but that he will love Helena more than she will love him, to the point where she is frightened away: he remarks, “Thou shalt fly him,” and he tells Puck to “effect it with some care, that he may prove / more fond on her than she upon her love” (II.I.266). Oberon’s request shows that he wishes to see a particular type of story played out by Demetrius and Helena. Rather than asking Puck to resolve the conflict between the lovers, he is asking Puck to turn them into actors in a play of his own devising. *Good!*

The particular theatrical scenario Oberon originally orders Puck to create—a women, pursued by an over-amorous man—seems to reflect his own situation with Titania. The fairy queen is first introduced by Oberon as “proud Titania,” to which she replies, “What, jealous Oberon?” (II.1.60-61). These titles immediately establish the imbalanced power dynamic of their relationship and the root of their conflict: Oberon’s jealousy and Titania’s proud independence. Oberon is jealous not only of the changeling Titania refuses to give up to him, but also of her supposed love for Theseus. Titania’s refusal to give in to Oberon’s demands, having “forsworn his bed and company,” forces Oberon to engage in pursuit and trickery to regain her favors (II.1.62). This places them in a story much like the one Oberon seems to be imagining playing out with Demetrius and Helena, one that relies on Ovidian tropes of powerful gods pursuing chaste nymphs who refuse their advances. This suggests that Oberon’s request is a way for him to displace his own difficulties with Titania onto another set of lovers.

Puck initially intervenes with the human lovers at Oberon’s request, but as the play continues, he displays greater and greater independence in creating a performance that pleases himself more than Oberon. Puck first demonstrates this independence by intervening with Oberon’s punishment of Titania, transforming Bottom into a comical monster and leading him close to Titania’s resting-place. He describes his actions as part of the creation of play: “I’ll be an auditor; / An actor too perhaps, if I see cause” (III.1.74-75). Puck disrupts the mechanical’s play to create a new one, in which Bottom is “translated” into a new story altogether (III.2.32). Oberon claims to be pleased with this result, telling Puck, “this falls out better than I could devise” (III.2.35). But Oberon’s praise simultaneously accentuates the fact that Puck has claimed more power for himself by determining the outcome of Oberon’s plans. *Love it!*

Oberon is less pleased with Puck’s mistake in placing the love-juice on Lysander’s eyes instead of Demetrius’. But as Puck himself points out, he has followed Oberon’s instructions to the letter:

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

And so far am I glad it so did sort

As this their jangling I esteem a sport. (III.2.347-353)

Puck’s defense of his enterprise as blameless, and his unabashed admission that he is glad of his supposed error and takes pleasure in the “jangling” discord of the lover’s quarrels suggests that he is not interested only in pleasing Oberon, but in finding ways to amuse himself within the bounds of his instructions. Oberon is disturbed by the unexpected consequences of his request, complaining that Puck has “some true love turned, and not a false turned true,” but this only highlights the irony of his supposed desire to create “true love” through the use of a deceptive potion (III.2.91). Oberon seems uncomfortable when faced with the spectacle he requested, perhaps realizing how similar the men’s undignified pursuit of Helena is to his of Titania.

Puck’s pleasure in the chaos he creates is evident in his dialogue with Oberon, in which he speaks at greater length and more about his own desires, when previously he had simply accepted orders:

Then will two at once woo one:

That must needs be sport alone.

And those things do best please me

That befall prepost’rously (III.2.118)

Puck’s design—to see “two at once woo one,” has now supplanted Oberon’s. He seems to take pleasure in the patterns he can create with the four humans, whom he sees as interchangeable. The words “two,” “woo,” and “one” create playful assonance reflecting Puck’s delight in the shifting dance of the human lovers’ affections. In addition, by using the word “prepost’rously,” Puck could be referring either to mean inverted order or to mean unnaturalness and absurdity. This inversion and unnaturalness may refer not only to Puck’s interventions with the human lovers, but also to his rejection of his master’s authority to pursue his own pleasure.

As Puck’s influence in the plot of the four human lovers grows, Oberon finds that the only way to bring back natural order is for Puck to create further confusion. He tells Puck:

The starry welkin cover thou anon

With drooping fog as black as Acheron,

And lead these testy rivals so astray

As one come not within another’s way.

