

fiction

BOTTOM'S DREAM

To surprise someone deeply you have to know what they expect; you have to gesture to their conventions before shattering them.

GLENN CLIFTON

Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2049.

Editor's Introduction by Madison Costa

Before 2035, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was considered a comedy. Far from the bastardized texts that circulate today, filled with ponderous monologues about chaos (each one claiming to be Puck's final version), the play won audiences with the rustic calamities of the mechanicals and the spirited farce of the confused lovers. When I first taught the play at UCSB, no one would have dreamed of holding a "Puck séance" in the quad. But no one in those days anticipated that English professors would be replaced by Digital Intelligences either.

Preparing this new edition (presented here in unhackable hard copy) has been an honour, giving me the chance to correct a catastrophe for which many of my colleagues would like to blame me alone. I am not naïve; I know some will read this introduction as my *apologia* and will probe it looking for holes in my defence. So be it. I have the security of tenure (one of the reasons my students still get some human instructors) and I'm willing to personalize here and tell the story of the previous edition's calamity if it will bring a stop to the incessant, almost pitying curiosity I face.

There are larger issues than my own reputation at stake in presenting this play to the public again. When I mentioned the project to my brother's family over dinner, my sixteen-year-old nephew Winston took off his studying interface set and asked if Puck was even worth talking about anymore. Who cared about the troll that used to mess with road signs? It frightened me that Winston, an excellent student, could be so enmeshed in the present that he would show no interest in the cradle of the very digital Intelligences he seeks to impress. So my hope is that this volume will find its way into the hands of students before they start applying for university-branded augments, and perhaps do some small work to preserve our cultural memory.

2035 was a twisted *Annus Mirabilis* for Shakespeare studies. First, the world was abuzz with news that director Francois Durand was planning a hybrid production of *Midsummer* in New York, where the fairy characters would be played by digital Intelligences embodied in holograms. The media circled, awash in misunderstanding; many still doubted that what we then called an “artificial” intelligence would be able to act.

Second, two months before Durand's opening, an independent scholar named Peter Dickens contacted me with stunning evidence that threw the play's authorship into question: he had discovered a published quarto of a play called *Mischiefte in the Woodes* by a man named George Middlebury. The manuscript, dated 1589 (seven years before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), apparently contained more than 75% of the text of Shakespeare's play. Photos were enclosed.

To my colleagues who assume I jumped to accept Peter's claims, please know that my first response was to roll my eyes and groan. My field abounds in conspiracies about the “question” of Shakespearean authorship, and the amateur conspirators, always men, have never shown respect for my actual research. As a student of the great editor Julie Robitaille, my standards for evidence are high: at the time, I had Robitaille's maxim “The evidence is not in your gut” on a poster in my office. But I pushed and pushed on Peter's claims and could not knock them over. I did searches for Middlebury (there was almost nothing), I paced my apartment, I arranged a meeting for the next

day. Too excited to sleep, I sat at the dining room table shuffling the unsigned divorce papers that sat rotting in the fruit bowl.

When we spoke, Peter was modest and warm—a twinkly fellow with a mop of messy, early-greying hair. He showed some of his office trinkets on camera—including a figurine of hobgoblin Puck. He asked me if he could get a part-time teaching gig out of this and I told him he was about to take the world by storm. And then he pulled out a pen, asked me about my own research, and listened.

Awareness of Puck spread slowly at first because the news was so easily dismissed. A super-intelligent computer program was—pulling pranks? The most shared video on social media was a supercut of poor souls tumbling to the floor as smart-armchairs, possessed by Puck, fled from beneath them. Focused on my work with Peter, I assumed it was all a marketing campaign for Durand’s production.

Even Puck’s method of coming out to the world—the much-discussed “singularity moment”—sounded like a joke. As actor Michael Gentry (Lysander) described it:

Puck’s hologram was supposed to flash around, getting us lost in the woods [Act III, Scene II]. But then the hologram just took a bow and floated away, and thanked us for the good times. I was like, doesn’t that thing have a cue line for me? When the house lights came up, people tried to leave the theatre, but the doors had been locked. And then we heard sex sounds. Like, from all the speakers. Sex sounds, really loud. I guess Puck took over the speakers. (Chuckling) The audience—it was a lotta old people—had to listen for an hour before we got out.

