

## ROME SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

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# *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

*by William Shakespeare*

## *Study Guide*

### THE PLAYWRIGHT

**Shakespeare, William** (1564-1616), the supreme English poet and playwright, is recognized in much of the world as the greatest of all dramatists.

A complete, authoritative account of Shakespeare's life is lacking; much supposition surrounds relatively few facts. His date of birth is traditionally held to be April 23; it is known he was baptized on April 24, 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. The third of eight children, he was the eldest son of John Shakespeare, a locally prominent merchant, and Mary Arden, daughter of a Roman Catholic member of the landed gentry. He was probably educated at the local grammar school. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. He is supposed to have left Stratford after he was caught poaching in the deer park of Sir Thomas Lucy, a local justice of the peace. Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway produced a daughter in 1583 and twins—a boy and a girl—in 1585. The boy did not survive.

Shakespeare apparently arrived in London about 1588 and by 1592 had attained success as an actor and a playwright. Shortly thereafter, he secured the patronage of Henry Wriothesley, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton. The publication of Shakespeare's two fashionably erotic narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and of his Sonnets (1609) established his reputation as a gifted and popular Renaissance poet. The Sonnets describe the devotion of a character, often identified as the poet himself, to a young man whose beauty and virtue he praises and to a mysterious and faithless dark lady with whom the poet is infatuated. The ensuing triangular situation, resulting from the attraction of the poet's friend to the dark lady, is treated with passionate intensity and psychological insight. However, Shakespeare's modern reputation is based mainly on the 38 plays that he apparently wrote, modified, or collaborated on.

Although generally popular in his day, these plays were frequently little esteemed by his educated contemporaries, who considered English plays of their own day to be only vulgar entertainment.

Shakespeare's professional life in London was marked by a number of financially advantageous arrangements that permitted him to share in the profits of his acting company, the Chamberlain's Men, later called the King's



Men, and its two theaters, the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars. His plays were given special presentation at the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I more frequently than those of any other contemporary dramatists. It is known that he risked losing royal favor only once, in 1599, when his company performed "the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard II" at the request of a group of conspirators against Elizabeth. They were led by Elizabeth's unsuccessful court favorite, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, and by the earl of Southampton. In the subsequent inquiry, Shakespeare's company was absolved of complicity in the conspiracy. After about 1608, Shakespeare's moved to Stratford. There he had established his family in an imposing house called New Place, and had become a leading local citizen. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the Stratford church.

## THE CHARACTERS

THESEUS Duke of Athens \* EGEUS father to Hermia \* LYSANDER, DEMETRIUS } in love with Hermia \* QUINCE a carpenter \* SNUG a joiner \* BOTTOM a weaver \* FLUTE a bellows-mender \* SNOUT a tinker \* STARVELING a tailor \* HIPPOLYTA queen of the Amazons \* HERMIA daughter to Egeus \* HELENA in love with Demetrius \* OBERON king of the fairies \* TITANIA queen of the fairies \* PUCK or Robin Goodfellow \* COBWEB PEASEBLOSSOM \* MOTH \* MUSTARDSEED & OTHER FAIRIES.

## SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's better known comedies! It's a play about magic, love, animosity, and dreams! *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is unusual among Shakespeare's plays in that it lacks a written source for its plot. Even though Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding is described in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and elsewhere and the theme of a daughter who wants to marry against her father's desires was common in Roman comedy, it still does not have – like Shakespeare's other plays – a written source one can identify with for its plot.

Usually in a Shakespearean comedy, the play starts out with a problem. Then at the end the problem is solved and everyone is happy! The problem in this case is *love*!

Hermia loves Lysander, but Egeus, Hermia's father doesn't want her to marry Lysander! Egeus wants his daughter to marry Demetrius, a wealthy and educated young man! The problem is that Hermia does not love him! But Helena, a close friend of Hermia does! In turn Demetrius hates Helena!

Under Athenian law, Hermia must marry the man her father has chosen for her, or must opt for either "single blessedness" (i.e., celibacy in a religious order), or death. Theseus says he will enforce this law and gives everyone a few days to decide. Demetrius seduces then abandons Helena. Lysander and Hermia decide to elope and get married in the next town, beyond the reach of Athenian law. Hermia tells Helena, who tells Demetrius in order to ingratiate herself to him. Helena and Lysander flee into the woods, Demetrius follows the lovers, and Helena follows Demetrius.



The parallel plot is one of Bottom and his friends who are all working men of Athens. They decide to put on a play for the Duke's wedding then they all go to the woods to rehearse their play in secret. When their rehearsals cross into the fairy world, Puck gets into the act and magically turns Bottom into an Ass, scaring all his friends who leave him in the woods. Oberon, King of the Fairies is angry at Titania, his Queen. To make her pay for her stubbornness he takes the juice of a magic flower, drops it in Titania's eyes and casts a spell so that when she wakes, she loves the first thing she sees - which is Bottom as the Ass. Puck then takes the flower and drops magic juice into Demetrius' and Lysander's eyes - but when they wake the first person they see is Helena. Disaster is furthered by the arrival of Hermia. At the settlement of the conflict between the Fairy King and Queen, Bottom loses his Asses head, Demetrius marries Helena, Lysander marries Hermia and the working men of Athens present their play at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding.

