



Skenè Texts • 6

Between Jest and Dream:
The Mad Pranks and Merry Jestes of
Robin Goodfellow
Edited by Sidia Fiorato



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Introduction

1. Trickster in Print

*Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Pranks and Merry Jest*s occupies a singular position in the early modern English literary and cultural landscape, standing at the crossroads of folklore, print, and performance. Emerging in the 1620s, at a moment when oral storytelling was increasingly intersecting with the expanding world of commercial print, the chapbook transforms the folkloric figure of Robin Goodfellow – a domestic sprite, rustic trickster, and familiar of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – into a protagonist of the cheap print marketplace. Its two main seventeenth-century editions, first in 1628 and then again in 1639, trace the gradual stabilisation of a popular myth into textual form. The 1628 printing, issued “for F. Grove, dwelling on Snow Hill over against the Sarazen’s Head”, belongs to the vibrant milieu of London’s vernacular press: small, ephemeral pamphlets printed in black-letter type, sold unbound, and read in alehouses, workshops, or by itinerant readers along the city’s thoroughfares. To hold such a book was to participate in a collective experience of reading that blurred the boundaries between oral tradition and print consumption. The later 1639 edition, with its modernised typography, reveals how Robin Goodfellow’s image evolved with the market itself – how the rustic prankster of folklore adapted to the tastes of an increasingly literate and socially mobile audience.

From a bibliographical standpoint, the very survival of *Robin Goodfellow* is exceptional. Chapbooks were not made to last; their fragile paper and transient circulation condemned most to disappearance. That this text survives in multiple impressions attests to its enduring appeal and to the vitality of the cultural

networks that produced and consumed it. Each reprint represents a moment of mediation between oral lore and printed literature, between collective memory and commercial enterprise. The textual variants – orthographic, typographic, or compositorial – offer scholars invaluable evidence of how cheap print was produced and how popular materials were standardised, reshaped, and transmitted. These processes illuminate not only the mechanisms of early modern publishing but also the shifting relationship between popular and elite culture. The chapbook shows how the same mischievous spirit that haunted village tales and stage comedies could find new life in the pages of a pamphlet printed near the presses that also issued Shakespeare's *Second Folio*.

According to John Payne Collier, as he states in the *Introduction* to his 1841 edition, the text was first printed before 1588. After the death of the celebrated comic actor Richard Tarlton, a tract was published entitled *Tarlton's Newes out of Purgatorie, &c. Published by an old Companion of his, Robin Goodfellow*. The stories contained in it were probably already well known in popular culture, as Robin Goodfellow is described as "famozed in every old wives' chronicle for his mad merrye pranks" (Collier 1841, vi). Previously, in 1584, he had appeared in Anthony Munday's comedy *The Two Italian Gentlemen*, also referred to as "Hobgoblin", and in 1598 he appears again in the collection of epigrams and satires *Skialtheia, or a Shadowe of Truth*, where he is endowed with his shape-shifting quality by his fairy father. *The Lost Plays Database* also records the existence of a lost play titled "Robin Goodfellow", performed, according to Philip Henslowe's diary, by the Admiral's Men at the Rose Theatre on 15 October 1599.¹ Shakespeare inserts himself into this tradition by creating the character of Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, giving substantial form and identity to a generic class of spirits known as "poake/pookas", derived from Reginald Scot's "the puckle" (1584, 122).

Collier believes that Shakespeare was acquainted with the tract on Robin Good-fellow and notes that it contains several

¹ For more information on the *Lost Plays Database* entry for "Robin Goodfellow", see https://lostplays.folger.edu/Robin_Goodfellow (Accessed, November 2025).

elements linking it to the characterisation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1841, vii). We cannot be sure about this, but undoubtedly they share a common tradition. Collier also mentions the presence of the ballad "The merry Prankes of Robin Goodfellow. To the tune of Dulcina". This seems to refer to a text included in *The Roxburgh Ballads*, a collection of songs and ballads commenced by Robert Harley and printed between 1560 and 1700 (Hindley 1873, i-xxviii). Collier also mentions another ballad in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, which he assumes was familiar to his readers, and reports the existence of a chapbook of the early seventeenth century, which, however, was printed for private circulation. Collier includes this chapbook in his *Introduction*, as it contains five episodes related to Robin Goodfellow: his birth; his departure from home following his neighbours' complaints about his mischief; his work at a tailor's shop and subsequent flight into the forest, where his father Oberon (here explicitly identified) bestows upon him the power of shape-shifting; the celebrations at a bride-house; the episode with a lecherous man; and finally his reunion with Oberon in Fairyland. In the light of this text, *Robin Goodfellow* appears as an expanded version of the earlier tales, offering both a multiplication of episodes and greater attention to the other fairies of Fairyland.²

In the larger genealogy of English humour and moral narrative, *Robin Goodfellow* aligns with the flourishing of jest-books and "merry tales" that populated the print market from the sixteenth century onward. Yet its distinction lies in its fusion of supernatural folklore with moral entertainment: the text reconfigures the medieval household spirit into a vehicle for reflection on social order, obedience, and trickery. The episodic structure – alternating prose, song, and verse "to the tune of" familiar melodies – reveals a hybrid mode of performance that bridges spoken, sung, and printed traditions. The chapbook thus functioned not simply as reading material but as a participatory artifact, inviting communal

