



William Blake

Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing, circa 1786

OF FLOWERS AND FAIRIES AND FARCE

Being a small re-telling of a Comedie of Wm Shakespeare

'Come hither, Puck; fetch me the flower which maids call Love in Idleness; the juice of that little purple flower laid on the eyelids of those who sleep, will make them, when they awake, dote on the first thing they see. Some of the juice of that flower I will drop on the eyelids of my Titania when she is asleep; and the first thing she looks upon when she opens her eyes she will fall in love with, even though it be a lion or a bear, a meddling monkey, or a busy ape; and before I will take this charm from off her sight, which I can do with another charm I know of, I will make her give me that boy to be my page.'

- Oberon, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

If you're thinking Tinkerbell when you think of fairies, Shakespeare has a surprise for you. There are lots of cultures that include fairies and other tiny beings of the woods, but in many of them, these beings are dangerous indeed. Cherokee Indians, who for centuries lived in wooded areas, tell of fairies who can be mean and hurtful if provoked, and the fairy world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not all sweetness and fun. After all, it's the fairies who muddle the minds of mortals with spells and the juice of flowers. They can be mean and spiteful indeed.

Just ask Bottom, the Weaver...the mortal who helps to write the play-within-a-play. One minute he's the simple human and the next, thanks to Puck, he's only *mostly* human: he's grown the head of an ass. And thanks to Oberon and that "Love-in-Idleness" flower juice, the queen of the fairies, Titania falls in love with donkey-headed Bottom. Puck is fond of making fun of human love, but here, the fairies are joking each other!

Flowers also play an important part in this light comedy. After all, these are people of the forest, and they use all its resources: Titania sleeps in a snake skin, crowns Bottom's ass-head with flowers, and sleeps where wild thyme, cowslips, sweet violets grow under a canopy of woodbine, musk-roses, and eglantine. Note that in Shakespeare's time, each flower had a remedy for a human ailment, and also stood as a symbol for a human condition.

When the lovers flee to the woods, it's not a benign place into which they enter: It's a frightening and dangerous place.

Online Activity

Of Flowers and Faeries and Farce

VOCABULARY

muddle
spiteful
benign

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do cultures come up with characters like fairies: Small, impudent, supernatural creatures that wreak havoc on their prey?
2. Why do people enjoy hearing stories about fairies and their mystical world?
3. What do certain flowers stand for today? The daisy, the rose, the carnation, the daffodil?
4. Why was it important for children to hear scary stories about fairies and the woods? Think about issues of safety.

ARTS ACTIVITIES

1. Virtual Museum *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has inspired many artists. Have students explore some of these pieces at this website and create their own virtual museum: http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/MidsummerPaintings.html. The virtual museum can be created as a slideshow in PowerPoint, or using cut and paste in a Word document. Before selecting, students should select a theme or a selection approach: Variety, Titania, Metaphor, etc. Then students should name their museum exhibit with a catchy phrase and the subtitle of their choice such as "Dream and Reality: The Art of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

2. Musical Fairies Music with the theme of fairies or the fairy world is common. Students can listen to selection and match them with artwork in Art Activity #1 or art representations of fairies. Some musical selections include: Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies," Purcell's "The Fairy Queen," Beethoven's "The Elfin Fairies," Stravinsky's "The Fairy's Kiss," and Ravel's "Fairy Overture." Artwork includes Edmund Thomas Parris' "The Visit At Moonlight," David Scott's "Ariel and Caliban," and works by Richard Dadd and Sir Joseph Noel Paton, two famous Victorian painters who are known for their fairy world works.

SOL EXTENSIONS

ENGLISH Read stories from around the world that feature sprites or fairies, small, impudent, supernatural creatures who wreak havoc on their prey. How are these tales similar to "trickster" stories?

SCIENCE Many natural occurrences have been attributed to fairies over time. Fairy Rings are actually a fungus growing in grass. Fairies were said to create the tones made by falling water. Can your students discover other natural events attributed to fairies and explain their scientific cause?

HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES The history of fairies in the United Kingdom is fascinating and reveals much about the cultural foundations upon which British humanities are built.