

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE: SHAKESPEARE AND THE WORLD OF FAIRIES IN *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

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Abstract

Purpose: This research aims to explore the world of fairies in a comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605) written by William Shakespeare. This study proposes that the concept of fairies described by William Shakespeare is mere supernatural rather than being philosophical as the Elizabethan age itself is defined for its prudence and emerging philosophies. Further, This study intends to present an alternative perspective on Elizabethan Fairies.

Methodology: This research is hermeneutic in approach and descriptive in nature. The sources are collected in the form of both print and web. The primary text used for this research is Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605).

Findings: Shakespeare not only changes the physiognomy of Elizabethan fairies but also alters the functions that are associated with them. Elizabethan Fairies were known for their awe and evil-doing but the world of fairies that Shakespeare describes in the play is to some extent altered.

Application of the study: This study is relevant to the field of literature, Elizabethan Literature, and Occult philosophy. Students and researchers of Elizabethan drama will find it useful.

Novelty or Originality of the study: The study is hitherto a novel approach to Elizabethan supernatural powers. By considering this alternative viewpoint, this qualitative study intends to study the world of fairies of this play in depth by focusing on multiple standpoints of the Elizabethan age contradicting with Shakespearian fairies characterized in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Keywords: *Fairies, Occult Philosophy, Perspective, Shakespeare, World of Fairies.*

INTRODUCTION

In Elizabethan times heavenly components and supernatural beings were not a simple dream or creative mind of a creator, rather they were a piece of the convictions of the Elizabethan culture. Pixies were one such being. This study investigates the universe of pixies. This paper contends that Shakespeare has changed the physiognomy of Elizabethan fairies as well as the roles and tasks that are related to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Frances Yates, a scholar of occult philosophy claims that “Shakespeare’s preoccupation with the occult, with ghosts, witches, fairies, is understood as deriving less from popular tradition than from deep-rooted affinity with the learned occult philosophy and its religious implications” (Yates 2003). Controversial religious practices led to the foundation of occult philosophy in Elizabethans. In seventeenth-century “the nature of the cosmos was itself controversial – and beliefs about this nature affected one’s beliefs about religion or politics [...] Thus the stage was open for the “interaction of characters who seem to be inhabiting different, and fundamentally incompatible, spatial epistemologies” (Poole 2011).

With the advent of the 1530s, religious and political ideologies about supernatural beings were changed. The basic roles and functions of supernatural powers were redefined. “Protestant reformers accused Catholic priests of inventing fairies to conceal their misdeeds. The abandoned baby on the doorstep, in earlier days, said to be left by fairies, was now said to be a priest’s illegitimate child” (Toller 2004). On the one hand, the teachings of the national Church of England were prevailing but on the other hand, many people still believed in the existence of the fairies as Singman pointed out “Side by side with the official teachings of the church was a continuing belief in magic. Many people still believed in supernatural creatures, particularly fairies” (Conlan, 2004).

Elizabethan Fairies were known for their awe and evil-doing as Keith Thomas says “it is clear [...] fairies were frequently thought as highly malevolent” (Thomas 1971). According to Helen Cooper, four theories have been presented about the origin of fairies. The first school of thought considers them to be the ghosts of the dead ones. The second school of thought considers them fallen angels who possess magical powers. The third school of thought considers them demons and the fourth school of thought calls them pagan deities. The common factor in all aforementioned theories is the wickedness of fairies. Cooper argues that “Fairies, even more than magic, smacked of the devil. [...] the very qualities that marked them as supernatural also marked them as dangerous, whether those qualities were strict judgment, capriciousness, their ability to alter the laws of the physical world, or the power of prophecy” (Cooper, 2015).

In this context, there were four types of faires as she says “It is believed in the sixteenth century that there were four types of fairies” (Endo, 2011). Briggs named these four types Trooping, hobgoblins, mermaids, and hags (Briggs, 1959). To link faires with necromancy and devilish activities is not a new concept rather it has its roots in the medieval ages. After medieval times, Elizabethans became interested in this topic and started writing literature on fairies and their association with black magic. Lemmen has noted that “The Elizabethan fascination with fairies resulted in more literature on fairy magic and started discussions about how fairies could be incorporated into necromancy” (Lemmens, 2019). So, there are different schools of thought who penned the devilish characteristics of fairies.

