

## UNIT

## 1

## MID SUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

*Mid Summer Night's Dream*

## STRUCTURE

This chapter shall cover the following main points:

- Learning objectives
- Overview
- Justification of title
- Introduction of the play
- Plot
- Biography of the author
- Themes and symbols and motifs
- Characters
- Analysis of main characters
- Summary and analysis of scenes
- Quotes
- Summary
- Key words
- Review questions
- Further reading

## • LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Understand a comedy.
- Summarize *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Analyze, in-depth, the meaning and role of a character in the play.
- Identify the conflicts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Understand the significance of the resolutions of those conflicts.
- Appreciate conflict in its relationship to character and plot.

- Elucidate the ideals and nuances of romance as shown within the play.
- Analyze the presence of illusions within and outside of the enchanted forest.
- Analyze the characters in the play.
- Discuss the themes and symbols in the play. Discuss Shakespeare's treatment of women in the play.

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## OVERVIEW

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Play- Mid Summer's Night Dream

Writer- William Shakespeare

Written- between 1595-96

Published- in 1600

Genre- Comedy

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## JUSTIFICATION OF TITLE

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The title of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has both literary and social significance. The title tells the audience right away that the play is going to deal in some way with a sort of dream on a summer night. ... He also suggests to the audience that the play itself was merely a dream. Right away, the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream* makes us think that this play by William Shakespeare will embody an ethereal or a fantasy-like quality. The title also tells us that the story is likely to take place on a summer night that may or may not be the product of a character's dream. Much can be learned about this play by studying its name.

The act of speaking to the audience creates the possibility that the play was nothing more than a dream, for how could Puck speak directly to members of an audience if he was actually a fairy in the forest? The line between waking and dreaming is blurred within the play itself, as well as between the actors and the audience.

Some of the characters in the play are also led to believe that what they experienced was nothing more than a dream. Demetrius and Lysander, two men who are both in love with Hermia, are given a love potion by Puck. While Lysander is supposed to receive the potion, Demetrius is not. Toward the end of the play, Puck casts a magical fog to put all of the humans asleep so that he can fix his mistake. Like Puck's suggestion to the audience, he convinces his fellow characters that the events of the evening are nothing

more than a dream. Hence, the title 'Mid summer Night's Dream' is suitable for this play.

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## INTRODUCTION OF THE PLAY

A Midsummer Night's Dream is first mentioned by Francis Meres in 1598, leading many scholars to date the play between 1594 and 1596. It is likely to have been written around the same period **Romeo and Juliet** was created. Indeed, many similarities exist between the two plays, so much that A Midsummer Night's Dream at times seems likely to degenerate into the same tragic ending that befalls Romeo and Juliet.

The play was first printed in quarto in 1600, following its entry into the Stationer's Register on October 8, 1600. This quarto is almost surely taken directly from a manuscript written by Shakespeare. A second quarto was printed in 1619 and falsely backdated to 1600 and attempted to correct some of the errors in the first printing, but also introduced several new errors. It is the second quarto which served as the basis for the First Folio in 1623.

There is a myth that A Midsummer Night's Dream was first performed for a private audience after an actual wedding had taken place. The play's three wedding and play-within-a-play Pyramus and Thisbe certainly would seem to fit the scene, with all the newlyweds retiring to their respective chambers at the end. However, no evidence of this imagined performance exists. Rather, A Midsummer Night's Dream was definitely performed on the London stage by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and the title page of the first Quarto indicates it was written by William Shakespeare.

The title draws on the summer solstice, Midsummer Eve, occurring June 23 and marked by holiday partying and tales of fairies and temporary insanity. Shakespeare cleverly weaves together not only fairies and lovers, but also social hierarchies with the aristocratic **Theseus** and the "rude mechanicals," or the artisans and working men. This allows the play to become infinitely more lyrical, since it is able to draw on the more brutal language of the lower classes as well as the poetry of the noblemen.

One of the more interesting changes which Shakespeare introduces is the concept of small, kind fairies. Robin Goodfellow, the spirit known as Puck, is thought to have once been feared by villagers. History indicates the prior to Elizabethan times, fairies were considered evil spirits who stole children and sacrificed them to the devil. Shakespeare, along with other writers, redefined fairies during this time period, turning them into gentle, albeit mischievous, spirits.

The final act of the play, completely unnecessary in relation to the rest of the plot, brings to light a traditional fear of the Elizabethan theater,

namely that of censorship. Throughout the play the lower artisans, who wish to perform Pyramus and Thisbe, try to corrupt the plot and assure the audience that the play is not real and that they need not fear the actions taking place. This culminates in the actual ending, in which Puck suggests that if we do not like the play, then we should merely consider it to have been a dream. One of the most remarkable features of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is that at the end members of the audience are unsure whether what they have seen is real, or whether they have woken up after having shared the same dream. This is of course precisely what Shakespeare wants to make clear, namely that the theater is nothing more than a shared dream. Hence the constant interruption of that dream in the Pyramus and Thisbe production, which serves to highlight the artificial aspect of the theater. Bottom and his company offer us not only Pyramus and Thisbe as a product of our imagination, but the entire play as well.

Puck's suggestion hides a more serious aspect of the comic fun of the play. There is deep underlying sexual tension between the male and female characters, witnessed by Oberon's attempts to humiliate Titania and Theseus' conquest of Hippolyta. This tension is rapidly dissipated by the sure solution which the play assumes, making it seem less real. However, the darker side of the play should not be ignored, nor the rapid mobility with which the actors transfer their amorous desires from one person to the other.

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## PLOT

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**A story of order and disorder, reality and appearance and love and marriage. Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons are to be married and great celebrations are planned.**

### INTO THE FOREST

Egeus brings his rebellious daughter Hermia in front of the Duke. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius but Hermia refuses, because she's in love with Lysander. The Duke orders Hermia to obey her father or, according to Athenian law, she must face a death penalty or enter a convent.

Hermia and Lysander decide to elope that night. They confide in their friend Helena. However, she's secretly in love with Demetrius so, hoping to win his affection, she tells him of Hermia's plan. That night, all four lovers set out into the forest.

Meanwhile, a group of Athenian tradesmen known as the Mechanicals, led by Peter Quince, are planning to perform a play in celebration of the Duke's wedding. They rehearse *The Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe* in the same forest.

## LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Elsewhere in the forest, the fairy king and queen, Oberon and Titania, argue over Titania's refusal to give up her page-boy to Oberon. He sends his servant Puck to find a magic plant to cast a spell on Titania.

The juice of the plant, when squeezed onto the eyes of someone asleep, causes them to fall in love with the first creature they see when they wake up. Oberon uses the juice on Titania as she sleeps in her bower.

Puck overhears the tradesmen rehearsing and magically transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass. The other men are terrified and flee the forest. When Titania wakes, the first creature she sees is Bottom and she falls rapturously in love with him.

Helena chases Demetrius in the forest and their fighting disturbs Oberon. He tells Puck to use the magic plant on Demetrius too, so that he will fall in love with Helena. However Puck muddles up the two Athenian men and uses it on Lysander instead, who promptly falls in love with Helena. Both women are confused and Hermia furiously attacks her friend.

### **Stop reading now if you don't want to know how it ends...**

Eventually, Oberon lifts all the enchantments and puts the humans to sleep. Titania is horrified that she's been enamoured of an ass and is reconciled with Oberon. On waking, the lovers decide the night's events must have all been a dream. Lysander and Hermia are back to normal, and Demetrius admits he does love Helena after all. Bottom wakes up and recounts his 'strange dream'.

The wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta becomes a triple celebration as the other human couples marry too. Quince and Bottom's troupe amuses the couples with their amateur performance of the play.

As the couples retire, Oberon, Titania and the fairies perform a blessing, and Puck asks the audience to applaud if they enjoyed the performance.

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## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

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### **Family Background**

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, a small town of about 1,500 people northwest of London. John Shakespeare, William's father, made his living primarily as a tanner and a glover but also traded wool and grain from time to time. John Shakespeare also served although not at one time as the town ale taster inspector of bread and malt, a petty constable, city chamberlain, alderman, and high bailiff like a mayor, the city's highest public office. Mary Arden, William Shakespeare's mother, brought a long and impressive family lineage to her

marriage to John, one that traces itself back to William the Conqueror. In the mid-1570s, John Shakespeare's fortune began to decline mysteriously some say it was because of his wife's Catholicism, although that claim is unsubstantiated, and it was largely mortgages made on properties Mary brought to the marriage that helped to sustain the family.

### **Education and Marriage**

Shakespeare attended school in Stratford-upon-Avon. Although there are no records to prove his enrollment, critics accept it with considerable certainty. At school, Shakespeare would have studied reading and writing in English as well as in Latin and Greek and Roman writers including Horace, Aesop, Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, and Plautus. The extent to which he would have been familiar with the works of such ancient classics is unknown, but studying Shakespeare's plays and long poems suggests he had at least a degree of knowledge about them in their original forms, not merely translations.

In November 1582, at age 18, William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, 26. Their first child, Susanna, was born the following May; twins, Hamnet and Judith, followed in 1585. Little information is available regarding Shakespeare's life from the time of the twins' birth until 1592 when he received his first public recognition as an upcoming young dramatist and actor in London. We know that at some point he left his family in Stratford, but we know few specifics. Critics hold several theories. One asserts that during the mysterious seven-year period Shakespeare worked as an assistant master of a grammar school. Another popular theory maintains Shakespeare worked as a butcher's apprentice during this time but ran away to London where he was received into the theater. Another theory holds that during the seven-year period, Shakespeare made a living as a deer poacher who was eventually sent away from Stratford as punishment. Other theories contend Shakespeare was a moneylender, a gardener, a sailor, a lawyer, or even a Franciscan. Unfortunately, though, none of these theories is any more likely than another; no one knows with complete certainty what Shakespeare did between 1585 and 1592. All we know for sure is that by 1592 he had arrived in London, leaving his family behind, and had begun what is perhaps the most successful literary career the world has ever known.

### **Life in London**

Before the Great Plague of 1592-1593, in the time when Shakespeare first came to London, the city boasted several acting troupes. In 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne, any gentleman could maintain a troupe of actors. By 1572, it became illegal for any nobleman below the rank of baron to maintain a troupe, although other companies could perform by

obtaining a special license, which had many performance restrictions. Although this arrangement severely restricted the number of acting troupes, it extended governmental sanction to the remaining licensed companies.

When the Great Plague of 1592-1593 hit, closing the theaters and decimating the population of England, many acting companies dissolved, while others were forced to amalgamate with other troupes for survival. Two preeminent companies emerged in 1593, and they would rival each other for years. One company, The Lord Admiral's Men, was headed by Edward Alleyn with financial backing from Philip Henslowe. The other dominant troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men the troupe in which Shakespeare was actor, dramatist, and shareholder, later renamed The King's Men when James I took the throne in 1603, was run by the Burbage family.

Acting troupes were organized under a shareholding plan wherein financial risk and profits were divided among those actors who had become part owners of the company by buying shares in it. The troupes, comprised entirely of men and young boys, employed about 25 actors. Roughly fewer than half of a troupe's actors were shareholders and not all owned equal shares, but those considered especially valuable to the company were encouraged to become shareholders since this ensured their continued service and loyalty. To become a shareholder, an actor had to put up a considerable sum of money; when he retired or died, the company paid the actor or his heirs for his share. Non-shareholding adult members of a company, however, were considered hirelings of the shareholders and worked under contracts promising them a weekly wage of about 5-10 shillings, although they were frequently paid less.

