Puck and Theseus or the Parallels that Never Meet

Nizar Zouidi
University of Manouba, Tunisia

Abstract

It is quite common to consider Robin Goodfellow the jester of fairy king Oberon, a trickster. His tricks, however, are in no way common. He plays tricks on time and space. There is an abundance of words that belong to the semantic field of time and place in the play. The majority of these words are uttered by Theseus, the Duke of Athens. Un-playful as he might appear to be, the Athenian Duke guarantees the success of Puck’s tricks. The fairy and the Duke seem to be playing similar roles. In this article, we attempt to challenge the tradition that casts the actor playing Theseus in no other role than that of Oberon. We will endeavour to show that Theseus and Robin are the parallels that never meet.

Keywords: Doubling, trickery, time, parallels, performance
As early as the seventeenth century, critical accounts seemed to underscore the central role of Puck in determining the course of events in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In our age, Harold Bloom evokes certain lines from John Milton’s “L’Allegro” as one of the earliest critical accounts of the play (49-51). The lines run as follows:

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Tells how the drudging goblin swet,
To ern his Cream-bowle duly set,
When in one night, ere glimps of morn,
His shadowy Flale hath thresh’d the Corn
That ten day-labourers could not end,
Then lies him down the Lubbar Fend,
And stretch’d out all the Chimney’s length,
   Basks at the fire his hairy strength;
   And Crop-full out of dores he flings,
   ere the first Cock his Mattin rings
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(John Milton “L’Allegro” 105-114)

In these lines, Milton seems to confine the play to what Puck does. This perhaps is why the sporting fairy can only be taken seriously if one wishes to better fathom the plot of Shakespeare’s play. Emphasising the importance of the goblin’s actions hardly means that we should overlook their playful nature. On the contrary, “it is quite common to consider Puck a trickster” (Evans, 109).

**The Challenging Parallels**

Less common is to consider Theseus, the duke of Athens, as his accomplice. At first glance, the two characters seem different. Indeed, Puck is in every respect a free-spirited player, whereas Theseus is usually regarded as the paragon of formality. While “the vocabulary of Puck is the most vernacular in the play” (Von Doreen, 106). Theseus and Hippolyta speak more poetically.

Nevertheless, the play is known for accommodating such differences. Indeed, as August Wilhelm Von Schlegel remarks, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “the most extraordinary combination of the most dissimilar ingredients seems to have been brought about without effort by some ingenious and lucky accident” (Schlegel, 63). This perhaps explains that many productions of the play rely on doubling. Indeed, since 1970, the actors playing the roles of humans are sometimes cast in the roles of the fairies. For example, it is common that the actor that play Theseus also play the role of Oberon.

**The Critical Wedlock**

However, suggesting that this actor may play the role of another fairy may be considered a profanation. The very tradition of doubling does not seem to deem separating the royal couple of Athens in the fairy world a viable course of action. In this paper, we will not
We will rather attempt to challenge the tradition that rigidly refuses to consider Theseus’ undeniable parallels with Robin Goodfellow. We will argue that the Athenian Duke is hardly comparable to Oberon. Indeed, his role rather overlaps with that of Robin Goodfellow. Not only are the roles of these two characters similar, but they also are complementary.

Schlegel, similarly to Von Doreen, consigns Theseus to a role he shares with Hippolyta. The German critic writes: “Theseus and Hippolyta are, as it were, a splendid frame for the picture, they take no part in the action, but surround it with a stately pomp” (64). The royal couple are no doubt the patrons of festivity in the human world. This very role makes the human Duke utterly different from the king of the fairies.

The role of Theseus, as Schlegel argues, is to frame the play’s action. We can hardly attribute such a role to the king of the fairies. Indeed, according to William Hazlitt, “The leader of the fairy band” (61), is Puck. The playful fairy controls the play’s action in the forest. “Puck [...] promotes “the night rule” version of misrule over which” (Barber 118) he and not Oberon “is superintendent and lord” (Ibid) in all but name.

**The Invisible Ruler of the Night**

The Fairy’s visible hyperactivity may be read in this light. Ironically, this visible hyperactivity makes him hardly visible. Even Bottom, whose transformation seems to have allowed him to see the invisible, could not see the one who literally has made an ass of him. Indeed, It seems that “the only rustic who can see, hear and speak to the fairy folk” (Bloom, xi) cannot see Robin.