Like to Lysander sometime frame thy tongue,

Then stir Demetrius up with bitter wrong,

And sometimes rail thou like Demetrius

And from each other look thou lead them thus

Till o’er their brows death-counterfeiting sleep

With leaden legs and batty wings doth creep. (III.2.356-366)

Puck’s task of darkening the entire night sky to a color “as black as Acheron” and then causing “death-counterfeiting sleep” expands his deception to celestial, even divine, proportions as he plays the trickster with death itself. Puck must lead the lovers as far as possible “astray” to bring them back into order. He also creates false, mimicked version of the lover’s antagonist in order to put their conflicts to rest, suggesting that reflections of conflict can cancel each other out, producing order. The suggestion that the night’s events will “seem a dream and fruitless vision” could mean that the night’s events are indeed meaningless, but the use of “seem” emphasizes that this is a deception. In fact, the chaos that brings the two couples together may be the opposite of “fruitless,” since it ultimately brings the four into reproductive unions.

The potential of reflections and imitations of conflict to motivate a return to order is present not only in the plot of the human lovers, but also in that of Titania and Oberon. Oberon’s revenge on Titania turns out to create a spectacle that produces true sympathy in Oberon. He not only admits to pitying her directly, but also sees sorrow even in the drops of water in Bottom’s flower crown, which to him resemble “tears that did their own disgrace bewail” (IV.I.55). His imagination, provoked by the vivid image provided by Puck, plays a great part in his decision to reconcile. While he claims to have been returned the Indian boy, this happens offstage and goes unconfirmed; Titania makes no mention of it when she wakes. It seems possible that the spectacle Puck helps create was enough to make Oberon regret the cruel behavior, which put Titania in a situation where loving an ass could look preferable.

Still, this potential of theater to critique and reform relies on a careful presentation of theater as a spectacle produced as much by the audience’s imagination as by the players themselves. Puck’s concluding speech to the audience confirms his metaliterary significance as a representative of “shadows,” an Elizabethan term for players, and demonstrates how a play might be guarded from criticism. His acknowledgment that the players? have “have offended” some reinforces the idea that a play, by providing an uncensored mirror of reality, might upset its audience. Puck encourages the “gentles” of the audience to think “That you have but slumbered here / While these visions did appear,” the same solution provided for the human lovers after their night of chaos in the woods (V.1.417-418). Puck’s insistence on the experience of the play as being like a dream and the actors like shadows is important because both images remove the potential for blame from the playwright and actors, and point out the audience’s role in creating significance from the play. As shadows of the audience, actors are an image produced by a combination of the audience themselves and something external—the play functions like the lighting needed to cast a shadow in a particular direction. The figure of theater as a dream world similarly emphasizes that the entire experience of the play relies on the audience’s imagination.

Like the lovers in the wood, the audience is meant to leave the play having experienced an inversion of power, in which the servant may critique his master, but believing that they have produced this critique themselves. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* models how this can be done safely by emphasizing the role of the audience in drawing significance from a play. Theseus, as he watches the mechanicals, provides the perfect model of the gracious and forgiving patron: he responds to others’ derisive criticism of their play by proclaiming “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them” (V.I.210). He recognizes the players as shadows of reality, reliant upon imagination to animate them. Puck and Oberon, along with the other metaliterary elements of the play, work together to convince the audience that a negative reaction to a play should not provoke blame on the actors, but perhaps a more critical look at oneself.

Really good stuff here—your readings are convincing and your overall argument is quite right. I’ve noted a few places in the margins where I think you could have said a bit more, or done more with a passage that you quote. But this is a great way to start the semester, and I can’t wait to see where we go from here.

In particular, look for the comments in which I suggest that you should be getting into more detail. On a few occasions you just make your points too quickly, when you really should be spending more time getting into the details of the text to really show the reader how your argument is grounded in the text or, indeed, a sophisticated reading in the text. And you certainly are reading the text this way—you just need to make this clearer in your prose.

I’m sure that this, in part, is a result of the fact that you felt like you were running short on space, which is fair enough. But it’d be better to find something that you could cut and then get into more detail with what remains, rather than including more without treating it with the same level of close attention. For example, your final two paragraphs on the epilogue could have been reduced into a single paragraph, made to stand as a conclusion to the argument rather than (as they are now) a continuation of the argument. But that’s just one idea.

Anyway, this is an excellent start to the semester. Keep up the good work.

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1. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Russ McDonald (New York: Penguin, 2000. All quotations are from this edition and cited by act, scene and line number. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)