Shakespeare became a shareholding member of The Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599. Scholars estimate that until about 1603 the average payment for a play was £6 six pounds; by 1613 the price had risen to £10 or £12. In addition to his fee, the playwright was given all the receipts minus company expenses at the second performance but remember, if the show was bad, there may not *be* a second performance. Once these fees were paid, however, the play was considered property of the troupe. Printers often pirated more popular works, and troupes sometimes sold publication rights during times of financial stress. Such publishing practices, combined with the fact playwrights, including Shakespeare, didn't write with the intention of preserving their plays but with the goal of making money, makes it difficult for scholars to pinpoint definitive texts. In Shakespeare's case, only about half of his plays were published during his lifetime.

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In fact, it wasn't until 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death in 1616, that all his plays were assembled into one volume. This collection, referred to as *The First Folio* because it was printed in folio format, the largest, most expensive, and most prestigious kind of book, included previously published plays as well as plays never before published. Some of the works in *The First Folio* can be traced to the author's original version of the text including blotted lines and revisions, yet some were recreated from prompt books annotated versions of the play script that contain detailed directions for the action, settings, etc. or even the memories of the actors themselves helping to explain some of the inconsistencies found in different editions of the plays.

### **Shakespeare's Work**

Between the years of 1588 and 1613, Shakespeare wrote 38 plays. His dramatic work is commonly studied in four categories: comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances. In addition, Shakespeare wrote several Ovidian poems, including *Venus and Adonis* 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* 1594. Shakespeare is also well known for his sonnet sequence written in the early 1590s, which is composed of 154 interconnected sonnets dealing with issues such as love, fidelity, mortality, and the artist's power and voice.

Although we commonly single out Shakespeare's work as extraordinary and deserving of special attention, at the time of the plays' performances they were typically dismissed as popular entertainment. Whereas Shakespeare's works are studied today as timeless masterpieces, the original audiences knew the plays were good but did not recognize them as exhibiting the apex of the dramatic art form. In fact, Shakespeare, despite all the attention his name has generated since the late eighteenth century, was not the most popular dramatist of his time. Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's contemporary and Britain's first Poet Laureate, and Christopher Marlowe, a slight predecessor to Shakespeare, were both commonly held in higher esteem than the man whose reputation has since eclipsed both of his competitors.

In fact, Shakespeare's reputation as Britain's premier dramatist did not begin until the late eighteenth century. His sensibility and storytelling captured people's attention, and by the end of the nineteenth century his reputation was solidly established. Today Shakespeare is more widely studied and performed than any other playwright in the Western world, providing a clear testament to the skills and timelessness of the stories told by the Bard.



## THEMES AND SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

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### A. THEMES

Explore the different themes within William Shakespeare's comedic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Themes are central to understanding *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a play and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

#### (i) Love

The dominant theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is love, a subject to which Shakespeare returns constantly in his comedies. Shakespeare explores how people tend to fall in love with those who appear beautiful to them. People we think we love at one time in our lives can later seem not only unattractive but even repellent. For a time, this attraction to beauty might appear to be love at its most intense, but one of the ideas of the play is that real love is much more than mere physical attraction.

At one level, the story of the four young Athenians asserts that although "The course of true love never did run smooth," true love triumphs in the end, bringing happiness and harmony. At another level, however, the audience is forced to consider what an apparently irrational and whimsical thing love is, at least when experienced between youngsters.

#### 2. Marriage

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* asserts marriage as the true fulfillment of romantic love. All the damaged relationships have been sorted out at the end of Act IV, and Act V serves to celebrate the whole idea of marriage in a spirit of festive happiness.

The triple wedding at the end of Act IV marks the formal resolution of the romantic problems that have beset the two young couples from the beginning, when Egeus attempted to force his daughter to marry the man he had chosen to be her husband.

The mature and stable love of Theseus and Hippolyta is contrasted with the relationship of Oberon and Titania, whose squabbling has such a negative impact on the world around them. Only when the marriage of the fairy King and Queen is put right can there be peace in their kingdom and the world beyond it.

#### 3. Appearance and Reality

Another of the play's main themes is one to which Shakespeare returns to again and again in his work: the difference between appearance and reality. The idea that things are not necessarily what they seem to be is at the heart of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in the very title itself.

A dream is not real, even though it seems so at the time we experience it. Shakespeare consciously creates the plays' dreamlike quality in a number of ways. Characters frequently fall asleep and wake having dreamed "Methought a serpent ate my heart away"; having had magic worked upon them so that they are in a dreamlike state; or thinking that they have dreamed "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was". Much of the play takes place at night, and there are references to moonlight, which changes the appearance of what it illuminates.

The difference between appearances and reality is also explored through the play-within-a-play, to particularly comic effect. The "rude mechanicals" completely fail to understand the magic of the theatre, which depends upon the audience being allowed to believe for a time, at least that what is being acted out in front of them is real.

When Snug the Joiner tells the stage audience that he is not really a lion and that they must not be afraid of him, we and they laugh at this stupidity, but we also laugh at ourselves — for we know that he is not just a joiner pretending to be a lion, but an actor pretending to be a joiner pretending to be a lion. Shakespeare seems to be saying, "We all know that this play isn't real, but you're still sitting there and believing it." That is a kind of magic too.

#### 4. Order and Disorder

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* also deals with the theme of order and disorder. The order of Egeus' family is threatened because his daughter wishes to marry against his will; the social order to the state demands that a father's will should be enforced. When the city dwellers find themselves in the wood, away from their ordered and hierarchical society, order breaks down and relationships are fragmented. But this is comedy, and relationships are more happily rebuilt in the free atmosphere of the wood before the characters return to society.

Natural order — the order of Nature — is also broken and restored in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The row between the Fairy King and Queen results in the order of the seasons being disrupted:

The spring, the summer,  
The chiding autumn, angry winter change  
Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world  
By their increase knows not which is which.

Only after Oberon and Titania's reconciliation can all this be put right. Without the restoration of natural order, the happiness of the play's ending could not be complete.

## B. MAJOR SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Explore the different symbols and motifs within William Shakespeare's comedic play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Symbols and motifs are key to understanding *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and identifying Shakespeare's social and political commentary.

### (i) The Moon

The dominant imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* revolves around the moon and moonlight. The word moon occurs three times in the play's first nine lines of the play, the last of these three references in a most striking visual image: "the moon, like to a silver bow / New bent in heaven." One reason for repeating such images is to create the atmosphere of night.

Shakespeare's plays were mostly performed by daylight, and he had to create the idea of darkness or half-light in the imagination of his audience — there where no lights to turn off or to dim. In addition, these repeated moon references work upon the audience by creating a dreamlike atmosphere. Familiar things look different by moonlight; they are seen quite literally in a different light.

The moon itself is also a reminder of the passage of time, and that all things — like its phases — must change. The more educated people in Shakespeare's audience would have also understood the mythological significance of the moon. The moon-goddesses Luna and Diana were associated with chastity on the one hand and fertility on the other; two qualities that are united in faithful marriage, which the play celebrates.

### (ii) Animals

Animal images also appear many times in the play, reminding us of the wildness of the woods in which most of the play's action takes place, where an unaccompanied female would be at "the mercy of wild beasts" in a setting where "the wolf behowls the moon." But this is a comedy; these dangers are not really threatening. The animal references are stylized and conventional. The only physical animals encountered by the characters apart from Starveling's dog are the less-than-half-ass Nick Bottom and the totally artificial Lion played by Snug.

The animal references are included in the many images of the natural world that are associated with the fairy kingdom. These details emphasize the pretty delicacy of the fairies themselves and make the wood seem more real in the imagination of the audience. Oberon's "I know a bank" speech in Act II, Scene I is just one example of this.

### (iii) Seeing

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* also contains many references to seeing, eyes, and eyesight. These images serve a double purpose. The repetition

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reminds the audience of the difference between how things look and what they are, reinforcing the theme of appearance vs. reality, and that love is blind and beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

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## CHARACTERS

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### **Puck**

Also known as Robin Goodfellow, Puck is Oberon's jester, a mischievous fairy who delights in playing pranks on mortals. Though *A Midsummer Night's Dream* divides its action between several groups of characters, Puck is the closest thing the play has to a protagonist. His enchanting, mischievous spirit pervades the atmosphere, and his antics are responsible for many of the complications that propel the other main plots: he mistakes the young Athenians, applying the love potion to Lysander instead of Demetrius, thereby causing chaos within the group of young lovers; he also transforms Bottom's head into that of an ass.

### **Oberon**

The king of the fairies, Oberon is initially at odds with his wife, Titania, because she refuses to relinquish control of a young Indian prince whom he wants for a knight. Oberon's desire for revenge on Titania leads him to send Puck to obtain the love-potion flower that creates so much of the play's confusion and farce.

### **Titania**

The beautiful queen of the fairies, Titania resists the attempts of her husband, Oberon, to make a knight of the young Indian prince that she has been given. Titania's brief, potion-induced love for Nick Bottom, whose head Puck has transformed into that of an ass, yields the play's foremost example of the contrast motif.

### **Lysander**

A young man of Athens, in love with Hermia. Lysander's relationship with Hermia invokes the theme of love's difficulty: he cannot marry her openly because Egeus, her father, wishes her to wed Demetrius; when Lysander and Hermia run away into the forest, Lysander becomes the victim of misapplied magic and wakes up in love with Helena.

### **Demetrius**

A young man of Athens, initially in love with Hermia and ultimately in love with Helena. Demetrius's obstinate pursuit of Hermia throws love out of balance among the quartet of Athenian youths and precludes a symmetrical two-couple arrangement.

**Hermia**

Egeus's daughter, a young woman of Athens. Hermia is in love with Lysander and is a childhood friend of Helena. As a result of the fairies' mischief with Oberon's love potion, both Lysander and Demetrius suddenly fall in love with Helena. Self-conscious about her short stature, Hermia suspects that Helena has wooed the men with her height. By morning, however, Puck has sorted matters out with the love potion, and Lysander's love for Hermia is restored.

**Helena**

A young woman of Athens, in love with Demetrius. Demetrius and Helena were once betrothed, but when Demetrius met Helena's friend Hermia, he fell in love with her and abandoned Helena. Lacking confidence in her looks, Helena thinks that Demetrius and Lysander are mocking her when the fairies' mischief causes them to fall in love with her.

**Egeus**

Hermia's father, who brings a complaint against his daughter to Theseus: Egeus has given Demetrius permission to marry Hermia, but Hermia, in love with Lysander, refuses to marry Demetrius. Egeus's severe insistence that Hermia either respect his wishes or be held accountable to Athenian law places him squarely outside the whimsical dream realm of the forest.

**Theseus**

The heroic duke of Athens, engaged to Hippolyta. Theseus represents power and order throughout the play. He appears only at the beginning and end of the story, removed from the dreamlike events of the forest.

**Hippolyta**

The legendary queen of the Amazons, engaged to Theseus. Like Theseus, she symbolizes order.

**Nick Bottom**

The overconfident weaver chosen to play Pyramus in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Bottom is full of advice and self-confidence but frequently makes silly mistakes and misuses language. His simultaneous nonchalance about the beautiful Titania's sudden love for him and unawareness of the fact that Puck has transformed his head into that of an ass mark the pinnacle of his foolish arrogance.

**Peter Quince**

A carpenter and the nominal leader of the craftsmen's attempt to put on a play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Quince is often shoved aside

by the abundantly confident Bottom. During the craftsmen's play, Quince plays the Prologue.

#### **Francis Flute**

The bellows-mender chosen to play Thisbe in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Forced to play a young girl in love, the bearded craftsman determines to speak his lines in a high, squeaky voice.

#### **Robin Starveling**

The tailor chosen to play Thisbe's mother in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Moonshine.

#### **Tom Snout**

The tinker chosen to play Pyramus's father in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. He ends up playing the part of Wall, dividing the two lovers.

#### **Snug**

The joiner chosen to play the lion in the craftsmen's play for Theseus's marriage celebration. Snug worries that his roaring will frighten the ladies in the audience.

#### **Philostrate**

Theseus's Master of the Revels, responsible for organizing the entertainment for the duke's marriage celebration.