METHODOLOGY

This research is hermeneutic in approach and descriptive in nature. The sources are collected in the form of both print and web. The primary text used for this research is Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605). The theory of Latham (1930) is used as a backdrop to study the supernatural powers of Elizabethan times. This research aims to be an extended contribution to Minor White Latham's ‘The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare by applying descriptive analysis. This study contends that Shakespeare has presented an alternative perspective on Elizabethan fairies. He has changed the physiognomy, size, color, and functions which are associated with Elizabethan fairies.

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

The world of fairies that Shakespeare describes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is to some extent altered. Elizabethan fairies were almost of the same height as normal human beings. This was the reason that “they were not only recognized when they appeared in person but in many cases, human beings were mistaken for them” (Latham 1930). In *British Goblins* they are presented with short stature. Shakespeare alters the perception of the size of fairies. His fairies are even shorter than dwarfs. They are diminutive creatures who can easily reside in a flower's acorn. As Puck mentions “But they do square, that all their elves for fear/ Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there” (Act 2, scene 1). Shakespeare has presented his fairies as tiny creatures but the question of their wings is still debatable. Puck goes “swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow” (Act 3, Scene 2) or as he says to Oberon “I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes” (Act 2, Scene 1) or as Oberon says “We the globe can compass soon, / Swifter than the wandering moon” (Act 4, Scene 1). It is clear from their dialogues that they are expeditious but there is no evidence of their wings. Shakespeare has woven his play around the world of fairies as Maslova says “The world of fairies also becomes as a multipurpose tool in Shakespeare's hands to instigate a disruption within the social circle and the tone of the play” (Maslova 2020). The fairies are responsible for all the major happenings in the play. Therefore their role is crucial to understand.

Elizabethans were afraid of being pinched by the fairies. The act of pinching was called fairy punishment. It was believed that the most popular fairy punishment was pinching, which often left victims with blue bruises all over their bodies as Latham says “They were no casual, ordinary pinches that were given, but thorough and violent nips of a maximum intensity which had for their avowed purpose a skin as blue as bilberry” (Latham, 1930). According to John Walsh, Elizabethan fairies were of three colors: white, green, and black but black was the color which was more associated with the fairies (qt. in Latham 1930). Elizabethan believed that fairies are of dark complexion which shows their association with evil so people were afraid of them. “There were many rules the people of the 16th century followed to remain in the good graces of the fairy and keep from being punished” (Latham 1930). One of these rules was to clean the house as Burton says “People believed that with sweeping their houses and setting a pail of clean water, good victuals and the like, and then they should not be pinched, but find money in their shoes and be fortunate in their enterprises” (qt. in Swann 2000). Fairies were also to be blamed for sickness and bad health as Culliton noted in her research “In particular, the early modern populace held the belief that people and cattle could become diseased [...] by witches or fairies” (Culliton, 2019).

Moreover, Elizabethans were afraid of fairies because “Fairies possess not only the ability to see into the future but also the ability to see into the heart” (Cooper 2015). Fairies were considered dangerous as they “can cause blindness and all sorts of other injury” (Green 1997). It was also a belief that fairies abduct the normal infant child and replace them with a changeling who would grow up as a physically weak and retarded child. Puttenham says “Fairies use to steal the fairest en out of their cradles and put other ill-favored in their places which they called changelings, or Elfs” (qtd. in Swann 2000). Physically handicapped children are considered normal in the modern world and we know that these deformities are a result of mutation of DNA but earlier in Elizabethan times these deformities and disabilities were blamed on faires. They were considered the main source to bring this disability. Along with pinching, this abduction was a part of fairy punishment, which was given to careless parents as According to the critics that fairies were “predatory and might swoop down to snatch an unguarded infant child, leaving a changeling in his place. They might also nip, pinch or otherwise torment a careless housewife or untidy servant maid” (Lamb, 2000). Shakespeare gives an alternative perspective on this viewpoint. Titania abducts a boy as Puck mentions “she as her attendant hath / A lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king / She never had so sweet a changeling” (Act 2, Scene 1). She indeed has a changeling but she is not presented as a devilish fairy rather she is presented as a fairy queen who protects the Indian boy out of love for his mother. She even argues with Oberon on India's behalf. She says “His mother was a votaress of my order:/And, in the spiced Indian air, by night, / Full often hath she gossiped by my side / [...] But she, being mortal, of that boy did die; / And for her sake do I rear up her boy, /And for her sake, I will not part with him” (Act 1, Scene 1). Another interesting