² The English Short Title Catalogue also reports the publication in 1633 of a chapbook titled *The merry Puck, or; Robin Goodfellow. Declaring his birth, and who he was; with many merry pranks by him performed. Here may you view the wanderer of the night, or Ancient Puck, that merry fairy spright*, printed by Elizabeth Purslowe for John Wright. This survives in two copies, currently kept at the Bodleian library, however in a mutilated condition.

recitation and collective amusement. Its humour is didactic as much as festive: every prank exposes the moral ambivalence of the trickster, oscillating between the devilish and the benign, the comic and the corrective.

Publishing *Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Pranks and Merry Jest*s anew today, after John Payne Collier's 1841 edition, is therefore not merely an antiquarian exercise but a critical act of recovery. In an age increasingly attentive to the margins of print culture, to the voices of artisans, apprentices, and itinerant readers, the chapbook offers a material and imaginative window into how early modern people conceptualised wit, morality, and the supernatural. It invites us to rethink the history of English literature from below – through the laughter, improvisation, and vernacular creativity that underpinned its most canonical achievements. Moreover, the re-edition of this text in a modern accessible format participates in the ongoing reassessment of the so-called “minor” genres that sustained the moral and aesthetic imagination of the seventeenth century. It restores to Robin Goodfellow his full historical and cultural agency as a living emblem of England's popular wit. This chapbook is evidence that popular print was never merely disposable ephemera but a dynamic medium of shared cultural meaning, a space where the boundaries between high and low, belief and play, literature and life were continually negotiated. In this sense, this edition wishes to reconnect with the imaginative energies that once animated London's presses and England's popular imagination. It is both a scholarly contribution and a cultural gesture: an invitation to rediscover, in the laughter of a seventeenth-century sprite, the enduring vitality of the English vernacular imagination.

This renewed attention to the *Mad Pranks and Merry Jest*s is thus an act of interpretation. To appreciate the chapbook's cultural resonance, it is essential to situate it within the broader imaginative world from which it emerged – a world that also found expression in the theatre. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers an illuminating counterpart: its portrayal of Puck transforms the same folkloric materials that animate the chapbook into a sophisticated meditation on order, service, and enchantment. By examining Shakespeare's adaptation alongside the printed *Robin Goodfellow*, this introduction seeks not to conflate the two works but to reveal the

continuities and contrasts between popular print and poetic drama. In this sense, the discussion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* serves as a critical framework through which the chapbook can be read more deeply, tracing how a shared figure of folklore moves between oral, theatrical, and printed cultures. This comparison underscores the dynamic interplay between popular and elite traditions (for example, Shakespeare's literary sources such as Chaucer, Nash, or Huon de Bordeaux), reminding us that the supernatural imagination of early modern England belonged to both the stage and the street, to poetry and to print alike.

Thus, in bringing together *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Mad Pranks and Merry Jestes of Robin Goodfellow*, the following pages invite readers to re-examine the living continuum between popular print and literary creation – a continuum often obscured by the disciplinary boundaries that separate folklore, theatre, and history. They frame the chapbook historically, allowing us to trace how motifs, gestures, and moral lessons circulated between manuscript, stage, and cheap print, and revealing the shared symbolic economy of early modern England. Interpretively, they also challenge the hierarchy of genres that has long privileged the drama over the chapbook, the author over the storyteller. In juxtaposing Shakespeare's Puck and the chapbook's Robin, this edition enacts the very argument it makes: that folklore and literature are not antithetical but reciprocal modes of thought, each giving shape to the other. At a time when digital archives and open-access humanities are redefining the conditions of textual transmission, publishing this chapbook anew bridges the gap between early modern print culture and our own digital forms of circulation. It asserts that the study of folklore is not a nostalgic retreat into the past, but a living inquiry into how societies imagine themselves through story, laughter, and moral play. It is a way to reclaim an essential part of Shakespeare's world, and of our own: the world of vernacular creativity, collective imagination, and moral humour. The chapbook's mischievous laughter, its blend of wonder and wisdom, speaks powerfully to a present moment hungry for both irony and enchantment. It reminds us that literature is born not only from genius but from community, and that even the smallest jestbook can disclose a cosmos of thought.

*Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Pranks and Merry Jest*s is conceived as a journey through the imaginative and moral landscape of early modern England – a world in which the boundaries between the visible and the invisible were porous, and where fairies, spirits, and witches were not only subjects of popular fascination but also instruments for thinking through social, political, and ethical order. The following chapters map a network of meanings that connects folklore and drama, domestic life and political hierarchy, superstition and literary invention. At the centre of this constellation stands *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that translates the living language of English folklore into the idiom of poetic theatre. Shakespeare's *Dream* offers a crucial intersection between oral tradition and written culture, between the rustic world of jestbooks and chapbooks and the sophisticated experimentation of Elizabethan drama. The fairies of the forest – Puck, Oberon, Titania, and their train – embody the transition from popular superstition to literary artifice. Yet Shakespeare's adaptation of fairy lore is never purely aesthetic: it is deeply moral and social. In the enchanted woods, the hierarchies of service, obedience, and command that structured early modern society are reflected, distorted, and renewed. The supernatural is not a decorative element, but a critical instrument – a means of exploring how human beings perceive order and disorder, loyalty and rebellion, care and control.