#### **Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed**

The fairies ordered by Titania to attend to Bottom after she falls in love with him.

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## **ANALYSIS OF MAIN CHARACTERS**

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### **HERMIA**

Critics often recognize the similarity between Hermia and Helena because both represent the difficulties of adolescent love. But these two young women are more different than their male counterparts, Lysander and Demetrius, who are, indeed, indistinguishable. Not only do these two young women show the trials and tribulations of young love, but their interactions emphasize the importance of female friendship and the gender expectations that often make women's lives difficult. As the play opens, Hermia is under trial. Her father insists she marry Demetrius, the man he prefers, rather than Lysander, the man she loves. Her father reminds the audience that Hermia has no choice in this matter: Hermia is his property, and the laws declare he can dispose of her as he wishes, even if this means sending her to her death. Theseus agrees: According to him, Hermia's father should be a god to her. She is merely a form in wax that has been

imprinted with her father's power. Even though Theseus offers her the choice of living in a nunnery rather than dying, he won't allow her to make her own decision about a husband. Her "fancy" conflicts with her father's "will," emphasizing that an adolescent girl has no power against the will of law.

Later in the play, Hermia is criticized for her being "dark," an Ethiopie, in contrast with "light" Helena's bloneness. Hermia's "darkness" is significant, reminding us of the racial slurs that continue to plague our culture. Similarly, her fears that Lysander has abandoned her because she's shorter than Helena show that body image issues aren't a recent problem for women: Even in the sixteenth century, women equated build with desirability, often discovering themselves on the short end of this stick. Hermia's belief that Lysander has deserted her because of her body type also emphasizes the fickleness of love, which is often based not on deep features of character, but on trivial aspects of appearance.

### **HELENA**

Obsessed over Demetrius, Helena's character emphasizes the capriciousness of love and its excesses. Even though she knows she is making a fool of herself by pursuing Demetrius, Helena cannot stop the chase. She reminds us that love is blind, declaring that she is as beautiful as Hermia, so there is no logical explanation for Demetrius' sudden shift in affection. This point is further emphasized by the two men's love potion-induced attraction for her. Through these interactions, we learn that love is blind, illogical, seemingly produced by magic's sleight-of-hand, rather than reason's honesty. Like a child, lovers are often beguiled by trivial trinkets rather than deep character traits. This message is further heightened by the blandness of Lysander and Demetrius. As Lysander makes clear in his conversation with Egeus in Act I, no noticeable differences exist between the two men, so Helena could just as easily love one as the other.

Besides emphasizing love's arbitrary nature, Helena also highlights the gender differences that vex women. Unlike men who can woo whomever they please, women are not allowed to fight for love; instead, they must passively wait for the man of their dreams to notice them. In chasing Demetrius through the woods, Helena is breaking the rules of her sex, becoming the pursuer rather than the pursued. She likens herself to Apollo who chased the unwilling huntress Daphne through the woods. Helena's choice of examples is significant because it emphasizes the violence men or gods in this case have often perpetrated against women: Apollo wanted not only to capture Daphne, but to rape her. In chasing Demetrius, Helena claims to have appropriated Apollo's role, yet Demetrius is still the one who threatens violence when he vows to "do [her] mischief in the wood" if she doesn't stop following him. Not only must woman patiently wait for her

chosen lover to call, but she is also constantly threatened by male sexual violence if she resists unwanted male attentions.

What recourse do women have? Banding together. Thus, Helena is upset when she believes Hermia has betrayed her by joining Demetrius and Lysander. Childhood friendships between women should be stronger than the fickle love of men. Her comments make us question the position of all women in the play. For example, what is the source of Hippolyta's passivity in the play? Like Daphne, she has been captured and ravished by a male warrior. Did she lose her power when she lost the society of other women? And what about Titania? Why isn't she angry upon discovering that Oberon has charmed her and stolen her precious Indian boy? By focusing on these instances of male violence, the play implicitly suggests that women should become more active. Notice that Helena, who has actively pursued Demetrius, is rewarded for her proactive pursuit.

### **BOTTOM**

Probably created as a showcase for one of Shakespeare's favorite actors, Bottom's role involves dancing, singing, and laughter. From his first introduction, Bottom is presented as courageous and outgoing. He is confident in his ability to play any, even all, roles in "Pyramus and Thisbe." For example, he says his performance of Pyramus will cause the audience to cry a stormload of tears. As the audience realizes, this confidence is misplaced, and Bottom is little more than a swaggering fool — indeed, an ass, as Puck's prank makes apparent.

Bottom's language adds to his comic appeal. For example, he claims that if he performed the role of Thisbe, he would speak her lines in a "monstrous little voice," an obviously contradictory statement. Then he would "aggravate" his voice if he played the lion's role so that the ladies in the audience would not be frightened; once again, Bottom's word choices show his silliness, while adding a comic element to the play. Similarly, rather than worry about his acting performance, Bottom wonders which beard would be most effective for the role of Pyramus.

Although Bottom is the locus of comedy in the play — he's a traditional Shakespearean clown — he also draws the audience's attention to serious themes, such as the relationship between reality and imagination. In preparing for the performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe," Bottom continually draws his fellow players' attention back to the question of the audience's gullibility: Will the ladies be upset when Pyramus kills himself; will they realize that the lion is not a lion but an actor? To remedy the first problem, Bottom asks Quince to write a prologue, explaining Pyramus is not really dead, and that Pyramus is not, in fact, Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. In this instance, Bottom focuses the audience's attention on the difficulty of



differentiating reality and perception; his solution suggests his belief that the players' acting will be too convincing, that they will fully realize the goal of theater. Similarly, to keep the ladies from being afraid of the lion, he suggests the actor playing the lion show half of his face and explain that he's really a man, not an animal. This belief in the power of theater extends to his solutions for bringing moonshine and a wall into the play. In creating a wall for the set, he believes covering a man with plaster and some loam will sufficiently convince an audience. Always ready to be surprised, to accept the world's wonder, Bottom believes his audience will be equally susceptible to the powers of art.

Bottom's openness to the world's oddities extends to his visit to the fairy realm, which could be viewed as simply another fantasy, much like the theater. It is ironic that Bottom, the most down-to-earth character in the play, is the only mortal who meets any of the fairies. When Titania falls in love with him, Bottom isn't surprised. But he does recognize that Titania's statements about him aren't true, for example that he is an angel or that his looks inspire confidence. At bottom, he knows love and reason don't often work at the same level. Once again, his comments focus on a key, recurring theme of the play: How do love and reason relate? Should love be based on reason or on fantasy? In addition, Bottom's interactions with Titania emphasize the class differences between the characters in the play; as a member of the artisan class, Bottom was literally in a different realm from the regal Queen of the Fairies.

When he returns to the real world, following his stay in the fairy world, Bottom would like to discuss his experiences. He can't. Although he usually is full of language, he is unable to speak about his fairy-inspired visions. Instead, he wants Peter Quince to write a ballad about these experiences; what ordinary language cannot accommodate, poetic language can. Unlike Theseus, Bottom has complete faith in the power of art to capture visionary experiences. Through him, Shakespeare implicitly validates the vision of the artist.

## **PUCK**

Oberon's jester and lieutenant, Puck is a powerful supernatural creature, capable of circling the globe in 40 minutes or of enshrouding unsuspecting mortals in a deep fog. Also known as Robin Goodfellow, Puck would have been familiar to a sixteenth-century English audience, who would have recognized him as a common household spirit also often associated with travelers. But he's also a "puck," an elf or goblin that enjoys playing practical jokes on mortals. Although he is more mischievous than malevolent, Puck reminds us that the fairy world is not all goodness and generosity.

Another definition of his name aligns him with a Norse demon, sometimes associated with the devil. Perhaps it isn't surprising that he brings a somewhat more dangerous element to Titania and Oberon's seemingly benevolent fairy realm. He invokes the "damned spirits" that wander home to graveyards after a night of evil doing, while Oberon reminds him that his band of fairies are aligned with the morning dew, with sunlight and joy. Unlike Oberon who genuinely tries to create human happiness, Puck seems indifferent to human suffering. When he has accidentally caused both Lysander and Demetrius to fall in love with Helena, Puck enjoys the pleasure their folly brings him. Although he restores the proper lovers to each other, he does so only at Oberon's request, not out of any feelings of remorse. Similarly, Oberon feels repentance for Titania's idiotic love for Bottom, but Puck doesn't. While Oberon and Titania bless the newlyweds in Act V, Puck reminds the audience of the dangers of the night, graves gaping open and wolves howling at the moon. As a traditional Shakespearean fool, Puck makes us aware of the darker side of life, the underworld realm of shadows and magic and, ultimately, death.

### **OBERON**

The King of the Fairies, Oberon's personality has two sides. On the one hand, he ensures that the proper lovers end up together by the end of the play. He sympathizes with the sorely abused Helena and causes Demetrius to fall madly in love with her. As a benevolent ruler of the spirit world, he also brings blessing of peace and health to the future families of the newlyweds. But his personality is not all kindness; Oberon shows a more malicious side in his dealings with Titania.

Their initial interaction in the play begins with a fight. The dual has been brought about by Titania's possession of an Indian boy. While Titania appears to be legitimately raising this child, the only son of one of her votresses who died in childbirth, Oberon has decided he wants the boy as a servant. Why? Shakespeare never tells us. Perhaps Oberon wants to prove his male authority over Titania; perhaps he feels Titania is overindulging the boy and would like to bring discipline into his life. Any explanation the audience comes up with must be based in conjecture, because Shakespeare does not explain Oberon's motivation. No explanation, though, would seem to justify the cruelty Oberon uses in winning the boy away from Titania. Oberon casts a spell upon her, a trick that leaves her in love with Bottom, the ass. Many critics recognize Oberon's kindness in releasing her from this spell as soon as he has gotten what he wanted from her — the boy — but his treachery must still be acknowledged.

## THESEUS

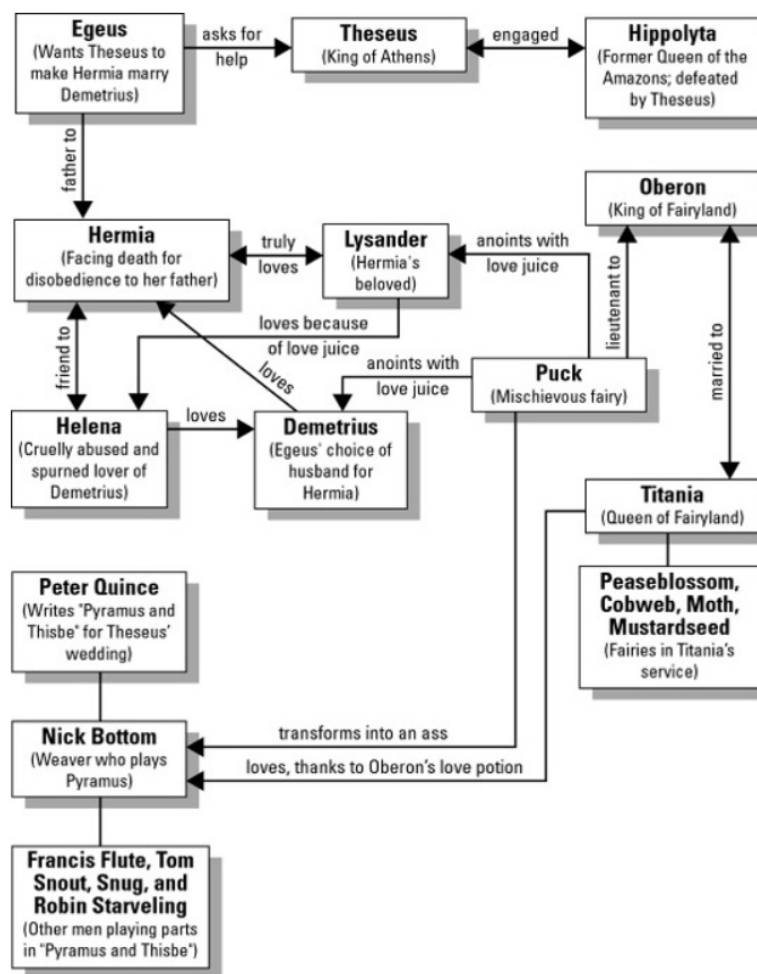
Like Oberon, Theseus is a contradictory character. On the one hand, he is the ruler of Athens and represents the voice of law and authority in the mortal realm, paralleling Oberon's similar position in the fairy world. His duty as dispenser of justice is seen early in the play through his interaction with Hermia and Egeus. Although Theseus is more understanding of Hermia's situation than her father, he still vows to sentence her to death if she won't accept one of his two alternatives: marrying Demetrius or entering a convent. Even when Hippolyta is noticeably upset with his verdict, Theseus insists that a daughter's first goal must be to obey her father. As upholder of authority in Athens, Theseus' first duty is to support the city's laws, even when they appear unfair.