This cannot be ascribed to magic alone. Indeed, after the metamorphosis of Bottom, the shield of invisibility that protects the fairies from mortal eyes is no longer in effect. For example, the Queen of the fairies can no longer enjoy her ethereal nature. As a result, she is vulnerable to the trickster who somehow remains invisible till all his tricks are successfully carried out. It is easy to see that the very success of these tricks depends on the trickster’s invisibility.

Puck’s voice, however, is audible. It is heard both by humans and by magical beings. Still, it is impossible to identify him. It is a voice that freely haunts the woods and that can take any shape. To the humans it is human and to the fairies it is fairylike.

‘What hast thou done?’

As a matter of course, the essence of Robin remains fluid. He can only be described as hyper-dynamic as his speech seems to reflect:

\[
\text{Up and down, up and down,}
\text{I will lead them up and down.}
\text{The people fear me in the country and the town.}
\text{Goblin, lead them up and down. (A Midsummer Night’s Dream. III. ii. 408-411)}
\]

Puck is never asked ‘what art thou?’ (Hamlet. I.i.46) like the other goblin in Hamlet. Instead Oberon asks him: ‘What hast thou done?’ (A Midsummer Night’s Dream. III.ii. 90). It seems that action is all that matters when we speak about/to Puck. What the fairy is means
very little to those who meet him. The words of the other fairy in act two scene one testify to this:

Either I mistake your shape and making quite,
Or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite
Call'd Robin Goodfellow. Are not you he
That frights the maidens of the villagery,
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,
And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,
Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?
Those that Hobgoblin call you, and sweet Puck,
You do their work, and they shall have good luck.
Are not you he?

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II, i, 32-42)

Puck’s fellow fairy could only refer to his actions rather than to his shape – for his shape can be mistaken. Indeed, there is an abundance of the verbs of action in this speech. Even the two adjectives used to describe Robin, “shrewd” and “knavish”, refer to his acts. It seems that Puck’s identity is related to what he does.

The Vulnerability of the Past

The nature of action in the play is quite problematic. According to Schlegel, “the loves of mortals are painted as poetical enchantment which by contrary enchantment, may immediately be suspended, and then renewed again” (Schlegel, 64). This shows that what has been done can be undone. Indeed, Robin assures the audience that

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended—
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearnèd luck
Now to ’scape the serpent’s tongue,
We will make amends ere long.
Else the Puck a liar call.
So good night unto you all.
Give me your hands if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends..

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, V, i, 423-438)

Everything that has happened appears as no more than a possibility. It may after all be (made) a dream. Indeed, Puck even tells us that he may give a different version of the play if the audience wishes him to do so.
The Missing Joint in Time

The technique used by Shakespeare is comparable to stage magic. Lysander and Hermia are made to seal their love with the most sacred of vows. Assured of Lysander’s unwavering devotion, Hermia goes to sleep. She wakes up to find him courting her friend. Waking up to find herself wooed by two young men, Hermia’s friend Helena accuses her friend of using her two lovers to trick her and screams:

O spite! O hell! I see you all are bent
To set against me for your merriment

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, III. ii. 145-146 [emphases mine])

then adds

Lo, she is one of the confederacy!
Now I perceive they conjoin’d all three
To fashion this false sport in spite of me

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream III. ii; 192-194)

In the two utterances quoted above, Helena uses verbs of perception to refer to what she has not seen rather than to what she sees. What is that which she has not seen? The answer is what happens inside the closed fist of the stage magician. The game is like the silk handkerchief changing colour magic. All we can see or believe we see is a handkerchief changing from one colour to another as it passes the closed fist of the stage magician. The secret seems to be literally in the hand of the stage magician. Therefore, Helena’s surprise and disbelief is caused by a missing joint in time. This missing joint in time can be seen at work when the charmed characters sleep (Titania, Lysander and Demetrius) or when they leave the stage (Bottom).

