

## **Gods and Demons:**

# An Examination of the Divine in King Lear and A Midsummer Night's Dream

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## **Outline**

### **I. Thesis**

- Highlighting the exploration of divine matters in *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and establishing the significance of characters' perspectives of Gods in shaping the plays.

### **II. *King Lear*: Pagan Realm**

- Explore the serious tone and use of pagan symbols and imagery in the play.
- Emphasize characters' summoning of Gods during times of crisis.
- Highlight Lear's evolving perception, linking it to tragic events and conflicts.

### **III. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: The Kingdom of the Gods**

- Contrast the lighthearted approach, the playful interpretation of the characters as Gods in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Discuss symbolism and imagery conveying the capricious nature of gods in a comedic setting.

#### **IV. Comparison: Impact on Tragic and Comedic Fates**

- Discuss the profound exploration of divine matters in *King Lear*, leading to a desire for salvation.
- Highlight the whimsical and fantastical plot in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, influenced by the characters' confidence of their identity as Gods

#### **V. Effects on Plot Development**

- Analyze how characters' perspectives on Gods shape the tragic events and conflicts in *King Lear*.
- Discuss the role of divine interpretation in the comedic fates and romantic entanglements in the characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## Gods and Demons:

### An Examination of The Divine in King Lear and A Midsummer Night's Dream

This essay sets out to uncover and compare how characters in *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* understand the Gods. It seeks to reveal the significant impact these perspectives have on the development of each play. Through a careful examination of the characters' beliefs, we delve into the depths of their motivations, beliefs, and subsequent actions. This exploration of divine perspectives acts as a guiding tool, shedding light on the moral landscapes that shape Lear's tragic downfall and the playful romantic adventures in the enchanted forest. Shakespeare, a master craftsman, embeds profound insights into the human condition and social dynamics within the characters' views on gods.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare establishes a serious atmosphere characterized by pagan symbols and imagery when delving into divine matters. The characters' viewpoints on Gods lean towards seeing them as “all good” beings, as illustrated in Lear's remark that God only gets the woman down to her belt- the rest belongs to the devil (4.6.140-145). This statement highlights the belief that God is in control of only positive aspects in life, while negative experiences, misfortunes, and hardships are attributed to the devil.

The presence of different types of Gods is emphasized by descriptive terms used within the play to define these beings such as mighty, kind, pure and gentle, further reinforcing the

diversity present in the pantheon of Gods. This suggests a hierarchy or distinction among Gods, each possessing specific powers and governing particular aspects of the world.

Importantly, the characters in *King Lear* see the Gods as ultimate masters of fate, as reflected in Edgar's phrase emphasizing their perceived control: "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us." (5.3.210). In this pagan context, the characters feel that all actions and deaths are governed by the Gods, placing their destinies under divine judgment and craftsmanship, completely beyond their control.

This exploration of pagan beliefs in *King Lear* establishes the stage for the characters' interactions with the divine, influencing the unfolding of tragic events and conflicts in the play. At the beginning of the play, King Lear thinks the Gods will make things right. He expects the Gods to punish Gonerill and Regan for not being thankful. But as the story goes on, Lear starts to worry that the Gods are against him. This change shows how Lear's thoughts are all mixed up, and by Act 5, he seems to find his faith again, expressing how much he loves his daughter Cordelia. The sad part is that Cordelia is taken away by a 'regular' person, Edmund. Lear not talking about the Gods in this important moment makes us wonder who is to blame.

Gloucester and Kent, like Lear, have different views on the Gods. Gloucester, at first, thinks the Gods are fair, but the things happening around him make him doubt this. The mention of eclipses in Act 1 Scene 2 becomes a way to talk about disorder in both the sky and on Earth. Kent, following the beliefs of the time, says that the stars and planets affect people's lives.

What the characters believe about divine justice really changes how the story goes. Lear's faith affects what he decides and does, making the sad parts of the story happen. Gloucester and Kent changing their minds about the Gods adds complexity to the themes, using the movement of the stars as a way to explain order and chaos. Talking about eclipses helps the characters try to understand the mess in their lives, blaming it on problems in the sky.

The way faith is shown in *King Lear* is not just about supporting a religion. Characters like Cordelia and Edgar, who act like good Christians, make us question the idea of divine justice as they face sad endings. Cordelia's sad fate makes us wonder if the Gods are really good, and Edgar's confused thoughts about divine punishment add more layers to the story.

Contrary to the variety of Gods worshipped in *King Lear*, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, The Gods (by the characters) are perceived as if they are within the character's themselves. The name Theseus for the king of Athens and Hippolytus for his queen places us as readers into a sort of mythological mindset. As we associate one character from Greek mythology, we naturally view the other characters to be part of the same theme. The traits allotted to the characters are, in this way, purposely similar to those of Greek Deities, like Oberon and Titiana who could be considered similar to Zeus and Hera. The character of Puck in the play could potentially be compared to Eros, the Greek God of sexual love and beauty. The cream that Puck places over the character's eyes to make them fall in love with the first thing they see could be considered equivalent to Eros' golden arrows, which he uses to make people

fall in love, or be indifferent to love that could be linked to Puck's reversal of the love between the characters with the same cream.