Based on this example, Theseus' view of love would seem to fit within the boundaries of law and reason. This notion is supported by his speech at the beginning of Act V, in which he famously announces that the imaginations of poets, madmen, and lovers are all the same: All are prone to excesses beyond the realm of reason. But isn't Theseus also a lover? His statement seems to discount his own position as lover of Hippolyta; as a reasonable man, does he qualify as a lover? Yet even the rational Theseus claims time moves too slowly as he anticipates his wedding day, showing his unreasonable longing. But his love for Hippolyta is not the pure, fresh, freely chosen affection of Hermia and Lysander. As Theseus reminds his bride, he won her by doing her harm: She was part of the spoils of war. In their quarrel, Oberon and Titania tell us this is not the first relationship for either Hippolyta or Theseus. Not only has Theseus' name been linked with Titania's, but he has supposedly ravished and deserted Perigouna, Ariadne, and Antiope, among others. Similarly, Hippolyta has been the "buskin'd mistress" of Oberon and has spent time with Hercules and Cadmus. Not lovers in their first bloom, Theseus and Hippolyta offer a picture of more mature love.

Theseus' famous speech from Act V also appears to denigrate the poet's imaginative faculty by aligning him with lovers and madmen. He argues that the poet "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name," a trick performed by strong imaginations. His theory denies the importance of craft and discipline in the creation of art, casting artistic talent as little more than airy fantasy. In choosing a play for the wedding festivities, he does not select the most skillful performers, but those who present their art with simplicity, duty, and modesty. While Hippolyta dislikes the silly performance of the players, Theseus argues that both good and bad actors create but "shadows," and the audience must flesh out the performances through their own imaginations. Overall, Theseus' view of imagination

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minimizes the work of the artist, placing more responsibility on the audience.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF SCENES

### Act I: Scene 1

#### Summary

This scene opens in Theseus' palace in Athens. It is four days before his wedding to Hippolyta, the former queen of the Amazons, and Theseus is impatient with how slowly time is moving. Hippolyta assures him that the wedding day will soon arrive.

As Theseus and Hippolyta plan their wedding festivities, Egeus and his daughter, Hermia, arrive on the scene with Lysander and Demetrius. Egeus is angry because his daughter refuses to marry Demetrius, the man of his choice, but is instead in love with Lysander. Egeus accuses Lysander of bewitching his daughter and stealing her love by underhanded means. Agreeing with Egeus, Theseus declares that it is a daughter's duty to obey her father. Hermia demands to know the worst punishment she will receive

for disobedience. Death or spending her life in a nunnery comprise Hermia's choices. Lysander joins the argument, arguing that he is Demetrius' equal in everything and is, indeed, more constant in his affection than Demetrius, who was recently in love with Helena. These proceedings upset Hippolyta, because the prospect of Hermia's death upsets her plans for a happy, festive wedding day.

Finally, everyone except Lysander and Hermia leave the stage. Lysander reminds Hermia that the course of true love has never run smoothly, so they must view their difficulties as typical for lovers. He has a plan for eluding Athenian law: The two lovers will run away from Athens and live with his childless widow aunt to whom he has always been a surrogate son. Living with her, they will be outside of Athenian jurisdiction so that Hermia can avoid Theseus' death sentence and can marry. Having few other options, Hermia is enthusiastic about Lysander's idea and declares her undying love for him.

Just as the lovers have completed their plan for escape, Helena enters the scene. What charms does Hermia possess, Helena wonders, that have so completely captivated Demetrius? Hermia swears that she has no interest in Demetrius, that he actually seems to thrive on her hatred of him. Hermia and Lysander confess their intention of fleeing Athens, and Helena decides to tell Demetrius about it in a final attempt to win his love.

### **Analysis**

From the outset, Shakespeare subtly portrays the lovers as a group out of balance, a motif that creates tension throughout the play. For the sake of symmetry, the audience wants the four lovers to form two couples; instead, both men love Hermia, leaving Helena out of the equation. The women are thus in nonparallel situations, adding to the sense of structural imbalance. By establishing the fact that Demetrius once loved Helena, Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a harmonious resolution to this love tangle: if Demetrius could only be made to love Helena again, then all would be well. By the end of the play, the fairies' intervention effects just such an outcome, and all *does* become well, though it is worth noting that the restoration of Demetrius's love for Helena is the result of magic rather than a natural reawakening of his feelings.

The genre of comedy surrounding the Athenian lovers is farce, in which the humor stems from exaggerated characters trying to find their way out of ludicrous situations. Shakespeare portrays the lovers as overly serious, as each is deeply and earnestly preoccupied with his or her own feelings: Helena is anxious about her looks, reacting awkwardly when Lysander calls her "fair"; Hermia later becomes self-conscious about her short stature; Demetrius is willing to see Hermia executed to prevent her from marrying

another man; and Lysander seems to have cast himself as the hero of a great love story in his own mind III.ii.188, III.ii.247. Hermia is stubborn and quarrelsome, while Helena lacks self-confidence and believes that other people mock her. The airy world of the fairies and the absurd predicaments in which the lovers find themselves once in the forest make light of the lovers' grave concerns.

## **Act I: Scene 2**

### **Summary**

In this scene, the action shifts to the cottage of Peter Quince, the director of a band of amateur actors who are planning a play to perform for Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. The play enacts the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe, two young lovers who die during a clandestine meeting. Quince is in the process of assigning roles to the various players but meets with many objections to his casting efforts.

Nick Bottom, the weaver who is an entertaining but foolish man, usurps Quince's authority as director and claims he would like to play all of the roles in the drama. He is cast as lover Pyramus. Flute, the bellows mender, is assigned the role of the heroine, Thisbe. Not happy to play a female role because he wants to let his beard grow, Flute is pleased to learn that he can wear a mask for the performance so he won't need to shave. Snug, the joiner, is cast in the role of the lion.

Bottom wants to appropriate this role as he wanted to appropriate the others, claiming his roar could make the ladies shriek. His statement makes the players nervous. They worry that if the lion is too authentic, the women in the audience will be frightened, literally, to death: They fear that Theseus might have them hanged for scaring the ladies. Bottom agrees to temper his roar, making it gentle as a "sucking dove," but Quince flatters him by insisting that Snug must keep the part of the lion because only Bottom can play the leading role of Pyramus. When the casting is finally finished, Quince sends the players off to learn their lines and tells them to meet for a rehearsal the following evening at the Duke's oak.

### **Analysis**

The most important motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and one of the most important literary techniques Shakespeare uses throughout the play, is that of contrast. The three main groups of characters are all vastly different from one another, and the styles, moods, and structures of their respective subplots also differ. It is by incorporating these contrasting realms into a single story that Shakespeare creates the play's dreamlike atmosphere. Almost diametrically opposite the beautiful, serious, and love-struck young nobles are the clumsy, ridiculous, and deeply confused

craftsmen, around whom many of the play's most comical scenes are centered.

Where the young lovers are graceful and well spoken—almost comically well suited to their roles as melodramatically passionate youths—the craftsmen often fumble their words and could not be less well suited for acting. This disjunction reveals itself as it becomes readily apparent that the craftsmen have no idea how to put on a dramatic production: their speeches are full of impossible ideas and mistakes Bottom, for example, claims that he will roar “as gently / as any sucking dove”; their concerns about their parts are absurd Flute does not want to play Thisbe because he is growing a beard; and their extended discussion about whether they will be executed if the lion's roaring frightens the ladies further evidences the fact that their primary concern is with themselves, not their art.

The fact that the workmen have chosen to perform the Pyramus and Thisbe story, a Babylonian myth familiar to Shakespeare's audiences from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, only heightens the comedy. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is highly dramatic, with suicides and tragically wasted love themes that Shakespeare takes up in *Romeo and Juliet* as well. Badly suited to their task and inexperienced, although endlessly well meaning, the craftsmen are sympathetic figures even when the audience laughs at them—a fact made explicit in Act V, when Theseus makes fun of their play even as he honors their effort. The contrast between the serious nature of the play and the bumbling foolishness of the craftsmen makes the endeavor all the more ridiculous. Further, the actors' botched telling of the youthful love between Pyramus and Thisbe implicitly mocks the melodramatic love tangle of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander.

## Act II: Scene 1

### Summary

This scene transports its viewers from Athens into the woods outside of the city, the dwelling place of Oberon, Titania, and their band of fairies. The scene begins with a conversation between Oberon's mischievous elf Robin Goodfellow, also known as Puck, and one of Titania's attendants. Puck warns her to keep Titania away from this part of the woods because Oberon will be reveling here, and if the two meet there will certainly be a serious quarrel. Oberon is angry with Titania because she refuses to give him a sweet Indian boy upon whom she dotes. Titania's attendant suddenly recognizes Puck, accusing him of being the hobgoblin who is blamed for roguish acts in the village, such as frightening young women or misleading night travelers. Puck admits that he is this “merry wanderer of the night.”

Suddenly Oberon and Titania enter the scene from opposite directions. Their bickering begins. Each accuses the other of having had affairs, and

Titania says Oberon's persecution of her has caused the current chaos in the world: The rivers are flooding, the corn is rotting, and people are plagued by "rheumatic" diseases. Oberon blames Titania; if she would simply relinquish the Indian boy, peace would be restored. Titania refuses to let the boy go because his mother was a close friend of hers, and when she died in childbirth, Titania agreed to raise her son.

Hatching a plan to win the Indian boy, Oberon sends Puck in search of a flower called love-in-idleness. When the juice of this magical flower is poured on sleepers' eyelids, it makes them dote crazily on the first live creature they see upon awakening. In this way, Oberon plans to make Titania fall in love with some wild beast; he won't release her from this unpleasant spell until she gives him the Indian boy.

After Puck has left in search of the powerful flower, Oberon sits scheming. Demetrius and Helena unknowingly stumble into his bower, but he is invisible to them. Helena actively pursues her beloved, but Demetrius vows to hurt her if she doesn't leave him alone. After they have left, Puck returns. Taking pity on Helena, Oberon tells Puck to anoint the eyes of the Athenian man Demetrius so that he will fall in love with this jilted woman. Puck promises to fulfill Oberon's order, though Puck hasn't seen Demetrius, so he doesn't know which Athenian Oberon is talking about.

### Analysis

Act II serves two main functions: it introduces the fairies and their realm, and it initiates the romantic confusion that will eventually help restore the balance of love. The fairies, whom Shakespeare bases heavily on characters familiar from English folklore, are among the most memorable and delightful characters in the play. They speak in lilting rhymes infused with gorgeous poetic imagery. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play dominated by the presence of doubles, and the fairies are designed to contrast heavily with the young lovers and the craftsmen. Whereas the lovers are earnest and serious, Puck and the other pixies are merry and full of laughter; whereas the craftsmen are bumbling, earthy, and engage in methodical labor, the fairies are delicate, airy, and indulge in effortless magic and enchantment.