function of Elizabethan fairies was to astray men from the road. All the men who used to lose their ways were supposed to be under the influence of these fairies. “Fairies often mislead wanderers and sometimes strike them or wound them with fairy weapons” ([Green 1997](#))

Fairies were godly creatures and could foresee the future. Fairies were indeed supernatural and had some powers. Magicians of Elizabethan times used to call and conjure Fairies to talk about the future. They “contained instruction for conjuring them up to learn a variety of occult secrets” ([Thomas 1971](#)). Oberon who is the fairy king in the play was the name of the devil in the Elizabethan era. “The name Oberon or Oberion was borne by a demon who had been frequently conjured by fifteenth and sixteenth-century wizards” ([Thomas 1971](#)). Shakespeare has changed his position from a devil to a fairy king. Before Elizabethan times, in the medieval age, Oberon was a fairy king. So in this way, Shakespeare has revived an ancient notion and has presented an alternative view of Elizabethan fairies. Harms points out that fairy names are complex and molded throughout the times in the process of editing the manuscripts ([Harms 2016](#)). Any names that occur in the renaissance manuscripts which are absent from the medieval manuscripts could be fairy names. I say possibly because the scribes that wrote them are known to have made mistakes, such as misspelling names and thereby creating additional spirits, skipping a name during the copying process, or adding a name that they came across in another text. Other than Oberon, Shakespeare also talks about another fairy Robin Goodfellow who was not a fairy at all in Elizabethan times. Latham says “He was no fairy if the records of his history before 1594 be true, and this was his first inclusion in fairyland” ([Latham, 1930](#)). He was a spirit, and was often depicted with a broom “Robin Goodfellow’s clothes might vary, one item of his costume never changed. This was the broom or threshing flail which he habitually carried” ([Latham 1930](#)). At the end of the play, he is shown with his broom as he says “I am sent with broom before, / To sweep the dust behind the door” (Act 5, Scene 1). Shakespeare gives an alternative by making him a fairy. Another name that is used for him is Puck who was also a devil “the term Puck or pouke was a generic term applied to a class of demons or devils and the devil himself” ([Latham 1930](#)). So Shakespeare gives an alternative perspective to the world of fairies. Puck plays mischievous tricks on four lovers for fun but he never intends to do so when Oberon asks “This is thy negligence: still thou mistakest, / Or else committ’st thy knaveries wilfully” he replies “Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook.” (Act 3, scene 2) Eventually, he helps the lovers without any recompense as he says “Jack shall have Jill; / Nought shall go ill; / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well” (Act 3, Scene 2). Puck is not presented as a devil who plays pranks for fun.

The Elizabethan court was based on hierarchal order in which the Monarchs were on the top. After the monarchs were nobility, gentility, and peasantry respectively. Shakespeare applies this hierarchal model to his world of fairies. For instance, there is a Fairy king and a Fairy Queen. Like earthly monarchs, Oberon has his jester Puck “I jest to Oberon and make him smile” (Act 2, Scene 1). Fairy Queen also has her attendants who serve her. Moreover it is mentioned by Puck that Oberon wants the changeling to be the knight of his train. “And jealous Oberon would have the child / Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild” (Act 2, Scene 1). Oberon himself mentions that he wants the changeling to be his henchman “I do but beg a little changeling boy / to be my henchman” (Act 2, Scene 1). Moreover, the fairies replicate human emotions as mentioned by [Zhu, \(2019\)](#) is of the view that the fairies bear great resemblance to humans in terms of their emotions. This human characteristic of fairies was not the trait of Elizabethan fairies. Shakespeare also changed the power structure of fairies and gave us the notion that “fairies (are) living in a matriarchal society” ([Hoydis 2021](#)). Hence, Shakespeare introduced us to a new perspective by providing us with human alike fairies.