The idea of the characters being Gods in the play is further developed by Theseus's demand to Hermia to see her father as a God as he's the one who created her beauty" (1.1.50). This emphasizes that the characters subconsciously considered Gods to be people, and not some higher or greater beings. Helena's statement "We, Hermia, like two artificial gods, Have with our needles created both one flower," (3.2.210-215) further claims that Shakespeare didn't just simply mean to portray these characters as Gods but they were written in such a way as if they, in their minds, believed they truly were Gods and even worshipped themselves that way.

Comparing the influence of characters' beliefs on tragic and comedic outcomes in *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reveals a distinct contrast. In *King Lear*, characters' pagan beliefs shape their views on a divinely controlled world. The notion that God governs only the good aspects of life, while the devil is responsible for misfortunes, creates a hierarchy of Gods with specific powers. The characters see Gods as orchestrators of fate, with a conviction that divine justice is meted out through human wrongdoings. Tragic outcomes in the play are closely tied to characters' unwavering pagan beliefs, creating a somber tone and a desire for salvation.

On the other hand, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes a lighthearted approach to the divine. Gods are portrayed within the characters themselves, evoking a mythological atmosphere. The intentional similarities to Greek deities contribute to the fantastical plot, the character's

playful engagement with the divine, symbolized by elements like the love-in-idleness flower, leads to humorous resolutions of romantic entanglements.

This comparison highlights *King Lear* as a profound exploration of divine matters, emphasizing a desire for salvation rooted in pagan beliefs. Meanwhile, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* showcases a whimsical plot shaped by characters' playful engagement with an unstable concept of the divine, contributing to comedic outcomes.

In terms of plot development, Lear's initial belief in divine justice sets the stage for the unfolding tragedy in *King Lear*. At the beginning of the play, Lear thinks that if he divides his kingdom among his daughters, they will reciprocate with love and care. This idea is rooted in a sense of divine justice—Lear expects a harmonious response to his generous gesture. However, as events take a turn for the worse, and his daughters betray him, Lear's perception of divine justice shifts dramatically.

When things go wrong, Lear begins to question whether the Gods are angry with him. This change in perspective becomes a pivotal point in the narrative, influencing Lear's decisions and actions. Lear's growing fear of divine hostility and his feelings of injustice during the storm showcase a shift from his initial belief in an “all-good” divine order to a more apprehensive view of the Gods. This transformation in Lear's understanding of divine justice significantly contributes to the tragic events in the story.



Even though some might argue that there are Christian ideas in *King Lear*, the play mostly follows pagan beliefs. Characters like Cordelia and Edgar, who act like good Christians, have sad endings. This makes us wonder if the gods are fair or not within the pagan beliefs of the characters. The fact that those with Christian virtues in the play face tragic fates shows that divine justice in the world Shakespeare creates is complicated and sometimes seems random.

Some expressions in the play like Edgar's observation to Gloucester, "Therefore, thou happy father, Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.." (4.6.85-90) highlight the characters' belief in the Gods' control over their fate. This implies a sense of powerlessness and lack of control over their own lives. The characters see the Gods as orchestrators of fate, using human wrongdoings as instruments to bring suffering. The fatalistic tone in such expressions contributes to the overall sense of inevitability and tragedy in the play.

Further, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the thematic exploration of characters perceiving themselves as Gods or engaging in divine interpretations significantly influences the unfolding of the plot, infusing it with complexity and humour.

The fairy king, Oberon, and the fairy queen, Titania, are depicted as formidable and otherworldly entities possessing magical prowess and dominion over nature. Their divine attributes align them with celestial beings, introducing a supernatural ambiance to the play. The conflicts between Oberon and Titania, particularly their dispute concerning the changeling boy,

accentuate the unpredictable and capricious nature associated with Gods. Their meddling in human affairs generates disorder, laying the groundwork for ensuing comedic events.

Puck serves as a mischievous and impish character in the service of Oberon. Functioning as a trickster god, Puck orchestrates pranks and instigates confusion among mortal characters. The unintended repercussions of Puck's actions contribute to comedic misunderstandings and entangled relationships, exemplified by the mismatched love interests involving Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius.

The subplot involving the "rude mechanicals" attempting to perform a play for the Duke and Duchess adds another layer of comedic interpretation of Gods. Bottom, one of the mechanicals, undergoes a transformation into an ass due to Puck's mischief. This transformation sets the stage for humorous interactions between Bottom and Titania, who, enchanted, falls in love with him. The absurdity of the situation and the exaggerated reactions of the characters contribute to the overall comedic tone of the play.

The love relationships within the play are characterized by confusion and irrationality, propelled by the magical interventions of the fairy world. The characters' perceptions of themselves and each other become distorted, intensifying the comedic elements. The resolution of these conflicts emphasizes the role of fate and supernatural forces in shaping human relationships.

In essence, the characters' self-perceived divine status or engagement with divine elements in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contributes substantially to its whimsical and humorous nature. The play skillfully delves into the unpredictable and irrational aspects of love, fate, and the supernatural, establishing itself as a comedic masterpiece within the realm of Shakespearean drama.

## **Bibliography**

1. *King Lear*
2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*