### Fantasy in “*Dream*” As Unyielding as a Dream

In the world of illusion, note several elements in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – in which logic is suspended in favor of symbolism – as that would be in our own dreams.

- Puck describes his own helpful and harmful behavior as if it is all logically consistent.
- Are the fairies large (*Titania embraces Bottom*) or tiny (*creep into acorn cups, wrap in a snakeskin, make coats from bat fur*)?
- Do the spirits fly around the globe with the night, or watch the dawn and have diminished powers during the day? Shakespeare describes both.
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* breaks theatrical illusion, the rule that the players do not talk to the audience about this being a play. Oberon begins (*because Shakespeare must have him do so*) by saying, "I am invisible." The play-within-a-play is interrupted several times by explanations by the actors.
- The amateur actor's concern about the lion frightening the ladies probably refers to an episode in which actors who were to impersonate lions were omitted from James of Scotland's parade, out of fear of frightening the audience. The actors decide the lion must be played with a half-mask, so people will realize it's really a person.



### Ignore the Eye, Use the Mind

The key passage in the play is Theseus's speech on "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" (V.i.5-22). Mentally ill people hallucinate, lovers see ugly people as beautiful, and poets create an imaginary world to give life to ideas ("gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name"). Fear can make even a normal person – in dim light – mistake a bush for a bear.

As you read the play, focus on the theme of how emotions, however irrational, color perception. Shakespeare is writing about how fantasy and imagination influence how we see the world, and how we see and behave toward each other.

- Egeus accuses Lysander of being insincere and of using evil magic to win Hermia's love (I.i.27-32). Actually, it's Egeus who's fantasizing.
- Hermia says, "I wish my father looked but with my eyes", to which Theseus replies "Rather your eyes must with his judgment look" (I.i.56-57). No two people see the world in the same way.
- Helena knows Demetrius is a jerk, says he has bad taste in women, etc., etc. But Helena loves him anyway (I.i.226-233). She reflects on love's blindness and sudden metamorphosis (234-245).
- Demetrius, who remains under the influence of the love juice, remarks after talking with Theseus in the woods that he doesn't know what he dreamed, and what really happened.
- Theseus says that even the best theatrical productions are "shadows", and that imagination can "amend" (mend, repair) a bad play so it seems good. Notice that Theseus is himself a character in a play.
- At the end, Puck invites the audience to believe, if they didn't like the play, they just dreamed it.

### As Sinister as in a Dream

The spiritual powers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have a sinister side.

- Oberon and Titania have manipulated Theseus and Hippolyta.
- The boy over whom the fairy king and queen quarrel is the son of an "Indian King" and a "votaress of [Titania's] order", evidently a celibate who was raped by a warlord. (Elsewhere in the play, Oberon calls Queen Elizabeth "the imperial votaress", because she was supposedly celibate.)
- Oberon is simply wrong to demand that Titania turn over to him the child of Titania's dedicated servant who died giving him birth.
- The battle between Oberon and Titania has devastated nature and hurt people. Neither one cares. Note in particular the imagery of sheep killed in a flash flood, rotting and being eaten by crows.
- Puck "misleads night-travelers, laughing at their harm." This is the will-o-wisp, the eerie light that leads night travelers off the road and into the marsh. Today we know this to be swamp gas.
- The fairies enact a charm around the sleeping Titania, to ward off the ugly and dangerous creatures of the night – worms, poisonous snakes, spiders, newts, beetles. "Philomel(a)" is the nightingale (some say swallow); her story from classical mythology involves rape, mutilation, and cannibalism. Note that the "one sentinel" fairy silently betrays his mistress to Oberon, who says to Titania, "Wake when some vile thing is near."
- Titania tells her fairies to cut the legs off bees and pull the wings off butterflies to create creature comforts for Bottom.
- Titania tells Bottom, "Thou wilt remain here, whether thou wilt or no."
- Puck remarks that only one male human in a million keeps his promises.
- As the spirit of chaos and unreason, Puck says, "And those things do best please me / That befall preposterously!"
- Puck promises to prevent birth defects in the newlyweds' babies. Can or do the fairies also cause these?

### Paradoxes

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, imagination changes impossible things into reality.

- Theseus woos Hippolyta "with his sword". On opposite sides in battle, they fall in love. Enemies become friends (the mismatched lovers, the families of Pyramis and Thisbe.)
- Helena's affection for Demetrius seems to make him hate her. Hermia's hatred seems to make him love her.
- In the dream world of the forest, deer chase tigers as Helena pursues Demetrius.
- Like Demetrius's whipped spaniel, Helena grows fonder from mistreatment.
- Pyramis is white as a lily, red as a rose.
- Theseus and Hippolyta, describing the hunt, with the hounds sounding random, discordant notes, celebrate the wild, free beauty of chaos. The play-within-a-play is "tragical mirth, merry and tragical, tedious and brief."

