



The Green World

Oberon, Titania, Puck and the Demi-Diabolical Realm of Fae

By Jerry James

The Fae are nothing more than demonic beings in angelic skins, living for the sole purpose of bringing forth chaos and discord onto the world.

—Codex Sancti ad Lunam Bestiary



“Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing,” William Blake (c. 1786)

William Shakespeare sets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in an ancient Athens of the mind. True, it is governed by Duke Theseus and Hippolyta. But instead of their immortal counterparts being Zeus and Hera, they are Oberon and Titania, rulers of the Fae, joined by that wild card, Puck.

Their realm is what the critic Northrop Frye would later call, “The Green World,” a world set apart from daily life. But the color green might not always have the same restful connotation in Shakespeare’s time as it does for today’s weary urbanite. Rather, the Green World was the place to which the prey fled. To hunt the prey, the hunter wore green. And who was the prime Hunter in Christendom? The Devil! Or, to call him by a once-common synonym, Puck.

It is sometimes said that Shakespeare took the danger out of the Fae, turning them into endearing characters only a step removed from Disney’s Tinkerbell. But not every fairy in the play is a creature of light and air. Oberon and Titania are the former lovers of Hippolyta and Theseus—and they play for keeps. The Athenian mortals who venture into the Green World risk serious changes in their lives. Some might even call these changes diabolical.

Where did Shakespeare get his conception of the Realm of Fae? In that context, who are Oberon, Titania and Puck? And what are they up to?

The Realm of Fae



Isadora Duncan as the First Fairy, 1896

As so often happens in English folklore, it all starts with the Irish. Their legends say the Fae were created from stardust by the Tuatha Dé Danann to assist them as the stewards of Nature. However, the Fae decided they would be better off striking out on their own, severing their connection with the divine and ruling their own kingdom outside the laws of the gods. This tale bears an astonishing resemblance to the story of Lucifer's departure from heaven, minus the Miltonian fireworks.

Oberon, King of the Fae, was sometimes said to have two wives, Titania and Mab—one summer, one winter; one simply amoral, one downright malicious. This paralleled the way the king and queen's offspring dealt with humans, whom they regarded with an amused contempt. The Fae were those whom humans always called "the fair folk," or "the good people," in an effort to keep them from knowing what mortals *really* thought of them. Tall as Tolkien's elves, these Fae might at any moment decide to disperse your herd or enlarge it; snatch your child or bless it; kill you or grant long life. On a whim. It was a parlous way for humans to live.

Shakespeare, perhaps pillaging a lost play called *The King of Fairies*, modified all this folklore for his own ends. His Mab is small (*Romeo and Juliet*). But his Titania and Oberon retain their stature. Shakespeare may

have here displayed some hidden Catholicism, flaunting in Protestant England these pagan, Roman creatures—with just a tang of the Devil.

The four lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* flee into the Green World of necessity. But this quartet will soon discover that they do things differently there. The lovers have the bad timing to find themselves in the middle of a quarrel between Oberon and Titania, a quarrel so massive it has disrupted all of Nature. Nature will be set right, but not before some astonishing acts of amorality and maliciousness are performed—sometimes directly upon the hapless humans.

The Green World laughs at mortals.

Oberon



Oberon's name comes from the Old High German Alberich (alb = elf; rih = ruler), who was a magician in the legends of the Merovingian dynasty. In the *Nieblegenlied*, he guards the Rheingold. (Richard Wagner would later make him much nastier.) Ob is also the name of one of the serpents in the Caduceus, the staff of Hermes, which was said to be able to wake the sleeping and vice-versa. Little wonder that Oberon can so command sleep!

Shakespeare probably heard of Oberon from his appearance as Auberon in *Huon de Bordeaux*, the 13th century French historical romance, translated c. 1540 by Lord

Berners. Also, Shakespeare's colleague Philip Henslowe reported a like-named play in 1593. (Oberon's name would eventually be tamed into the very British Aubrey.)

In *Huon*, Oberon is only 3 feet tall, having been cursed by a wicked fairy. None of that for Shakespeare, whose tall Oberon wants what he wants when he wants it—and will use brutal means to get it, employing Puck, his diabolical familiar. In this case, he wants “a little changeling boy to be my henchman,” a desire which 21st century ears might hear differently than those of the play's original audience.

But Oberon is also capable of near-human emotions, including sympathy for Helena and—after having gotten what he wants—pity for Titania.

The Green World has unseen depths.

Titania

The name "Titania" comes from Shakespeare's well-thumbed copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There, it is the name for several goddesses who were descendants of the Titans, the Elder Gods overthrown by the Olympians under Zeus. One of these was Circe; another, Diana. Circe transformed men into beasts. Diana, surprised while skinny-dipping, transformed the luckless voyeur into a stag, who was then torn apart by his own hounds. Echoes of these episodes mark Bottom's encounter with Titania.

Sarah Allison writes, “Diana has ties to Hecate, and Hecate to Persephone. So, Titania is a super-combo of classical and medieval references—Artemis, Circe, Hecate, Persephone. Goddesses of night, nature, the underworld, witchcraft, and transformation.”



Titania's magic is not the equal of Oberon's, but he cannot take the changeling from her by force. She must freely give him up. So it is that Oberon bewitches Titania into dallying with Bottom, now topped with the head of an ass. It was Jan Kott who pointed out, “From antiquity... the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all quadrupeds was supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus.”

It is only after her encounter with Bottom that Titania yields up the child to Oberon without so much as an objection, triggering his pity—now that he has the boy.

The Green World can be as cruel as Nature itself.

Puck

Shakespeare may have found Puck in Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). The name comes into English from Old Norse—unless, of course, it's the other way round. Or does it come from the Irish “pooka,” even though Puck has little in common with Harvey, the pooka who was Jimmy Stewart's six-foot-tall invisible rabbit buddy?

The First Fairy knows enough about Puck to tread carefully, first using the human ploy of calling him “Robin Goodfellow.” And if she's a bit too close to the mark when she calls him “hobgoblin,” she's quick to immediately placate him with “sweet Puck.”

Although Shakespeare's Puck brags about his pranks, they remain only pranks, toned down for Elizabethan audiences. Pulling a stool from under a milkmaid's bottom is a far cry from leading a traveler to his death.



By 1906, he has become Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, "the oldest Old thing in England." He came with oak and ash and thorn and will depart only when they are gone. Nowadays, what was once a demi-diabolical name has descended into the adjective "puckish," meaning, "playful, especially in a mischievous way."

But some Elizabethan theatregoers would remember the days when Puck was a name to fear, along with those of ogre and incubus. They might even remember *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (c.1377), in which it is written, "There is no amount of money that can bail us out of Puck's [the Devil's] prison."

This memory lurks in the underbrush of the Green World.

Reconciliation



"The Reconciliation of Titania and Oberon"
Sir Joseph Noel Paton (1847)

When morning comes to the Green World, all the follies of the night are forgotten or glossed over. The lovers and Titania affect a "Who, me?" stance. Even Bottom, so proud of his oratory, is reduced to incomplete sentences—and an ineffable memory.

That night, Oberon, newly attended by his changeling boy, will bless the triple wedding in company with Titania. There will be no mention of the means by which this tranquility was achieved. Oberon's drugs are amnesiac. No one who has been non-consensually dosed with them seems to have any knowledge of what has happened to so change them. It is almost, well, diabolical.

Did we mention that Oberon is often depicted with horns and hooves, just like you-know-who?

All part of the Green World.

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