There was a belief in Elizabethans that fairies and ghosts wander only in the nighttime. Shakespeare alters this perception. When Puck says to Oberon that the dawn is about to break so they should be in a haste to complete their task “My fairy lord, this must be done with haste, / For night’s swift dragons cut the clouds full fast, / And yonder shines Aurora’s harbinger; / At whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there, / Troop home to churchyards: damned spirits all” (Act 4, Scene 1) Oberon simply replies that he is not afraid of the light. He says “But we are spirits of another sort: / With the morning’s love have oft made sport” (Act 4, Scene 1). So Shakespeare makes a distinction. His fairies work at night as well as in the daytime.

Although Shakespeare gives an alternative perspective to the world of fairies yet there are some characteristics that he did not alter. The very first characteristic is immortality. Fairies being spirits were immortal as [Toller, \(2004\)](#) says them as “immortal”. In the play, there are references to their immortality. Titania says “the human mortals want their winter here” (Act 2, Scene 1) moreover she says when she refers to the mother of the changeling “but she, being mortal, of that boy did die” (Act 2, Scene 1). These instances show that she is mortal. Peaseblossom also says to Bottom “hail, mortal!” (Act 3, Scene 1). The second characteristic is of vanishing at will. In the play, Oberon says “I am invisible and I will / Overhear their conference” (Act 2, Scene 1). So Oberon can vanish at his will. The third characteristic is fairy dance. “The appearance of the fairy almost always came with music and dancing” ([Latham 1930](#)). In the play we see them dancing and singing. Titania says to her attendant fairies “Come, now a roundel, and a fairy song” (Act 2, Scene 1) she also mentions “To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind” (Act 2, Scene 1).

Unlike Elizabethan fairies, Shakesperian fairies are amicable and kind. Helen Fielding claims in her article that “They are indeed very loyal titania, who commands her servant fairies to wait on Bottom” ([Fielding, 2020](#)). Shakespeare does not present Titania, Oberon, and Puck as evil or wicked creatures rather he presents them with amiable qualities as all the fairies give their blessing on the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. “To the best bride-bed, will we, / Which by us

shall blessed be; / And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate. [...] With this field-dew consecrate, / Every fairy takes his gait; / And each several chamber bless, / Through this palace, with sweet peace; / And the owner of it blest / Ever shall in safety rest” (Act 5, Scene 1). Thus Shakespeare presents an alternative perspective to the world of fairies.



Robin Goodfellow, his mad pranks and merry jests, 1628. From Latham, Minor White. *The Elizabethan Fairies: The Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare*. New York: Columbia UP, 1930. Web



A man being pulled back before entering a fairy circle. From Sikes, Wirt. *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*. London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1880. Web.



Two fairies visit a market stall. From Sikes, Wirt. *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*. London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1880. Web.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Shakespeare has presented an alternative perspective on the world of fairies. Despite being a significant belief of Elizabethans, Shakespearian fairies are different from the Elizabethan fairies. Unlike Elizabethan fairies, they are good by nature. Physiognomy, Color, and size of Elizabethan Fairies are also altered in the play. Shakespeare got his inspiration from the Elizabethan court and based his model of fairies on it and thus presenting an alternated perspective on fairies.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

This study covered the major aspects of fairies like color, size, physiognomy, and the functions associated with fairies yet, the study is limited and can be extended in several ways. The researchers can look into the roles associated with

Elizabethan fairies. Also, future studies can be conducted on other supernatural elements like ghosts and devils which are rooted in Elizabethan philosophy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

It is to mention clearly that I have no conflict of interest with the current organization. Also, no unethical practices were followed during this study.

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