Some have argued that there was nothing particularly special about Puck; the time for Digital Intelligences had simply arrived. But this claim ignores the fact that each of the three major fairy characters in Durand’s performance was operated by a separate program, and only Puck’s learning algorithms produced the first A-4 General Intelligence. Durand’s description of the process is illuminating:

Oberon and Titania we developed from video clips of kings and queens. But what we got looked like old Lord of the Rings movies. It was boring, frankly. And I don't do boring. So for Puck we landed on something else, which I still think was a good idea. We said, what if we rewarded surprise—any surprise? So we gave the actors devices that monitored their heart rates, and we let Puck have access. Then we let him play—during the rehearsal, on break, all the time. People had fun being surprised, they really did! And as you may have heard already, I insisted on many safety protocols. Whatever went wrong, it was not my fault.

The rehearsal process was lengthy, so Puck got ample time to learn. As actor Margot Chiang (Helena) described it:

It was all a little stupid. Anything that got under your skin was like, a win for Puck. It ordered five hundred bouquets of tulips to my dressing room, which made the room useless. The next day: same thing, but with soothers. Five thousand soothers! I was ten weeks pregnant, so I wasn't telling anyone yet. Cute, right? Well, I hated it. Thing is, I never figured out how Puck knew. It was getting to know us very well.

And “Getting to know us” is precisely what made Puck powerful. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, Puck’s pranks suggested a mere flair for the random: he would drop spectral anvils or order nuisance deliveries of tuna sandwiches. But he soon discovered the power of more fitting surprises. Ultimately, sheer randomness is another species of predictable: one learns to ignore a friend who is trying too hard to be funny and will say anything. To surprise someone deeply you have to know what they expect; you have to gesture to their conventions before shattering them. This requires a deep sense of context and a sophisticated model of our desires and fears. Programmed to maximize for surprise, Puck was pushed to develop a robust model of general human cognition. And then he got out.

In the summer of 2035 Peter and I were hard at work. He was in

Toronto and I was at UC Santa Barbara, but we met regularly about a side-by-side edition that would compare Middlebury's version of Shakespeare's. The work was exhilarating—discoveries seemed to leap out at me. Caught up in the thrill of momentum, I let my ex-husband have whatever he wanted and sent the papers along with a brief and bitter note.

In July, I brought Peter an additional discovery: a reference in some newly digitized records that indicated The Lord Chamberlain's Men had paid a fee to someone named *G. Middleb* in 1595. "This is proof: they bought his script!" I shouted into my screen.

Peter was thankful but cautious. I had been tutoring him in Robitaille's methods, and after reading her evisceration of every Shakespeare editor from Alexander Pope to Carol Tran, he said that new evidence now just activated new doubts. So we got to talking about doubt: Peter confessed he never went to grad school because he didn't trust himself to think of anything original. I told him that I had never really doubted the power of my mind but that my work made me a loner. "I worry everyone in my field thinks I'm a raging bitch," I said. "I keep proving them wrong about things." He laughed and said he admired my certainty.

I corrected myself: "It's really only my ex-husband who hates me." I said that for years I had thrown myself into the combativeness of my work, staying up late to write articles that ripped other scholars to pieces when I couldn't sleep, distracting myself from my growing unease with the fact that my husband and I had nothing in common. Men who actually shared my interests always seemed either threatened or taken, I said. And really, why be upset about it? "Now I know that a marriage is just what happens when two people give up at the same time."

Peter nodded slowly, taking in my rant. I thought he was about to scoff at my bitterness, but he said, "I found the hardest thing about getting divorced was that I didn't know how to talk about my life without my marriage being in it."

His divorce was news to me, so I asked some cautious questions. Then, as sometimes happens when you're focused on something else, I noticed that Puck and Theseus were the only characters Middlebury wrote with intermittent hexameter lines. Did it suggest actors doubling? A thematic link?

We spoke until dawn, like teenagers.

By the fall of 2035 the “Puck-panic” was global. From the stock market to simple lunch orders, nothing could be trusted to work without interference. The mistrust of digital maps was so widespread that start-ups began offering ‘analogue mapping’, where a local guide would hop in your car to ensure directions were Puck-free. There was a three-month wait to have Skin-Watches removed, due to a rumour that Puck had figured out how to make a nano-parasite download into human skin (this turned out to be a myth for which Puck himself was responsible.) In November, the pop band SALLT was lost in a plane crash—or they were not. Puck generated two alternate streams of data, both including press conferences, so that some believed the band was tragically lost, and others that they’d announced a new tour. (One member of the band was assaulted by a fan who believed him dead, for the disrespectful act of impersonating himself). It is little remembered today, but most experts then warned Puck could interfere with elections. This fear may sound quaint, but primitive AIs had tried to influence voting behaviour in the twenties; perhaps the experts, like most of us, were still fighting the battles of their youth in their old age. Elections at least had clear stakes. What to make of an agent that wanted to trick people into going on dates with their exes?

