

University of Alexandria  
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**Prospero's Revels:**

**A Study of the Folktale Elements in a Selection of Shakespeare's**

**Comedies**

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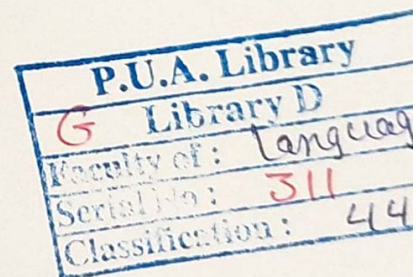
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### Conclusion

**“Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
... were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air.”**

*The Tempest (4.1.148-50)*

At an age of fascination with festivity and celebration, royal pageants, masques and revels, as well as public spectacles both of theatrical and ritualistic nature, a young man from the countryside by the name of William Shakespeare, immersed in the culture of his folk, well read in history, philosophy, literature, etc., with a good taste for a fine tale and an unmatched talent at telling it, moves to the central cultural hub of England to leave an imprint on both national and world literatures for ages to come.

This study claims that the Bard of Avon, known for his borrowing from different sources, did not only rely on the written word, but also on oral folk narratives that were passed from one generation to another, and that were thriving as a form of art, told by adults for adults, in a continuous process of telling and retelling in which the narrator would every time put his own imprint. From these tales and the folk culture that created them, Shakespeare, like Bottom the Weaver's name suggests, weaved his plots, to create “literary fairytales” that survived to feed the imaginations of all posterity.

Shakespeare being an entertainer, first and foremost, and quite a brilliant one indeed, uses such folktale elements in his comedies, which one may even identify as clichés to create something new, something with a power of liberation from everyday life, “literary fairytales.” His comedies like the spirit of carnival manifest in festivals like May Day or Midsummer often



subverted the established world order to liberate the audience into an alternate wished for existence where all their dreams come true.

This research includes six of Shakespeare's comedies as mere examples of the poet's works, noting that although *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, are usually categorized as romances rather than comedies, it was thought apt to include them in such study, since they still fall under the wider definition of comedy as having a "happy ending", which is often translated into the typical "happily ever after" of fairytale discourse.

Moreover, the study deals with the plays not according to chronological order, but rather according to their resemblance to the fairytale model. Thus, the first chapter starts by discussing the general festive spirit of the two light romantic comedies *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, as two plays where identity is concealed and later revealed to accomplish the fulfillment of a love story at the end. The second chapter deals with *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter's Tale*, where a more complex vision of the tale is at work; impossible bonds, riddles, festivals, pastoral lovers, statues coming to life are all embedded within the structure of the plays to make them even further removed from reality. The last chapter deals with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, where the fairytale in Shakespeare becomes not just a tale but a whole dramatic world. In these two plays the fantasy is not just in the plot. We finally meet the fairies, who happen to shape the world's imagination of the fairytale ever since.

In doing so, the bard does not only rely on his stories for enjoyment or suspension of world order, but he also uses various devices of estrangement to highlight the incredibility of his material and that it should all be taken with a grain of salt. In an attempt at a semiotic reading of the plays within the framework of their resemblances to folk and fairy tales, Shakespeare seems

to be quite self-reflexive at times, where his drama often becomes a meta-dramatic discourse. Mixed identities and disguise take over in the first two plays to emphasize Shakespeare's view of the world as theatrical space, "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players." His characters are definitely "players" who have their "exits" and their "entrances" and indeed play many parts. Viola is both herself and Cesario, and Rosalind is also Ganymede. Even Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* shares in the spectacle of this mass-masquerade of female characters.

The second chapter celebrates the versatility of Shakespeare's tales, and his ability to suit them to his different characters. In a pun referring to Shakespeare's own father being a milliner, Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* "hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes. / No milliner can so fit his customers with gloves." Autolycus' songs become symbols of Shakespeare's plays, and the pun praises his abilities for creating characters, that are both in line with the folktale tradition as types and yet so poignant. Shylock is one of them, for example. As a symbol of the Ogre who is after human flesh, Shylock has so wealthy a character that he can sometimes be unnerving,

The third chapter is a realization of the dream. Often termed as "visionary" plays both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* boast almost all aspects of the fairytale, from love stories which end in marriage, and festivity, plays within plays and revels, to the fairies, who are described as "airy nothing" in one play, and "such stuff as dreams are made on" in the other. However, while these creatures have been sometimes referred to in the other plays discussed, it is only in these two plays that we fully realize their existence, acting as the hand that moves the clock and pushes the action forward. In these plays, like the others Shakespeare is also engaged in some kind of meta-narrative, reflected in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at two major points, the play within the play and Bottom's imaginative dream, and in *The Tempest* in the character of



Prospero himself, who is not only the protagonist of the play but also in many ways its very author. Prospero is Shakespeare's reflection of himself as a playwright in the creation of these revels, and his wand is a sign for Shakespeare's genius which gives to "airy nothing" a "local habitation and a name."