The latter example is quite interesting. It brings to mind the costume change magic. The assistant disappears for a little while then appears in a new costume. The same happens to Bottom who leaves the stage only to be “translated” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, V, iii, 59). As he re-enters, his companions are struck with terror and put to flight.

Like Helena and Hermia, “the troupers” cannot understand the change that occurred to their friend. They too are the victims of a missing joint in time. This testifies the centrality of time to Shakespeare’s stage magic in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

At the very beginning of the play, Theseus complains alternatively about the fast and slow pace of time:

Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in
Another moon. But oh, methinks how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
Like to a stepdame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man’s revenue.

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, I, I, 1-6 [Emphases Mine])

The time expressions used in these lines show that Theseus Oscillates between excitement and despair. Words and phrases like “apace”, “happy days” and “nuptial hour” contradict with the expressions “how slow”, “old moon” etc. This disclose an initial ambivalence towards time. This ambivalence will be emphasised as the four days seem to magically dream themselves away in an immeasurable night. Indeed, Titania assures us that the whole forest adventure has taken a single night saying:
Come, my lord, and in our flight
Tell me how it came this night
That I sleeping here was found
With these mortals on the ground.

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, IV, ii, 84-87)

Time, therefore, is a problematic category. Still, it is the key to understanding the parallels between Theseus and Puck. “There’s no/ clock in the forest” (As You Like it, III, ii, 235-236), but one might add that if there is any time measuring mechanism in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, it can be found in Theseus who always tells the time. This perhaps is why he seems to be absent in the forest adventure. However, as soon as the forest scenes end, we hear the word “day” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, IV, ii, 90) from the lips of the Duke. Theseus announces the end of that long night before he dismisses it as an idle dream. His description of his hounds in act four scene one brings the play back to Greece, while the word day brings it back to the realm of measurable temporality. In this sense, he is the one that signals the lovers’ return to human History and Geography.

Before this scene, the lovers are lost in the forest’s winding paths that seem to lead nowhere. They are directed by false voices that have no fixed identities. There, time also ceases to be finite. No matter how many times the characters sleep and wake, it is – as Titania claims – the same night that unfolds. The forest, therefore, seems to be hedged from the determinants of the real.

Guardian of the Magical World

In His speech on the lover, the lunatic and the poet, the Duke of Athens claims that what happened in that long ‘night’ were mere illusions created by the “seething brains” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, V, i, 5) of the lovers. Hyppolita’s protest is to no avail. Still, it makes the verdict seem as unreasonable as that which it denies. The dismissal of the strange events is further questioned (maybe unwittingly) by Theseus himself when he says:

Lovers, to bed; ’Tis almost fairy time.
I fear we shall out-sleep the coming morn
As much as this night we have overwatch’d

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, V, i, 354-356)

These lines show that Theseus, the time measuring character, is trying to make sure the two worlds never meet again. He thus guarantees the invisibility of the trickster. Therefore, we may argue that in the play, he acts as the guardian of the magical world. Accordingly, he cannot be excluded from the forest adventure altogether.

(Un)staged Doubles

In 1970, Peter Brook casts Alan Howard as Theseus and Oberon, Sara Kastleman as Hippolyta and Titania, John Kane as Philostrate and Puck, and Philip Locke as Egeus and Quince. Since then, a tradition of performative doubling has been established. This tradition still holds its sway over the theatrical performances of the play. Nevertheless, in the 2011 Nancy Meckler’s production of the play, the doubling has been seasoned. In that
production, only the two royal couples are played by the same actor/actress, Joe Stone-
fewings and Pippa Nixon.

There may be a mysterious link between The Duke of Athens and the fairies, but
whether it justifies casting the same actor in the roles of Theseus and Oberon or not, is
questionable. In her broadcasted lecture on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Emma Smith
emphasises the interchangeability between characters. She gives the example of Demetrius
and Lysander. Smith refers to the scene in which Theseus says that “Demetrius is a worthy
gentleman” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, i, 52) and Hermia retorts: “so is Lysander” (*A
Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, I, 53).

However, what Smith seems to overlook is that Lysander and Demetrius are
interchangeable only within the value system that considers each one of them “a worthy
gentleman” in his own right. Indeed, both Lysander and Egeus resist the parallelism by
referring to two distinct value systems. The former refers to the love Demetrius professes for
Helena while the latter clings to the ancient law of Athens.