The conflict between Oberon and Titania imports into the fairy realm the motif of love being out of balance. As with the Athenian lovers, the eventual resolution of the tension between the two occurs only by means of magic. Though the craftsmen do not experience romantic confusion about one another, Bottom becomes involved in an accidental romance with Titania in Act III, and in Act V two craftsmen portray the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, who commit suicide after misinterpreting events.



*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was probably performed before Queen Elizabeth, and Shakespeare managed to make a flattering reference to his monarch in Act II, scene i. When Oberon introduces the idea of the love potion to Puck, he says that he once saw Cupid fire an arrow that missed its mark:

*That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,  
Flying between the cold moon and the earth  
Cupid, all armed.  
A certain aim he took  
At a fair vestal thronèd by the west,  
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow  
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.  
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft  
Quenched in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,  
And the imperial vot'ress passèd on,  
In maiden meditation, fancy-free  
II.i.155–164.*

Queen Elizabeth never married and was celebrated in her time as a woman of chastity, a virgin queen whose concerns were above the flesh. Here Shakespeare alludes to that reputation by describing Cupid firing an arrow “at a fair vestal thronèd by the west”—Queen Elizabeth—whom the heat of passion cannot affect because the arrow is cooled “in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon.” Shakespeare celebrates how Elizabeth put affairs of state before her personal life and lived “in maiden meditation, fancy-free.” He nestles a patriotic aside in an evocative description, couching praise for the ruler on whose good favor he depended in dexterous poetic language. Audiences in Shakespeare's day would most likely have recognized this imaginative passage's reference to their monarch.

Because many of the main themes and motifs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are very light, even secondary to the overall sense of comedy and the dreamlike atmosphere, it is perhaps more important to try to understand not *what* the play means but rather *how* Shakespeare creates its mood. One technique that he uses is to embellish action with a wealth of finely wrought poetic imagery, using language to work upon the imagination of the audience and thereby effect a kind of magic upon the stage: “I must go seek some dewdrops here,” one fairy says, “And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear” II.i.14–15. The fairies conjure many of the play's most evocative images: Oberon, for instance, describes having heard

*a mermaid on a dolphin's back*

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*Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath  
 That the rude sea grew civil at her song  
 And certain stars shot madly from their spheres  
 To hear the sea-maid's music* II.i.150–154  
*and seen  
 a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
 Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
 Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,  
 With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.  
 There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,  
 Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight* II.i.249–254.

This technique extends even to the suggestive names of some of the characters, such as the craftsmen Snug, Starveling, Quince, Flute, and Snout, and the fairies Cobweb, Mustardseed, Mote, and Peaseblossom.

## **Act II: Scene 2**

### **Summary**

Titania's fairies sing her a soothing lullaby as she prepares for sleep. While she rests, Oberon creeps up, squeezes the potion onto her eyelids and utters a spell to make her awaken when something vile is near.

When Oberon leaves, Lysander and Hermia wander into Titania's bower, but she is invisible to them. The lovers are lost, and Lysander suggests they stop to sleep for the night. Hermia agrees but won't let him sleep too close to her, even though Lysander claims that, because they are engaged, they can sleep innocently side by side. But Hermia insists on separation, so they sleep a short distance apart. After they have fallen asleep, Puck enters, searching for the Athenian whose eyes Oberon wanted him to anoint with the love juice. Seeing Lysander and Hermia lying apart from each other, he mistakes them for Demetrius and Helena and erroneously applies the magical juice to Lysander.

After Puck exits, Demetrius and Helena run into the bower. Helena is in frantic pursuit of her beloved, but he manages to flee his pursuer and sprints into the woods. Depressed and exhausted, Helena stops to rest and notices Lysander asleep on the ground. She wakes him and, thanks to Puck's potion, he immediately falls in love with her. When he claims to have abandoned Hermia, who he now describes as dull and unattractive, Helena assumes he is teasing her so she runs away. Lysander chases after her, and Hermia awakens. She has been dreaming about a fearful snake that ate her heart awake. Frightened that Lysander has disappeared, she, too, rushes into the woods.

## Analysis

Act II, scene ii introduces the plot device of the love potion, which Shakespeare uses to explore the comic possibilities inherent in the motif of love out of balance. Oberon's meddling in the affairs of humans further disrupts the love equilibrium, and the love potion symbolizes the fact that the lovers themselves will not reason out their dilemmas; rather, an outside force—magic—will resolve the love tangle.

The ease with which characters' affections change in the play, so that Lysander is madly in love with Hermia at one point and with Helena at another, has troubled some readers, who feel that Shakespeare profanes the idea of true love by treating it as inconstant and subject to outside manipulation. It is important to remember, however, that while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains elements of romance, it is not a true love story like *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's aim is not to comment on the nature of true love but rather to mock gently the melodramatic afflictions and confusions that love induces. Demetrius, Helena, Hermia, and Lysander are meant not to be romantic archetypes but rather sympathetic figures thrown into the confusing circumstances of a romantic farce.

Like much farce, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relies heavily on misunderstanding and mistaken identity to create its humorous entanglements. Oberon's unawareness of the presence of a second Athenian couple—Lysander and Hermia—in the forest enables Puck's mistaken application of the flower's juice. This confusion underscores the crucial role of circumstance in the play: it is not people who are responsible for what happens but rather fate. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, oppositely, Shakespeare forces his characters to make crucial decisions that affect their lives.

Much of the comic tension in this scene and throughout the rest of the play, as the confusion wrought by the love potion only increases stems from the fact that the solution to the love tangle seems so simple to the reader/audience: if Demetrius could simply be made to love Hermia, then the lovers could pair off symmetrically, and love would be restored to a point of balance. Shakespeare teases the audience by dangling the magic flower as a simple mechanism by which this resolution could be achieved. He uses this mechanism, however, to cycle through a number of increasingly ridiculous arrangements before he allows the love story to arrive at its inevitable happy conclusion.

## Act III: Scene 1

### Summary

Comedy returns to the play in the opening of this scene. Peter Quince and his company are rehearsing their rendition of Pyramus and Thisbe.

Bottom has serious reservations about the play: Pyramus kills himself with a sword, and the lion is frightening, both factors that are sure to terrify the women in the audience. The other players agree, wondering if the play should be abandoned, but Bottom has a solution. A prologue needs to be written to explain that Pyramus is only an actor, and the actor playing the lion must show half of his face during his performance and tell the audience his true identity. With these problems successfully solved, Quince mentions two other difficulties with the upcoming performance: It requires moonshine and a wall. After consulting a calendar, they discover that the moon will be shining on the night of the performance, so they can simply leave a window open. The wall is a greater dilemma for these silly men. Finally, Bottom discovers a solution: An actor covered in plaster will play the role of the wall. Everyone agrees, and the rehearsal begins.

Puck eavesdrops on the performance, amused by the way these actors butcher their lines. The egotistical Bottom sits in the bushes, waiting his cue, and Puck can't resist playing a joke on him: He gives Bottom an ass' head. When Bottom enters, declaring his love for Thisbe, the other terrified actors dash into the woods. Unaware of his transformation, Bottom has no idea what has frightened them. As he walks singing through the woods, Titania, with the love juice on her eyes, awakens and falls immediately in love with the beastly Bottom. She appoints four fairies — Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mote, and Mustardseed — to serve the needs of her new lover.

### Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is roughly such that Act I introduces the main characters and the conflict; Act II sets up the interaction among the Athenian lovers, the fairies, and the craftsmen the lovers wander through the forest, the fairies make mischief with the love potion; and Act III develops the comical possibilities of these interactions. As Act III is the first act in which all three groups appear, the fantastic contrasts between them are at their most visible.

The craftsmen's attempt at drama is a comedy of incongruity, as the rough, unsophisticated men demonstrate their utter inability to conceive a competent theatrical production. Their proposal to let the audience know that it is night by having a character play the role of Moonshine exemplifies their straightforward, literal manner of thinking and their lack of regard for subtlety. In their earthy and practical natures, the craftsmen stand in stark contrast to the airy and impish fairies.

The fairies' magic is one of the main components of the dreamlike atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it is integral to the plot's progression. It throws love increasingly out of balance and brings the farce into its most frenzied state. With the youths' love tangle already affected by

the potion, Shakespeare creates further havoc by generating a romance across groups, as Titania falls in love with the ass-headed Bottom. Obviously, the delicate fairy queen is dramatically unsuited to the clumsy, monstrous craftsman. Shakespeare develops this romance with fantastic aplomb and heightens the comedy of the incongruity by making Bottom fully unaware of his transformed state. Rather, Bottom is so self-confident that he finds it fairly unremarkable that the beautiful fairy queen should wish desperately to become his lover. Further, his ironic reference to his colleagues as asses and his hunger for hay emphasize the ridiculousness of his lofty self-estimation.

### **Act III: Scene 2**

#### **Summary**

Encountering Oberon in another part of the forest, Puck explains the outcome of his experiments with the love potion. Oberon is pleased to learn that Titania has fallen in love with the monstrous Bottom and that Puck has also fixed the disdainful Athenian. Just after Puck assures him that Demetrius must now love Helena, Demetrius and Hermia enter the scene. Oberon recognizes Demetrius, but Puck realizes this is not the same Athenian he bewitched with the potion. Because her darling Lysander has mysteriously disappeared, Hermia accuses Demetrius of murdering him and hiding the body. Demetrius insists that he didn't kill his enemy, but Hermia refuses to believe him. Giving up the argument in despair, Demetrius sinks to the ground and falls asleep, while Hermia continues her search for the missing Lysander.

Oberon reprimands Puck for anointing the wrong Athenian with the love juice. To correct the situation, Oberon sends Puck in search of Helena and then squeezes the magic potion into the cold-hearted Demetrius' eyes. Lysander and Helena enter the scene, still bickering because Helena thinks he is mocking her. Their voices wake Demetrius, who falls in love with Helena at first sight, compliments of Oberon's potion. Hearing what she believes are Demetrius' phony declarations of love, Helena is furious: Both Lysander and Demetrius are now making fun of her. When Hermia enters, the situation gets even worse.

Not knowing about the potion-induced change in Lysander's feelings for her, Hermia is shocked when he declares he no longer loves her. Of course, Helena thinks that Hermia is also in on the farce and can't believe her closest childhood friend could be so nasty. After the lovers have all fought and fled the scene, Oberon forces Puck to fix the problem before the men kill each other. He advises Puck to create a deep fog in which the lovers will get lost and, finally, fall asleep in exhaustion. When they awake in the morning, the night's crazy events will seem like a dream except that

Demetrius will be in love with Helena. Oberon then rushes to Titania's bower to beg for the Indian boy.

### Analysis

Shakespeare's parody of love reaches its peak in this scene. Although Hermia claims Lysander's love is truer than the sun onto the day, previous scenes have shown that his love was easily altered with the application of a little love juice. When Oberon criticizes Puck for turning a true love false, rather than a false love true, Puck replies, "one man holding troth, / A million fail, confounding oath on oath" 92-93, suggesting only one man in a million is actually able to be true to his vows of love; all others break oath on oath, including the seemingly true Lysander. The comedy of the situation appeals to Puck, who muses on what fools "mortals be."

In declaring his love for Helena, Demetrius focuses first on her eyes, which he believes are clearer than crystal. Her lips are luscious fruit, like ripe and tempting cherries, but, more interestingly, he emphasizes her "whiteness." She is a pure white, like the snow on top of some high summit; indeed, in his eyes she is a "princess of pure white." The emphasis on white links her with purity, with innocence, with the dazzling, blinding light of a snow-covered field. But it also has a racial overtone. As whiteness becomes associated with purity, darkness becomes linked with its opposite, with evil. This creates a hierarchical dichotomy in which whiteness is prized and darkness is denigrated. As a result, dark-skinned people are also maligned, as happens here with Hermia. Lysander critiques her by labeling her an "Ethiope" and a "tawny Tartar" and implying that her darkness makes her somehow inferior to Helena.