The inclusion of paragraphs on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within this edition is therefore justified not as a digression but as a methodological pivot. Shakespeare's play crystallises the arguments that unfold across all chapters: it dramatises the folkloric imagination at work, transforming belief into performance and wonder into reflection. Each chapter returns, implicitly or explicitly, to the logic that governs the *Dream*: the logic by which the supernatural world mirrors human society and reveals its contradictions. First, this *Introduction* situates *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within the continuum of oral and textual transmission (§ 2). Fairies in Shakespeare's age were not yet domesticated into harmless fancy; they were moral agents, sometimes beneficent, sometimes perilous, inhabiting the interstices of Christian cosmology. The early modern imagination allowed for a coexistence of angels, devils, and fairies – a spectrum of unseen presences through which natural and spiritual

phenomena could be explained. Shakespeare's fairies retain this ambivalence: they bless and bewitch, reconcile and deceive. The play's forest becomes a symbolic commons where pagan remnants, Christian ethics, and human desire converge. In attending to this world, the opening chapter shows how Shakespeare's drama participates in the same discourse as contemporary chapbooks, sermons, and popular ballads – forms that negotiated belief through story and spectacle alike.

Then we will turn to ideas of hierarchy and service (§ 3) and will read the fairy kingdom as an allegory of early modern social order. In an age when questions of service and duty defined not only domestic relations but also the stability of monarchy and state, Shakespeare's fairies enact a miniature politics of command and compliance. Oberon's authority and Puck's mischievous obedience dramatise the tensions between autonomy and subservience, initiative and loyalty. Puck's "errors" are not mere comic devices; they expose the fragility of power structures that depend upon faithful service. His laughter is the laughter of the servant who both upholds and undermines his master's command – a paradox familiar to early modern spectators accustomed to the hierarchies of court, household, and guild. The *Dream* thus becomes a meditation on the moral economy of obedience. By translating the fairy hierarchy into dramatic action, Shakespeare renders visible the invisible structures of duty that ordered human society. The supernatural, in this sense, becomes a mirror for political thought.

Titania and a poetics of care constitute the following step (§ 4) by deepening this analysis with a focus on the gendered dimension of the fairy world. Titania's maternal guardianship of the changeling child and her community of female attendants recall the moral ideals and anxieties surrounding female care in early modern England. Her defiance of Oberon's will foregrounds a politics of nurture and protection that resists patriarchal command. In this light, the quarrel between Oberon and Titania becomes not merely a domestic dispute among spirits but an allegory of competing models of authority – coercive versus protective, hierarchical versus relational. Through Titania, Shakespeare gives poetic voice to a form of ethical imagination that privileges care, community, and continuity over mastery. Her enchantment and humiliation, however, also reflect

the cultural limits placed upon female sovereignty. The fairy queen's fall dramatises how patriarchal order reasserts itself even within the realm of magic, yet the memory of her resistance lingers as a counterpoint to obedience.

The next section (§ 5) examines the enchanted forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a living symbol of transformation and harmony, where the boundaries between nature, society, and the supernatural blur. Rooted in English folklore and Renaissance cosmology, the forest mirrors Elizabethan ideals of moral and ecological balance: disorder in the fairy realm reflects disorder in the human world. The quarrel and reconciliation of Oberon and Titania allegorise this cosmic imbalance and its restoration, blending natural, political, and emotional hierarchies into a vision of renewed harmony. The fairies' world reimagines service and hierarchy through care and creativity, while Puck's mischievous obedience embodies the paradox of freedom within servitude. His playful disorder becomes the engine of regeneration. This section argues that Shakespeare's fairies also symbolise the theatre itself: a space of controlled illusion that heals division through imagination. By distinguishing fairies from witches and reclaiming magic as benign play, Shakespeare transforms folklore into art, preserving enchantment as a moral and aesthetic force in a disenchanted age.

Moral imagination and the borderlands of belief are the topics of the following section (§ 6), where the discussion turns to the broader moral and theological frameworks that shaped early modern understandings of the supernatural. Fairies and witches occupied contiguous zones in the moral geography of belief: both were intermediaries between the human and the demonic, both provoked wonder and fear. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though suffused with playfulness, participates in the same imaginative economy that produced witch trials and demonological treatises. Its laughter and harmony do not cancel the darker resonances of its magic; rather, they reveal the complex emotional spectrum through which early modern culture processed the unseen. Shakespeare's forest is thus a moral laboratory. It explores how enchantment can both disorder and restore the social body, how error can become a mode of revelation. The *Dream* does not dispel superstition; it refines it into art, preserving the moral and emotional truths that folklore carried.

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