**A Matter of Actions**

These value systems are used to judge actions. Indeed, Egeus wants to sue his
daughter for refusing to marry the man he has chosen for her not for her being in love with
Lysander. In the same vein, Lysander reminds Demetrius of what he has done to Helena
saying: Demetrius, I’ll avouch it to his head,

Made love to Nedar’s daughter, Helena,
And won her soul. And she, sweet lady, dotes,
Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry
Upon this spotted and inconstant man.

(*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I, i, 107-111)

He blames him for his past actions. Therefore, it seems that only actions do matter.
In terms of action, there are more parallels between Theseus and Robin Goodfellow than
between the former and the king of the fairies. Within the framework where only actions
matter, Oberon hardly resembles Theseus. The role of Oberon in the fairy world can scarcely
be compared to that of Theseus in the world of the humans. In the human world, Theseus
directs the action on stage. It is he that removes Egeus and Demetrius from the scene to allow
the lovers, Lysander and Hermia, to plan their eloping. Moreover, He allows them enough
time to tell Helena about their plans. She in turn will reveal all to Demetrius.

Then, the couples will chase each other in the forest where Robin Goodfellow
intervenes to prevent the angry lovers from meeting each other onstage. Thus, Like Theseus,
who postpones his verdict (in the case of Hermia’s marriage), he prevents the play from
turning into a tragedy.

**The Parallels that Never Meet**

Curiously enough, Puck and Theseus seem to be the parallels that can never meet. This
may explain why Theseus withdraws from the stage at “fairy time” (*A Midsummer Night’s
Dream, V, i, 354). He also orders everyone to go to sleep and literally clears the stage for the fairies. He says the last mortal word in the play while Puck utters the last fairy word. Like Theseus, Puck frames the action of the play. As a matter of course, it is quite significant that the first line uttered by a fairy is Puck’s “How now, spirit? Whither wander you?” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II, i, 45). This question marks a shift from the real to the imaginary. The geographical exactitude of Thesues is replaced with the open generalities of the fairies speeches:

Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush, thorough brier,  
Over park, over pale,  
Thorough flood, thorough fire.  
I do wander everywhere  
Swifter than the moon’s sphere.  
And I serve the fairy queen  
To dew her orbs upon the green.  
The cowslips tall her pensioners be.  
In their gold coats spots you see.  
Those be rubies, fairy favors.  
In those freckles live their savors.  
I must go seek some dewdrops here  
And hang a pearl in every cowslip’s ear.  
Farewell, thou lob of spirits. I’ll be gone.  
Our queen and all our elves come here anon.  

(A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II, i, 2-16)

The notion of space seems hazy in these lines. Indeed, even the word “here” ceases to denote proximity; if both the King and the Queen of the fairies “doth keep [their] revels here tonight” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, II, i, 17), how can Robin ask his fellow fairy not to let Oberon see the Queen? Indeed, characters may be “here” without meeting each other.

Replacing Theseus as the clock and the compass of the play, Robin loosens time and space and stretches them beyond their known limits. Indeed, while Theseus subjects every movement onstage to his spatiotemporal exactitude, Puck seems to stretch these two categories without losing control over the performance. Despite his initial mistake, which is caused by Theseus management of time, the Fairy is in total control of the forest performance. Even sleep and waking happen only when it suits the plans of the playful fairy. In this play, trickery is primarily playing with time and space. Only two characters in A Midsummer Night’s Dream can play with both categories. The Duke and the playful fairy seem to be working together. Both of them play tricks with time and space. They manipulate these two categories to guarantee the success of the forest magic.

Accordingly, we may agree with William Hazlitt that it may be “too much to suppose all this intentional” (Hazlitt, 65), but we cannot overlook the overlapping between the roles of the two characters. Whether intentionally or not, the leader of the fairy band and the lord of Athens help each other.

We know that to suggest that the role(s) of the Duke and the playful fairy should be played by the same actor may still seem unwarrantable. However, the parallels between these two roles cannot be overlooked. This is why, highlighting them in performance will certainly prove rewarding.
References

Print sources


**Electronic sources**


**Performances**