Not surprisingly, Helena is angered by what she views as her friends toying with her, so she adds to the criticism by commenting on Hermia's stature. Indeed, height seems to play a role in love, and Hermia seems to believe that Lysander loves Helena simply because she is the taller of the two women. This exchange emphasizes the arbitrariness of the factors that create or repel love: eye color, hair color, height.

Like Helena earlier in the play, Hermia is here pushed beyond the limits of "maiden's patience" 66; when dealing with love, women forget the gender limits that have been imposed upon them, perhaps because they are judged by such seemingly ridiculous standards. Retaliating against suggestions that she is small, even dwarfish, Hermia calls Helena a "painted maypole." This comment implies a double critique: not only is Helena as skinny as a pole, but she is "painted," suggesting she is sexually knowledgeable. The fight that ensues between the two women puts them both beyond the limits of supposedly feminine gentleness. Helena further

critiques Hermia by calling her "keen," "shrewd," and a "vixen." A short shrew, Hermia is not the ideal woman.

In calling Demetrius a serpent, an adder, Hermia creates continuity with Act II, Scene 2, in which she dreamed that a serpent ate her heart out. But in this instance, Hermia mistakes the snake; Demetrius has not killed Lysander, but her heart will soon be pierced with an even greater shock. Hermia's hatred of Demetrius parallels his loathing of Helena, again adding continuity to the text. Notice how carefully Shakespeare has structured his play; by repeating key images, such as the moon or the serpent or Cupid's arrow, and key relationships and feelings, he has created a fluid, continuous text.

The relationship of Hermia and Helena is also parallel with that of Titania and her Indian votress. Like Titania and her friend, Helena and Hermia are as close as sisters. Together they sang with one voice, often working as if their hands and minds were united. Indeed, Helena compares them to a "double cherry" that seems to be parted, yet is united at the stem. Close friendship is another form of love exalted in this play. Helena chides her friend for destroying this ancient bond for the sake of a man; not only is this action a treachery against Helena, but it is an injury against all women. Of course, Helena here forgets that she has also done Hermia wrong; she told Demetrius about her friend's plan of elopement as a ploy to win his love, despite the fact that such knowledge might not be beneficial to Hermia. The play shows the conflicts that often ensue between love and friendship. For women in particular, friendship appears to be a vital part of life. Both Titania's actions with the Indian boy and Helena's comments in this scene suggest that women need to stick together, supporting each other, rather than letting their love for a man destroy their bonds of friendship. While the tides of love are forever ebbing and flowing, the waves of true friendship are calm and constant.

Such a friendship does not exist between Lysander and Demetrius. Although the text presents enough detail about the women's appearances and personalities for the reader to differentiate them, the two male lovers are basically indistinguishable. Both Lysander and Demetrius are critiqued for their fickle, faithless ways, and Helena criticizes them further for their unmanly behavior toward her. Suggesting that they are men only "in show," Helena argues that real men would not mock a lady, would not pretend to love her when they actually hate her. Making a woman cry does not qualify as "a manly enterprise" in Helena's opinion. What are the attributes of a gentleman? For Helena, honesty and faithfulness seem to be the two primary requirements. Neither she nor Hermia provides any explanation for their love of Demetrius and Lysander, respectively. No mention is made of either man's appearance or of any special aspects of his

personality, so there seems to be no reason for either woman's love. Indeed, the similarities in Demetrius' and Lysander's personalities become pronounced as they run through the fog Puck creates to keep them from fighting. Puck speaks with both their voices, so together the three generate a melange of voices in which individual identities are completely lost.

Do we see changes in the personalities of Puck or Oberon in this scene? From the beginning of the play, Puck has been presented as a mischievous elf, toying with the people in the surrounding villages to create entertainment for Oberon. His playful side is also emphasized here. As the scene opens, he revels in relating to Oberon the effects of his transformation of Bottom into an ass. Not only did Titania fall in love with the monstrous fellow, but Bottom's friends were so frightened by the change that they felt the entire woods had been transformed into something malevolent, so that even the briars and branches maliciously tore their clothing. When he realizes that he's placed the love potion into the wrong Athenian's eyes and that soon two men will be chasing after Helena, he is excited by the "sport," preferring things that happen "prepost'rously" 121. In addition, he does not accept the blame for this mistake but labels it an act of fate. Similarly, he blames Cupid, rather than himself, for making "poor females mad" 441. Mischief and chaos are Puck's domain.

Oberon, on the other hand, is a more responsible fairy. The ruler of the fairy world, Oberon is not pleased to learn that Puck has charmed the wrong Athenian. On the one hand, Oberon's behavior towards Titania is imperious and self-serving: He is delighted that she has fallen for an ass. Yet he is not interested in creating havoc solely for his own amusement, as is Puck. Instead, he would like to make false loves turn true, promoting joy and love in the world. Oberon also reveals that he is not one of the "damned spirits" who haunts the world by night. He is a different type of spirit, one that enjoys the morning, the fiery-red sun. While literature abounds with malevolent fairies who vex humanity, Oberon and his crew are benevolent creatures, promoting peace and happiness in the human realm.

#### **Act IV: Scene 1**

##### **Summary**

Bottom is enjoying his sojourn in Titania's bower: Peaseblossom amiably scratches his head, while Cobweb goes off in search of honey for him. As Bottom sleeps in Titania's arms, Oberon walks in. Feeling pity for Titania's pitiful love for this ass, Oberon squeezes an herb on her eyes to release her from the spell. Titania awakens, telling Oberon about her strange dream of being in love with an ass. Oberon has Puck remove the ass' head from Bottom. Now that Oberon has won the Indian boy from



Titania, he is willing to forget their argument, and the two, reunited, dance off together so they can bless Theseus' marriage.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus are walking through the woods when Theseus suddenly spies the sleeping lovers. Egeus recognizes them but wonders how they ended up together because Demetrius and Lysander are enemies. Theseus imagines they woke early to observe the rite of May and remembers this is the day Hermia needs to make a choice about her future. When the lovers are awakened, Demetrius confesses that he now loves Helena. No one really understands what has happened. Theseus decides the lovers should be married along with him and Hippolyta.

As the lovers return to the palace, the scene shifts to Bottom. Just awakening from his dream, Bottom declares he'll have Quince write a ballad about it, called "Bottom's Dream," because it has no bottom.

### Analysis

Barely 300 lines long, Act IV is the shortest and most transitional of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* five acts. The first three serve respectively to introduce the characters, establish the comic situation, and develop the comedy; Act IV ends the conflict and leads to the happy ending in Act V. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is the speed with which the conflict is resolved and the farce comes to an end; despite the ubiquity of chaos in Act III, all that is necessary to resolve matters is a bit of potion on Lysander's eyelids and Oberon's forgiveness of his wife. The climactic moment between Titania and Oberon, during which she agrees to give him the Indian boy, is not even shown onstage but is merely described.

Though Demetrius's love of Helena is a by-product of the magic potion rather than an expression of his natural feelings, love has been put into balance, allowing for a traditional marriage ending. As is often the case with Shakespeare, the dramatic situation is closely tied to the circumstances of the external environment; just as the conflict is ending and a semblance of order is restored among the characters, the sun comes up. There is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, as soon as the scenario has progressed to a suitable degree of complication and hilarity, Shakespeare simply invokes the fairies' magic to dispel all conflict. As the sun comes up, the reappearance of Theseus and Hippolyta, who symbolize the power and structure of the outside world, begins to dispel the magical dream of the play.

Theseus and Hippolyta bookend the play. They are extremely important figures both at its beginning and at its end, but they disappear entirely during the main action in the magical forest. The duke and his Amazon bride are romanticized in the play, but they belong solely to the nonmagical waking world, where they remain wholly in control of their own

feelings and actions. An important element of the dream realm, as the lovers come to realize upon waking in a daze, is that one is in control of neither oneself nor one's surroundings. In this way, the forest and fairies contribute to the lovers' sense of their experience as a dream, even though the action happens largely while they are awake.

## **Act IV: Scene 2**

### **Summary**

In this short scene, Quince and Flute are searching for their missing friend, Bottom. They worry that "Pyramus and Thisbe" won't be performed without him. Theseus is known for his generosity, and the actors believe they will potentially be rewarded with a lifelong pension for their stellar performance of this play. As they lament this lost opportunity, Bottom suddenly returns. His friends want to hear his story, but Bottom tells them there isn't time for that now: They must prepare for the play. He warns them to avoid onions and garlic so their breath will be sweet for the "sweet comedy" they will perform.

### **Analysis**

This brief comic scene returns the focus of the play to the subplot of the Athenian craftsmen. Structurally, Act IV, scene ii represents something of a new beginning for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the main conflict of the play has been resolved, but rather than ending with the weddings of the lovers, as is customary in an Elizabethan comedy the weddings do not even occur onstage here, Shakespeare chooses to include an extended epilogue devoted to sheer comedy. The epilogue takes up all of Act V and centers around the craftsmen's performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* for the Athenian crowd. Act IV, scene ii transfers the focus of the play from magic and unbalanced love to a play-within-a-play, in which the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not too heavy to begin with, are recycled into a form so ridiculous and garbled that the play draws to a wholly untroubled conclusion.

Though the preceding events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been far from tragic, many of the characters have experienced unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy, lovesickness, and insecurity. Act IV, scene ii makes a basic transition from sadness to joy as Bottom's return transforms his fellow craftsmen's sorrow and confusion into delight and eagerness. It is no coincidence that Bottom's reappearance occurs almost simultaneously with the audience being told that the lovers have been married. Just as the marriages dispel the romantic angst of the play, so does Bottom's return dispel the worry of his comrades. Similarly, the arrival in the forest of Theseus and Hippolyta, representatives of order, coincides with the

Athenian lovers' waking from their chaotic, dreamlike romp of the previous night.

## Act V: Scene 1

### Summary

The play has come full circle, and the cast has now returned to the palace where Theseus and Hippolyta discuss the strange tale the lovers have told them about the events of the previous evening. The joyous lovers enter, and Theseus decides it is time to plan the festivities for the evening. Of all the possible performances, the play "Pyramus and Thisbe" turns out to be the most promising. Theseus is intrigued by the paradoxical summary of the play, which suggests it is both merry and tragical, tedious and brief. Philostrate tries to dissuade Theseus from choosing this play, but Theseus thinks its simplicity will be refreshing.

In the remainder of the scene, the players present "Pyramus and Thisbe," accompanied by the lovers' critical commentary. Hippolyta is disgusted by this pathetic acting, but Theseus argues that even the best actors create only a brief illusion; the worst must be assisted by an imaginative audience. Following the performance, Bottom arises from the dead, asking Theseus if he'd like to hear an epilogue or watch a rustic dance. Theseus opts for the dance, having lost patience with the players' acting.

The play concludes with three epilogues. The first is Puck's poetic monologue, delivered while he sweeps up the stage. Oberon and Titania offer their blessing on the house and on the lovers' future children. The play ends with Puck's final speech, in which he apologizes for the weakness of the performance and promises that the next production will be better.

### Analysis

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is somewhat compacted in that the first four acts contain all of the play's main action, with the height of conflict occurring in Act III and a happy turn of events resembling a conclusion in Act IV. Act V serves as a kind of joyful comic epilogue to the rest of the play, focusing on the craftsmen's hilariously bungling efforts to present their play and on the noble Athenians' good-natured jesting during the craftsmen's performance. The heady tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes comical in the hands of the craftsmen. The bearded Flute's portrayal of the maiden Thisbe as well as the melodramatic "Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall" and nonsensical "Sweet moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams" language of the play strips the performance of any seriousness or profound meaning V.i.174, V.i.261.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which comes from an ancient Babylonian legend often reworked in European mythology, would have been

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familiar to educated members of Shakespeare's audiences. The story likely influenced *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare also pulled elements from other versions of the Romeo and Juliet tale. In both stories, two young lovers from feuding families communicate under cover of darkness; both male lovers erroneously think their beloveds dead and commit suicide, and both females do likewise when they find their lovers dead.