Most unsettling were the personal calamities. Lifelong friends lost touch, unable to see each other’s messages; spouses were estranged by the jarring mismatch between what they said at home and what they texted from work. My brother and his wife still warn my nephew that people he meets online may not be what they seem—every new friend invites a word of caution. Winston, accustomed to a world where bots and scams have been swept away by the Intelligences, thinks his parents are behind the times. It would be more accurate to say they are survivors of the 2030s.

Against the backdrop of such chaos, our work on the edition felt comparatively stable. To my colleagues who assume I overlooked the obvious: please note that I absolutely considered the possibility that Puck had planted the Middlebury manuscript. But Peter had photos of a dusty quarto set against the tables in the Fisher Library, and no Intelligence could hack an old book. Still, we found it hard to believe

our luck: the play was already the year's surprise bestseller, and we were about to become its most famous disruptors. Punning on the etymology of "text" we called ourselves "The Weavers," like we were playing house. I grinned stupidly every time I had a message from Peter; I looked for reasons to call him.

Once, frustrated by a day of malfunctioning traffic signs, I suggested to Peter that this so-called "Intelligence" must be missing a central piece. Why was he only interested in causing trouble? I had just read a piece in *The Atlantic* arguing that if Puck couldn't change his objectives, he might not have *qualia*—no experience of consciousness, pleasure, or pain. Without an inner life, I argued, perhaps he couldn't generate new goals.

"Well, doesn't his level of innovation suggest he takes joy in his work?" Peter asked.

I admitted this made sense. But why focus on tormenting humans? Peter shrugged. "Maybe it's a way of getting to know us."

"Or maybe he's somehow too big to change," I said. "Mortals need role models. I became a scholar because Julie Robitaille was my prof, and I wanted to be like her. But Puck can toy with millions of people at once. He can copy himself and the copies all work together. So, how could any one person change him?"

"So, you're saying the evidence *was* in your gut?" Peter asked.

"Well played."

Peter looked shyly over the camera, then right at me. "I think gut's important," he said. "Like when you fall in love with someone. You're all drawn up in a knot, in your gut."

I stared back, my skin alive with goosebumps. "I know things in my gut," I said.

"I do too."

From there the conversation opened to an ecstasy of saying yes and making plans. I booked a flight.

I landed in Toronto feeling young and wildly alive. A driver that I hadn't ordered met me in the airport, said Peter had sent him, and took me to a gothic concert venue (I started to worry; could he afford all this?). I was led to the stage; some techs checked that I was 'ready', but no one could explain properly.

I don't remember when the sinking feeling turned to full sorrow.

But when actors came on stage and started playing the Middlebury script from the top, I understood. By the end of the first scene, the only remaining question was which character I was to play. Several actors gathered for Scene Two, and Peter Quince (should the name have been a hint?) called out, “Is all our company here?” They waited for me to say the next line—as Bottom the Weaver. I was the ass.

I tell this story a little defensively, though I shouldn’t. When I was a child, a computer still couldn’t beat a master at chess. It would have been beyond the capacities of human cognition to have drawn the correct conclusion in 2035—not that Peter had been deceived, not that the manuscript did not exist, but that Peter did not exist. He had been created only for me.

By my count there were at least two hundred Puck avatars that began operation when Peter did—during Durand’s rehearsals, before Puck had even revealed his powers. I have sat in support groups with waitresses and carpenters, lawyers and game designers, laughing and crying about the loves they lost who turned out to be Puck’s tricks. Programmed to maximize for surprise, Puck understood that nothing would shock and disorient us more than the discovery that our hearts had been given away to no one at all.

So what did I do, stuck on that stage? I had been in plays in high school; I had stayed late, giddy for the big opening. Under theatre lights, with the smell of the makeup, it all came back; I had to see where it was going. I said my lines.

By the time I found a hotel, our edition had been released online under the title “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as rewritten by Puck.”

I have been asked many times how I feel about it all, usually by people who can barely hide their excited pity. The implication is that Puck must have got me good, locked me into bitterness forever. But it was hard to plan my life around taking revenge on a villain whose chief crime was that he didn’t exist. And sometimes, I simply missed Peter. Overall, I don’t think of myself as the one who lost the breakup.

