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Pucked Up

In the beginning of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, is counting down the seconds until he is to wed his new “trophy” Hippolyta, the Amazonian Queen. Hippolyta is also counting down the seconds, but she has a much more negative outlook on the matter. While these individuals are pondering how much time really exists between that very moment and the time it will take for the next four moons to come and go, Theseus hears a dispute between Egeus, and his daughter Hermia. Hermia is in love with Lysander, but Egeus is behaving like Bottom, who is an ass, and wishes his daughter to wed a man named Demetrius, for no clear logical reason. After a series of events the characters arrive in the woods along with Oberon, the fairy king, as well as Puck, his mischievous fairy helper. Oberon then happens to overhear a conversation between Helena, and the man she loves, Demetrius. After Demetrius makes it painfully obvious that he has absolutely no positive feelings for Helena, Oberon decides he is going to intervene by having Puck anoint Demetrius’s eyes with a flower that was struck by Cupid’s arrow causing him to fall in love with the first thing he lays his eyes upon after awakening. However, when Puck, without knowing better, anoints Lysander’s eyes rather than those of Demetrius, it sets the stage for a great deal of chaos. It is amongst this chaos that Puck says to Oberon

“Captain of our fairy band,

Helena is here at hand:

And the youth, mistook by me,

Pleading for a lover’s fee.

Shall we their fond pageant see?

Lord, what fools these mortals be” (Shakespeare, 3.2.110-115).

That is quite possibly the most powerful and philosophical statement in the play. When Puck declares “Lord, what fools these mortals be” (3.2.115), he is clearly drawing attention to what the play is all about. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare included another play within a play by creating the Rude Mechanicals, a group of simpletons who decide to provide the entertainment for Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding; but Shakespeare also included another element to the play where the Athenian lovers are also performing for the fairies.

Puck’s statement serves to emphasize the differences between the humans and the fairies. The fairies in the play are portrayed as unpredictable, random, carefree beings. Puck more than any, seems to act on a whim in most of his decisions. This is shown when he suddenly decides to turn Bottom’s head into that of an ass, for no apparent reason other than his own enjoyment (3.1). It could be said that this lifestyle that Puck and the other fairies live add to the meaning of Puck’s statement. Shakespeare was likely alluding to the fact that we as a society were beginning to have too many worries, and were becoming extreme with our “social rules” and many of them would seem foolish to us if we would simply distance ourselves from them and take a look at our society from an outsider’s view. We as humans tend to get caught up in the sorrows of this world, and begin to lose appreciation for the positives in our lives.

The play makes it clear that Puck either does not understand the mortals, or if he does, he believes their thoughts, actions, and way of life to be foolish. Is that so different from the way we live today? If we examine another culture or people do we truly understand them? If we do not live as they live and allow ourselves to become immersed in their way of life can we judge whether or not their lifestyle is simplistic compared to that of our own? Or is it that even after living as a part of another people, are we truly able to judge whose lifestyle is superior to the others? Or is it that as individuals we believe our own ways of life are more sophisticated, to some degree, than the ways of the hoi polloi?

Puck’s line also gives us a great insight into his character and personality. He is the character who is always up for a laugh; he is always quite relaxed about the situation, and is never hesitant to provide his companions with a witty quip. Despite being a mischievous prankster, he is an honest Puck (5.1.434), and is a very likeable character. One of the more notable things about Puck would be his honesty. After being questioned by Oberon if he anointed the wrong Athenian man’s eyes for a laugh, we see just how honorable, but surreptitious, Puck can be.

“Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook.

Did not you 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.”(3.2.347-353)

It was surprising that Puck was humble enough to admit that he had made a mistake, but it was impressive that he did not stop there but went on to own up to the fact that he was enjoying the chaos he had caused. It was a thought provoking line to hear that Puck was this noble of a character. It sets the stage for a mind to think whether or not Puck really is a more intelligent being than the Athenian lovers, as well as humans in general.

We as humans are given much more credit than is due. On the surface we may be a more intelligent species, but when examining the hoi polloi as a whole, or diving into the depths of any individual, including myself, we are for the most part simpleminded fools. We allow ourselves to be put under the rule of not only our own minds, but the minds of others. We spend our days worrying about the opinions of others, especially those who we think ourselves in love with. Puck was trying to draw some light on just how foolish a human being can be, especially when it comes to love. Men are usually thought to be more primitive than women when it comes to love, and I believe this to be a false assumption. It is clear to me that love blinds not only men but it covers the eyes of a woman just as much. In the moments leading up to Puck’s big line, we see the chaos that has come between the Athenian lovers reach its peak. Helena and Hermia, who are supposed to have been nearly sisters, come to a point where they are far more than inches away from seeing eye to eye. In fact, Hermia gets to be so angry and insecure that she threatens to claw out Helena’s eyes (3.2.298). While they are arguing about how and why Helena has stolen Hermia’s lover, Lysander, he and Demetrius are preparing to fight it out over who gets the great honor to court Helena. However, before any punches are thrown they decide to fight like gentleman, and settle it away from the presence of the ladies. This shows that love can tear apart the bond of a lifelong friendship in a matter of minutes, which is why Puck exclaims that mortals are fools and is all but bringing out the popcorn to watch the show. However, his show soon comes to an end and Oberon tells him to lure the two fighters apart in the woods so that they will not meet, therefore giving the fairies time to fix the problem that they have created. Unfortunately, after Oberon gives Puck the command to lure them apart and anoint Lysander’s eyes with the herb to restore him to his right mind, Puck reminds him that it must be done with haste because dawn is soon approaching (3.2.378).

Puck’s line quite possibly could have been Shakespeare inserting a part of himself into his play. Shakespeare’s writing is a clear sign that by saying he was an intelligent man, would be an extreme understatement to say the least. He was functioning on an infinitely higher level than the hoi polloi that was around him during his time, and this likely brought along with it quite a large amount of frustration. A common phrase of today’s time is that ignorance is bliss. I am sure that a man as intelligent as William Shakespeare was not very ignorant of many problems in the world he lived in. It is unlikely that he was able to turn a blind eye to the wickedness and corruption that existed in his time and it is doubtful that he was able to engage in a thought provoking conversation very often, at least with someone that was on his level. This, along with the fact that Shakespeare also had a somewhat mischievous and slightly perverse sense of humor, leads me to believe that Puck was a character Shakespeare created to put his point of view into the play. Regardless of the reason, Shakespeare created Puck as a character in his play to play a protagonist like role, and deliver an extremely powerful philosophical line that can be pondered over for lifetimes.

Work’s Cited

Shakespeare, William, and Wolfgang Clemen. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 2nd rev. ed. New York: Signet Classic, 1998. Print.