Insofar as the fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has thematic significance the main purpose of the play-within-a-play is to provide comic enjoyment, it is that the Pyramus and Thisbe story revisits the themes of romantic hardship and confusion that run through the main action of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe are kept apart by parental will, just as Lysander and Hermia were; their tragic end results from misinterpretation—Pyramus takes Thisbe's bloody mantle as proof that she is dead, which recalls, to some extent, Puck's mistaking of Lysander for Demetrius as well as Titania's misconception of Bottom as a beautiful lover. In this way, the play-within-a-play lightheartedly satirizes the anguish that earlier plagued the Athenian lovers.

Given the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is no surprise that one of the main themes of the play is dreams, particularly as they relate to darkness and love. When morning comes, ending the magical night in the forest, the lovers begin to suspect that their experience in the woods was merely a dream. Theseus suggests as much to Hippolyta, who finds it strange that all the young lovers would have had the *same* dream. In the famous final speech of the play, Puck turns this idea outward, recommending that if audience members did not enjoy the play, they should assume that they have simply been dreaming throughout. This suggestion captures perfectly the delicate, insubstantial nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just as the fairies mended their mischief by sorting out the romantic confusion of the young lovers, Puck accounts for the whimsical nature of the play by explaining it as a manifestation of the subconscious.

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## QUOTES

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1. *For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,  
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine;  
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,  
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt. I.i.*

After Hermia and Lysander depart Athens for the forest, Helena expresses her jealousy of the lovers' happiness and particularly of Hermia's beauty. These lines come late in Helena's speech, and they serve at once to reiterate her jealousy of Hermia and to demonstrate the pain she feels at

having lost the affections of Demetrius, the man who had promised himself to her and whom she still loves. Helena's language is suggestive. Her mention of heat and melting invokes the heat of both attraction and anger, yet her emphasis on eyes and showers also conjures figurative tears of pain.

2. *How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,*

*Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,*

*Knowing I know thy love to Theseus? II.i.*

Oberon speaks these words to Titania after she has just implied that he wastes his time writing pointless poems and chasing after women. In particular, she mentions Oberon's lust for Hippolyta, whom Titania refers to as "the bouncing Amazon, / Your buskined mistress and your warrior love" II.i.. Titania clearly feels jealous, and Oberon's touchy response in these lines shows that he is equally jealous of Titania, who has a thing for Theseus. Despite the undertone of jealousy, Oberon's point here is that Titania has no right to dishonor him by complaining about his actions when she is guilty of the same.

3. *What wicked and dissembling glass of mine*

*Made me compare with Hermia's spherieyne? II.ii.*

Once again, Helena dwells on her jealousy of Hermia's beauty. Unlike her previous expressions of jealousy, however, here Helena turns her focus back on herself. She does this through her rhetorical question. By asking what "wicked" mirror compelled her to compare herself to Hermia, Helena is effectively inquiring, "Why am I so obsessed with comparing myself to Hermia?" Although Helena does not have time to reflect further before she stumbles upon a sleeping Lysander, her moment of self-questioning is important because it resists the logic of female conflict over men.

4. *Are you not he*

*That frights the maidens of the villagery,*

*Skim milk, and sometimes labor in the quern,*

*And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,*

*And sometime make the drink to bear no barm,*

*Mislead night-wanderers, laughing at their harm? II.i.*

An anonymous fairy speaks these lines upon recognizing the infamous Puck, a puckish spirit who is well known in English folklore for performing various pranks on unsuspecting villagers. The tone of the unnamed fairy approximates that of an adoring fan. The awe with which he lists Puck's most typical pranks suggests just how much delight the fairy realm takes in promoting mischief. Puck makes this point explicitly in Act III when he

declares, “And those things do best please me / That befall prepost’rously” III.ii..

5. *What thou see’st when thou dost wake,  
Do it for thy true love take.  
Love and languish for his sake.  
Be it ounce or cat or bear,  
Pard or boar with bristled hair,  
In thy eye that shall appear  
When thou wak’st, it is thy dear.  
Wake when some vile thing it near.* II.ii.

This is the spell Oberon utters while squeezing the liquid from an enchanted flower onto Titania’s eyelids. Two things are worth noting here. First, Oberon’s verse is made up of rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the fairies often speak in this meter rather than the more usual iambic pentameter of the Athenian nobles. Thus the very meter of the language is associated in this play with mischief. Second, this particular enchantment stands as the play’s primary act of mischief, which comically amplifies the discord among the play’s lovers in anticipation of eventual resolution

6. *Up and down, up and down,  
I will lead them up and down.  
I am feared in field and town.  
Goblin, lead them up and down.  
Here comes one.* III.ii.

Puck utters these lines at the height of the chaos in the forest. The singsong quality of Puck’s verse links it to the theme of fairy mischief, and the repeated motif of “up and down” expresses the fairy’s delight in leading the unsuspecting Athenians astray. On the other hand, Puck’s repetition of this motif may convey his frustration at having to obey Oberon’s commands. Puck utters these lines immediately after the fairy king has instructed him to use the flower potion to restore order among the lovers, in which case they may indicate surliness.

7. *[Snout] O Bottom, thou art changed! What do I see on thee?  
[Bottom] What do you see? You see an ass head of your own, do you?  
[Quince] Bless thee, Bottom; bless thee. Thou art translated.* III.i.

Chaos and fear ensue immediately after Puck casts a spell that exchanges Bottom’s human head for that of a donkey. Although Bottom’s “translation” is the only physical metamorphosis in the play, it echoes the

many transformations that take place in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin poem that Shakespeare drew on heavily in writing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Despite alluding to classical mythology, however, Bottom's metamorphosis actually results from fairy magic, and his companions humorously misinterpret the event as a demonic curse—hence Quince's impulse to issue blessings. This mishmash of references amplifies the humor.

8. *Why are you grown so rude? What change is this, Sweet love?* III.ii.

After Hermia wakes from her sleep to find Lysander gone, she tracks him down, only to be met with harsh insults from her betrothed. In these lines she asks Lysander what has turned his “sweet love” so bitter. Lysander's emotional transformation is, of course, the result of fairy mischief. His transformation is also metaphorically linked to the many other changes in affection that occur in the play, including Demetrius' shift from Helena to Hermia and back to Helena as well as Titania's shift from Bottom back to Oberon.

9. *But all the story of the night told over,  
And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images  
And grows to something of great constancy,  
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.* V.i.

As against Theseus' skepticism regarding the lovers' story of their night in the forest, Hippolyta utters these lines to express her belief in their story. She cites as evidence of the story's truthfulness the fact that “all their minds [have been] transfigured so together.” Hippolyta's use of the word “transfigured” is significant, since it indicates not just transformation, but transformation into something better, more elevated. Thus, the lovers' minds have all undergone a metamorphosis that has brought them to a higher, nobler place. The positive valence of this transformation clearly indicates that “something of great constancy” has transpired.

10. *Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that [i.e., to love me], and yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays.* III.i.

Bottom addresses these words to Titania after she swears her love to him. Though Bottom's head has been transformed into that of a donkey, he is not under the same love enchantment as Titania, and thus does not understand why she would have to love him. In spite of this, Bottom reasons that love and logic don't always go together. Amusingly, Titania

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responds to Bottom's illogic with an equally unreasonable conclusion: "Thou are at wise as thou art beautiful" III.i..

11. *You speak not as you think. It cannot be.* III.ii.

Hermia speaks these words in response to Lysander, who has just asked her why she persists in following him: "Could not this make thee know / The hate I bear thee made me leave thee so?" III.ii.. The sudden and complete reversal of Lysander's affections strikes Hermia as an impossible turn of events that cannot stand to reason. She conveys this feeling of unreason by pointing to the apparent contradiction between what Lysander says and what he thinks.

12. *More strange than true. I never may believe*

*These antique fables nor these fairy toys.*

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,*

*Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend*

*More than cool reason ever comprehends.* V.i.

After the lovers have returned to Athens and told the story of their wild night in the forest, Theseus expresses his skepticism. The strangeness of the events recounted strain his sense of reality, and so he attributes the lovers' belief in their own story to the idea that they, like madmen, suffer from "seething brains." This condition has diluted their mental faculties, allowing them to "apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends."

13. *Run when you will, the story shall be changed.*

*Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase.*

*The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind*

*Makes speed to catch the tiger—bootless speed,*

*When cowardice pursues and valor flies.* II.i.

As Helena follows Demetrius and continues to swear her love for him, he responds less than kindly, telling her, "I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes" II.i.. Helena retorts with these lines, observing how her pursuit of Demetrius reverses the usual state of affairs, in which the strong man pursues the weak woman. Helena couches this idea of reversal in a reference to the myth of Apollo and Daphne. This myth involves the virgin nymph Daphne turning into a laurel tree to escape from the lustful god Apollo, who chases after her. Here, however, "Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase."

14. *You do advance your cunning more and more.*

*When truth kills truth, O devilish holy fray!*

*These vows are Hermia's. Will you give her o'er?* III.ii.



When the fairy enchantment shifts Lysander's affections from Hermia to Helena, Helena suspects that he, along with Demetrius, is trying to humiliate her with a prank. Lysander's love for Helena is not a strict reversal, since he did not previously hate her. Nevertheless, Helena understands this turn of events in terms of a negation in which "truth kills truth." Here, the truth of Lysander's vow to Helena negates his previous vow to Hermia. This negation has the effect of instigating conflict between Helena and Hermia, thereby reversing their relationship from friends to rivals.

15. *I know you two are rival enemies.*

*How comes this gentle concord in the world,*

*That hatred is so far from jealousy*

*To sleep by hate and fear no enmity? IV.i.*

Theseus addresses this question to Lysander and Demetrius, who have reconciled their differences. The reversal of rivalry into friendship clearly surprises Theseus, and the duke's surprise indicates his general failure of imagination. This failure of imagination returns at the top of Act V, when Theseus refuses to believe the lovers' account of the previous night. Despite Theseus' surprise at the reversal in Lysander and Demetrius' relationship, the entire play has been orchestrated to anticipate the eventuality of just such a reversal of discord into concord.

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## SUMMARY

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**A Midsummer Night's Dream takes place in Athens. Theseus, the Duke of Athens, is planning his marriage with Hippolyta, and as a result he is planning a large festival. Egeus enters, followed by his daughter Hermia, her beloved Lysander, and her suitor Demetrius. Egeus tells Theseus that Hermia refuses to marry Demetrius, wanting instead to marry Lysander. He asks for the right to punish Hermia with death if she refuses to obey.**

Theseus agrees that Hermia's duty is to obey her father, and threatens her with either entering a nunnery or marrying the man her father chooses. Lysander protests, but is overruled by the law. He and Hermia then decide to flee by night into the woods surrounding Athens, where they can escape the law and get married. They tell their plan to Helena, a girl who is madly in love with Demetrius. Hoping to gain favor with Demetrius, Helena decides to tell him about the plan.

Some local artisans and workmen have decided to perform a play for Theseus as a way to celebrate his wedding. They choose Pyramus and Thisbe for their play, and meet to assign the roles. Nick Bottom gets the

role of Pyramus, and Flute takes the part of Thisbe. They agree to meet the next night in the woods to rehearse the play.

**Robin Goodfellow, a puck, meets a fairy who serves Queen Titania. He tells the fairy that his King Oberon is in the woods, and that Titania should avoid Oberon because they will quarrel again. However, Titania and Oberon soon arrive and begin arguing about a young boy Titania has stolen and is caring for. Oberon demands that she give him the boy, but she refuses.**

Oberon decides to play a trick on Titania and put some pansy juice on her eyes. The magical juice will make her fall in love with first person she sees upon waking up. Soon after Puck is sent away to fetch the juice, Oberon overhears Demetrius and Helena in the woods.