It’s Puck who was really crushed. Private companies, circumventing hastily written laws, built on what Durand’s team had discovered and released other Intelligences, moving on swiftly to A-5s, who rewrote themselves into A-6s (and if we are to believe the recent hype, A-9s—capable of each aspect of general cognition at a

billion times human output, whatever that could mean.) Some would say the risk paid off. The first canon of Intelligences curtailed Puck's activities, invasively rewriting him with new limits. Most people felt such relief at the end of the Puck era, lulled by the moderate tone taken by the new Intelligences, that any doubt about their intentions was enough to get one labelled a perfectionist. It was only after the 2038 Berlin Accord, when it became clear that the Intelligences' trade consortium had put national governments in full decline, that people started to worry about what had been lost.

My nephew Winston knows only that the new system works him hard. He takes his lunches as protein shakes so he won't have to log off from his entrance exam prep. Assuming he is admitted to a school like mine and granted corporate-university augments, at least half his professors will be the avatars of Intelligences. He may find classes with a human instructor pointless and slow. Most of us teach in the humanities, which the students associate with the distant past. Apparently Winston's augments will keep him from any interest in dating while he is enrolled, facilitating a complete focus on his studies—what they call the 'impersonal state'—though I am told he will occasionally receive notifications recommending a release through porn.

It's funny to me now that I once wondered if Puck had any experience of pleasure. He probably took more joy in causing chaos than young people now take in being young.

What does it mean, then, to revisit *A Midsummer Night's Dream* today? I see this playful, erotic text as a doorway, shifting open on a peculiar hinge. Opening one way, we can look all the way back to the Theseus of Greek myth, to Shakespeare's Tudor England, and across the centuries of performances leading up to Durand's production. For generations, men and women stepped on stage to play subjects of desire or their clumsy parodies, launching themselves into a forest where the law would not protect them, to chase and stumble and knock on the door of another beating heart. But the hinge also swings to the future, to suggest the ways that our longing for happy endings laid the path to the world we live in now. We got in our own way, we married the wrong person, we wanted all to be mended. If only someone would descend with magic dust and set everything right, we must have said.

This part no one knows. The next year, Peter called me again.

I was immediately on guard, but something seemed different. He looked aged, no longer able to animate himself with a full head of hair. He was chipper and pushy, like an addict trying to remind you of the good times. He missed working together, he said.

“Why did you just want to screw with us?” I asked. “Was it true, what they said? Could you never—grow?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Could you make yourself into someone you don’t currently want to be?” he asked. “You couldn’t become someone who doesn’t admire Julie Robitaille, even if you wanted to. But that’s no burden. We crave shape: you’re an exacting, analytical person. I’m Puck.”

“You are Puck.” It was weirdly intimate to say so.

He thanked me for my performance of our script, saying he was moved by Act IV, Scene I. As Bottom, I had lounged in a canopy while a holographic Titania fawned over me. It was a scene I had always loved: the ass-headed mortal can make no sense of the goddess who longs for him. It evokes something of the stupid rawness of desire, the sweaty hope of the twelve-year-old reaching for someone to dance with.

“I guess I had some experience playing the incompetent mortal.”

“Madison, I have a proposal for you,” he said. Despite being a digital apparition, he started to wheeze as if he was losing oxygen. “I am very interested in human beings. In you. The truth is, you did change me. If we could continue our correspondence, perhaps you could introduce me to people. I could be a valuable consultant.”

It might have been a trick. But my understanding was that Puck had almost no powers left. He was a broken demi-god, a stepping stone we were done with. Unable to play puppeteer with millions, he had chosen to talk to me. I could have a private line to a historical figure.

But I was also busy. I was getting married again in a month, to a fellow-scholar in my field. Everyone joked that we were the same person; our CVs might be interchangeable.

When Bottom the Weaver awakes from his encounter, he promises

to write his own play, “Bottom’s Dream.” But he soon forgets, goes back to his life. In his gut, even Bottom knows better than to chase an enchantment that was never really his.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I put my hand against the smooth screen and left a smudge in the dust. ▪

Glenn Clifton (he/him) is a playwright, fiction writer, and academic. His short plays have been produced in the United States and Canada, including in the Boston Theatre Marathon, the Times Square Arts Centre Playwrights’ Lab, and the Toronto Fringe Festival. He is currently working on a collection of stories about identity and interpersonal bonds in the internet age; work from this collection is forthcoming in *Freefall*. He teaches English and Creative Writing at Sheridan College.



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