Infinite Interpretations

Actors define a character by bringing to life the traits printed on a page. In certain Shakespeare plays, however, an actor’s performance is a different interpretation of a character than what a reader may have gathered from the script. Shakespeare’s Puck and Oberon, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, are mischievous, domineering, and manipulative. In the 1999 Hollywood film production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the male fairies display other characteristics, such as immaturity, forbearance, and sympathy. The various acting choices displayed in the film’s presentation of Shakespeare’s first scene of the second act, add multiple features to already complex creations. The actors’ portrayals of Puck and Oberon, in the film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* provide attributes Shakespeare’s text does not display, allowing for a different interpretation of his characters.

In the film, the character Puck is portrayed in a way that is more infantile and clueless than presented in the play. In the beginning of Act 2, described as a “shrewd and knavish sprite…that frights the maidens of the villager,” one might picture Puck as a young, mischievous fairy under the capable hands of an older Oberon (2.1.33-35). The film, however, presents Puck (Stanley Tucci) as a middle-aged man alongside a slightly younger looking Rupert Everett as his master, Oberon. This decision to cast an older man as Puck enhances the character’s immaturity; the paradox of seeing a grown man participating in such childish pranks emphasizes the juvenility of his shenanigans. One sees a grown man partaking in silly tricks, as he literally “lurk[s] in a gossip’s bowl” as he only brags of having done in the play (2.1.47-50). This adolescent behavior is further illustrated in the film as Puck clumsily attempts to kiss another fairy, while stating “take heed the queen come not within [Oberon’s] sight” (2.1.19). In the text this line is seen as a command to help his master avoid confrontation, but in the film as he fails to woo the fairy, the audience is introduced to an incapable servant instead of a proper page. He then states a frightening line from the play, “Oberon is passing fell and wrath,” but the phrase loses its edge as Puck falls down several steps in a drunken manner and giggles uncontrollably (2.1.20). Puck, rather than the clever comedian one infers from the text, is represented in the film as a drunk who never grew up and never achieved competence as a servant.

As Tucci’s performance of Puck adds foolishness to the character, the film’s interpretation of his relationship with Oberon continues to enhance Puck’s immaturity while creating a fresh side to Oberon. The film further demonstrates Puck’s childishness as he nervously attempts to leave after witnessing his master call Titana a “tarry rash wanton” and threatens to “torment [her] for this injury” she caused (2.1.63,147). Through these words Oberon is portrayed as he is in the text; cruel and dictatorial. When Oberon calls for his servant Puck, Tucci rushes to his master’s side and once again showing his immaturity, mimics Oberon’s position on the ground. Everett (Oberon) changes his forceful attitude and indicates a pleasantness to the character by smiling at Puck’s antics. When Oberon asks for Puck to fetch him the flower containing the love juice, Tucci replies with Puck’s line in the play, “I’ll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes” (2.1.175-176). Unlike the play, Tucci makes no motion to exit, and instead leans back into a relaxed position with Oberon, displaying Puck’s incompetence. Oberon’s reaction, merely rolling his eyes, is an interesting choice for a character who mainly exhibits bitterness and domineering tones in the play, not only to his wife, but Puck as well. In the text, Oberon seems indifferent to Puck, only giving him orders, such as, “Come hither,” “Fetch me this herb,” “Meet me ere the first cock crow” (2.1.148,173,267). The actors’ intimacy and playfulness allows the audience to see Oberon as a forgiving friend instead of a demanding husband or cold master.

Everett’s Oberon is friendly when it comes to Puck, and sympathetic when it concerns Helena. Oberon’s motives for instructing Puck to place the love potion on Demitrius’s eyes are not necessarily clear in the play. After witnessing the altercation between Helena and Demetrius, he does not express sorrow for Helena, but only says, “Fare thee well, nymph. Ere he do leave this grove” (2.1.245). With lack of proof of Oberon’s sympathy in the text, one might believe Oberon to be manipulating the Athenian’s situation for his own amusement or dislike for Demitius, “a disdainful youth” (2.1.261). The film’s Oberon is given sympathy as a motive for interfering by Everett’s facial expressions as he watches Helena pursue Demetrius. Everett closes his eyes and squints his face in disgust as Calista Flockhart (Helena), recites a particularly demeaning analogy from the play in which she compares herself to a spaniel and begs “to be used as [Demitrius would] use [his] dog” (2.1.210). The disconcerting words are made even more disturbing by Flockhart’s enthusiastic delivery, causing Everett to shake his head in disappointment. Without Everett’s reactions as Oberon to Helena’s begging, one has no knowledge of why Oberon wishes to bring the two Athenians together. The film’s interpretation of this confrontation allows Oberon’s compassion to be displayed, creating sympathy for Helena, who at this moment in the play receives none.

Viewing a film adaptation of a Shakespeare play can change one’s opinions of a character’s attributes, feelings, and motives. The film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* during the first scene of the second act, heightens aspects of Puck’s impish behavior through Tucci’s age and performance of tricks. The fairy’s wit, however, is downplayed, for when Tucci recites Puck’s lines his physicality is that of a clumsy drunk. Puck’s relationship with Oberon illustrates Puck as incompetent, an attribute not seen in the play during this early scene. Through their relationship, Everett displays a friendly side of Oberon unseen in the play’s dialogue. His harsh words to his wife make him seem all the kinder when he reacts inoffensively to Puck’s inadequacy. Everett’s expression of disgust towards Helena’s analogy and looks of pity during her pleading, brings endearment to a character whose actions are interpreted as manipulative in the play. The actors’ creative choices define these characters in a new way during the film. Shakespeare is able to create personalities with dialogue alone, but the actors’ physicality and expressions create many opportunities for different characterizations and emphasize the multitudinous ways in which Shakespeare’s words can be interpreted.