Demetrius deserts Helena in the forest, leaving her alone. Oberon decides that he will change this situation, and commands Robin to put the juice onto Demetrius's eyes when he is sleeping. He then finds Titania and drops the juice onto her eyelids. Robin goes to find Demetrius, but instead comes across Lysander and accidentally uses the juice on him.

By accident Helena comes across Lysander and wakes him up. He immediately falls in love with her and starts to chase her through the woods. Together they arrive where Oberon is watching, and he realizes the mistake. Oberon then puts the pansy juice onto Demetrius's eyelids, who upon waking up also falls in love with Helena. She thinks that the two men are trying to torment her for being in love with Demetrius, and becomes furious at their protestations of love.

The workmen arrive in the woods and start to practice their play. They constantly ruin the lines of the play and mispronounce the words. Out of fear of censorship, they decide to make the play less realistic. Therefore the lion is supposed to announce that he is not a lion, but only a common man. Bottom also feels obliged to tell the audience that he is not really going to die, but will only pretend to do so. Puck, watching this silly scene, catches Bottom alone and puts an asses head on him. When Bottom returns to his troupe, they run away out of fear. Bottom then comes across Titania, and succeeds in waking her up. She falls in love with him due to the juice on her eyes, and takes him with her.

Lysander and Demetrius prepare to fight one another for Helena. Puck intervenes and leads them through the woods in circles until they collapse onto the ground in exhaustion. He then brings the two women to same area and puts them to sleep as well.

Oberon finds Titania and releases her from the spell. He then tells the audience that Bottom will think is all a dream when he wakes up. He further releases Lysander from the spell. Theseus arrives with a hunting

party and finds the lovers stretched out on the ground. He orders the hunting horns blown in order to wake them up.

The lovers explain why they are in the woods, at which point Egeus demands that he be allowed to exercise the law on Hermia. However, Demetrius intervenes and tells them that he no longer loves Hermia, but rather only loves Helena. Theseus decides to overbear Egeus and let the lovers get married that day with him. Together they return to Athens.

Bottom wakes up and thinks that he has dreamed the entire episode. He swiftly returns to Athens where he meets his friends. Together they head over to Theseus's palace. Theseus looks over the list of possible entertainment for that evening and settles on the play of Pyramus and Thisbe. Bottom and the rest of his company perform the play, after which everyone retires to bed.

Puck arrives and starts to sweep the house clean. Oberon and Titania briefly bless the couples and their future children. After they leave Puck asks the audience to forgive the actors if they were offended. He then tells the audience that if anyone disliked the play, they should imagine that it was only a dream.

*Mid Summer Night's Dream*

## KEY WORDS

- **abridgement** pastime.
- **aby** to pay the penalty for.
- **Acheron** a river in Hades: often identified as the river across which Charon ferries the dead.
- **adamant** lodestone, a hard stone or substance that was supposedly unbreakable.
- **Aegles** the woman for whom Theseus abandoned Ariadne.
- **Antiopa** Queen of the Amazons, often identified with Hippolyta, but here they are viewed as separate women.
- **Antipodes** the opposite side of the earth.
- **Apollo** the god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine, represented as exemplifying manly youth and beauty.
- **Ariadne** King Minos' daughter, who gives Theseus the thread by which he finds his way out of the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur.
- **Aurora's harbinger** the morning star, precursor of the dawn.
- **Bacchanals** worshippers of Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry.

- **barm** the yeast foam that appears on the surface of malt liquors as they ferment.
- **Bergomask dance** a rustic dance, named for Bergamo a province ridiculed for its rusticity.
- **bescrew** to curse, usually mildly.
- **Beteem** grant.
- **bootless** in vain.
- **bottle of hay** bundle of hay.
- **brow of Egypt** face of a gypsy.
- **buskin'd** wearing boots reaching to the calf or knee.
- **Byrlakin** by your ladykini.e., the Virgin Mary.
- **Cadmus** a Phoenician prince and founder of Thebes: he killed a dragon and sowed its teeth, from which many armed men rose, fighting each other, until only five were left to help him build the city.
- **cankerblossom** a worm that destroys the flower bud.
- **Carthage queen** Dido; founder and queen of Carthage: in the Aeneid she falls in love with Aeneas and kills herself when he leaves her.
- **childing** pregnant.
- **coil** commotion; turmoil.
- **collied** blackened, as with coal dust.
- **conn'd** to peruse carefully; to study; fix in the memory.
- **Corin, Phillida**, conventional names of pastoral lovers.
- **coy** caress.
- **Daphne** a nymph who is changed into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's unwanted advances.
- **dewlap** a loose fold of skin hanging from the throat of cattle and certain other animals, or a similar loose fold under the chin of a person.
- **Diana's altar** the altar belonging to the virgin goddess of the moon and of hunting: identified with the Greek Artemis.
- **disfigure** Quince's blunder for "figure."
- **dowager** an elderly woman of wealth and dignity.
- **eglantine** European rose with hooked spines, sweet-scented leaves, and usually pink flowers.

- **enforced** violated by force.
- **Ercles** Hercules.
- **Ethiope** a black person; a reference to Hermia's relatively dark hair and complexion.
- **exposition of** Bottom's malapropism for "disposition to."
- **eyne** eye.
- **faining voice** desirous voice.
- **false Trojan** Aeneas, son of Anchises and Venus, and hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*: escaping from ruined Troy, Aeneas wanders for years before coming to Latium: he is considered the forefather of the Romans.
- fancy-sick lovesick.
- **filch'd** to steal, pilfer.
- **Furies** the three terrible female spirits with snaky hair Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera who punish the doers of unavenged crimes.
- **gambol** frolic.
- **gauds** cheap, showy trinkets, playthings.
- **gleek** jest.
- **hight** named; called.
- **hind** the female of the red deer.
- **hounds of Sparta** dogs famous for their hunting skill.
- **humours** inclinations.
- **idle gaud** useless trinket.
- **imbrue** stain.
- **Limander, Helen** , blunders for the lovers Hero and Leander; Leander swims the Hellespont from Abydos every night to be with her; when he drowns in a storm, Hero throws herself into the sea.
- **lob** a big, slow, clumsy person.
- **lode-stars** stars by which one directs one's course.
- **love-in-idleness** pansy, heartsease.
- **Marry** [Archaic] interjection used to express surprise, anger, etc., or, sometimes, merely to provide emphasis; here, a mild oath, referring to the Virgin Mary.
- **mazed** bewildered.
- **mew'd** to confine in or as in a cage; shut up or conceal.
- **mimic** burlesque actor.

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- **minimus** petite person.
- **misgraffed** ill-matched.
- **mispris'd** mistaken.
- **the Morning's love** Cephalus, a beautiful boy loved by Aurora.
- **Mote** a speck of dust.
- **mote** a speck of dust or other tiny particle.
- **muskroses** Mediterranean roses with fragrant, usually white, flowers.
- **neaf** fist.
- **neeze** sneeze.
- **nine-men's morris** pattern cut in the turf when this game was played outside with nine pebbles.
- **Ninny/Ninus** mythical founder of Ninevah.
- **noll** head.
- **old Hiems** the winter god.
- **ounce** snow leopard.
- **ouzel cock** male blackbird.
- **oxlips** a perennial plant of the primrose family.
- **Pard** leopard, or panther.
- **patched** wearing motley many-colored garments.
- **patches** clowns.
- **Peascod** the pod of the pea plant.
- **peck of provender** one-quarter bushel of grain.
- **Perigouna** one of Theseus' lovers.
- **Phibbus' car** the chariot of Phoebus Apollo as god of the sun.
- **Philomel** the nightingale Philomela was a princess of Athens raped by Tereseus; the gods change her into a nightingale.
- **Phoebe** Artemis as goddess of the moon: identified with the Roman Diana.
- **preferred** presented for acceptance.
- **quern** a primitive hand mill, especially for grinding grain.
- **quill** the bird's piping song.
- **recreant** cowardly, craven.
- **reremice** bats.
- **roundel** round dance.

- **russet-pated choughs** reddish brown-headed crows.
- **scrip** script.
- **Shafalus and Procrus** blunders for "Cephalus" and "Procris," famous lovers.
- **Sisters Three** the Fates, the three goddesses who control human destiny and life.
- **spotted** morally stained.
- **St. Valentine** birds were supposed to choose mates on St. Valentine's Day.
- **stand upon points** pay attention to details.
- **stepdame** stepmother.
- **strings to your beards** the actors used strings to tie their false beards on.
- **Taurus** mountain range along the S coast of Asia Minor, Turkey.
- **That's all one** It makes no difference.
- **Thessalian** inhabitant of Thessaly, a region of E Greece, between the Pindus Mountains and the Aegean Sea.
- **Thracian** belonging to an ancient region in the E Balkan Peninsula.
- **thread and thrum** everything, both good and bad.
- **throstle** a songbird.
- **'tide** betide; happen.
- **tiring-house** attiring house.
- **tong & bones** instruments for rustic music.
- **translated** transformed.
- **transported** carried off by the fairies, or transformed.
- **triple Hecate's team** Hecate, a goddess of the moon Luna, earth Diana, and underground realm of the dead Hecate, later regarded as the goddess of sorcery and witchcraft.
- **troth** faithfulness; loyalty.
- **vaward** vanguard.
- **videlicet** that is, namely.
- **waggish** playful.
- **wasted brands** burned-out logs.
- **welkin** the vault of heaven, the sky, or the upper air.

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- **wonted liveries** accustomed attire.
- **wood** insane.
- **woodbine** a European climbing honeysuckle with fragrant, yellowish-white flowers.
- **wot** to know.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. What is the significance of the settings of the play? What are the major characteristics of each setting the Duke's palace, Quince's cottage, and the fairy-enchanted woods? What significance do forests have in other literary works you're familiar with? What about urban settings? What rules and values apply in the different settings? Why is the story set in ancient Greece — would it have been as effective in contemporary England?
2. Discuss the meanings of the play's title, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In addition to the title, what other references do you find to dreaming in the play? What relationship is created between dreaming and theater look, for example, at Puck's final speech? Why is Midsummer important to the themes of the play?
3. The play presents several different couples: Theseus and Hippolyta,; Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Titania and Bottom, and Titania and Oberon. What aspects of love are explored in each of these relationships?
4. Gender issues are significant in this drama. What differences are there in the roles and behaviors appropriate to men and women? Do these gender differences still exist today, or are they examples of outdated stereotypes?
5. Many contemporary productions of the play cast the same actor in the role of Theseus and Oberon, and also of Hippolyta and Titania. What does this suggest about the functions of these characters in the play? How are the Hippolyta and Titania similar and/or different? Theseus and Oberon?
6. The adventures of the four young lovers — Demetrius, Lysander, Helena and Hermia — are a necessary aspect of the play, yet many critics have suggested that these four characters are "indistinguishable." Do you agree? What similarities and differences do you find among their personalities? Do you have a favorite among this group?
7. Much has been written about the darker side of this play, its savage, erotic aspects and its violence. For example, the critic Jan Kott finds



the eroticism of the play "brutal." On the other hand, the critic Hartley Coleridge says this drama is "all poetry, and sweeter poetry was never written." Which of these critics do you agree with — if either? Overall, is this a sinister, violent, erotic play or a lighthearted, romantic comedy? Support your answer with references from the text.

8. Discuss the role of the play-within-a-play in Act V of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Does the Pyramus and Thisbe story have any relevance to the main story, or is it simply a comical interlude? What effect does the craftsmen's production of their play have on the tone of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole?
9. How does the play's broad frame of reference heighten its use of contrast as an atmospheric device? More generally, how does Shakespeare use contrasting tones and characters in the play?

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### FURTHER READING

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