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* abounds with a poet's self-conscious artistry – from the court idiom of the lovers' rhetoric, to Theseus's reminiscences of royal pageantry, to the clowns burlesque counter-point to young love's plight and social disobedience. Shakespeare's artifice culminates in the final scene where stately nobility observes the play of commoners, who are in turn observed by fairy royalty, who are in turn observed by the audience, and that leads to the inevitable question of theatre magic: who is watching us?

## VOCABULARY

Apase	At a rapid pace; swiftly.
Linger	To be slow in leaving, especially out of reluctance
Nimble	Quick, light, or agile in movement or action; deft; sensitive
Bewitched	Cast under a spell
Filched	To take (something, especially something of little value) in a furtive manner
Virgin patent	Right granted to virginity
Idolatry	Worship of idols
Spotted	Marked or stained with or as if with spots (a spotted honor)
Aye	Always; ever
Enthralled	Attracted strongly or irresistibly, as with love
Misgrafted	From old French <i>graffe</i> ; a badly grafted fusion of plants.
Bated	Taken away; subtracted
Phibus	Phoebe, <i>Greek Mythology</i> The goddess Artemis
Tear a cat in	Refers to Hercules killing a lion
Condole	To express sympathy or sorrow, to wail, lament
Extempore	Spoken, carried out, or composed with little or no preparation or forethought
Hold or	
Cut bow strings	To withdraw from a losing situation
Pensioners	A gentleman-at-arms (old English)
Fell	Of an inhumanly cruel nature; fierce
Spangled	Adorned or caused to sparkle when covered with or as if with spangles
Amazon	<i>Greek Mythology</i> A member of a nation of women warriors reputed to have lived in Scythia
Beguile	To deceive by guile; delude
Beached margent	Limits of the ocean, a beach
Changeling	A child secretly exchanged for another, in <i>Mythology</i> a human child raised by fairies
Henchman	A loyal and trusted follower or subordinate
Dulcet	Pleasing to the ear; melodious
Leviathan	A monstrous sea creature mentioned in the Old Testament
Adamant	A stone once believed to be impenetrable in its hardness
Entice	To attract by arousing hope or desire; lure
Fawn	To seek favor or attention by flattery and obsequious behavior
Dote	To show excessive love or fondness
Impeach	To challenge the validity of; try to discredit
Griffin	A fabulous beast with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion
Hind	A female red deer
Bootless	Without advantage or benefit; useless
Besrew	To invoke evil upon; curse
Transparent	So fine in texture that it can be seen through; sheer
Woodbine	Any of various climbing vines, especially a Mediterranean honeysuckle having yellowish flowers
Roundel	An English variation of the rondeau (A lyrical poem of French origin having 13 or sometimes 10 lines with two rhymes throughout) consisting of three triplets with a refrain after the first and third

Canker	To infect with corruption or decay
Philomel	A nightingale
Pard	A leopard or other large cat
Darkling	Occurring or enacted in the dark
Casement	A window sash that opens outward by means of hinges
Tiring house	A place where one adorns or attires
Bully	<i>Brother: fraternal pal</i> Brother, male agnate
Rate	To place in a particular rank or grade
Night rule	A person who habitually stays up and is active, partying, late into the night
Knave	An unprincipled, crafty fellow
Consecrate	To initiate (a priest) into the order of bishops
Glimmering	A dim or intermittent flicker or flash of light
Misprised	Undervalued
Derision	Contemptuous or jeering laughter; ridicule
Engilds	To cover with or as if with a thin layer of gold
Oes	Spheres or spherical objects
Celestial	Of or relating to the sky or the heavens
Chronicled	An extended account in prose or verse of historical events, sometimes including legendary material, presented in chronological order and without authorial interpretation or comment
Juggler	One that juggles objects or performs other tricks of manual dexterity. One that uses tricks, deception, or fraud
Vixen	A woman regarded as quarrelsome, shrewish, or malicious
Minimus	From Latin <i>minimus</i> , least
Coil	A disturbance; a fuss
Jangling	To cause to make a harsh, discordant sound
Welkin	The vault of heaven; the sky
Acheron	The river of woe, one of the five rivers of Hades
Aurora's harbinger	To signal the approach of dawn
Bottle	To hold in; restrain
Coronet	A small crown worn by princes and princesses and by other nobles below the rank of sovereign
Upbraid	To reprove sharply; reproach
Bower	A shaded, leafy recess; an arbor
Wonted	Accustomed; usual
Paragon	A model of excellence or perfection of a kind; a peerless example
Paramour	A lover, especially one in an adulterous relationship
Helen	Helen of Troy. The daughter of Zeus and Leda and wife of Menelaus. Her abduction by Paris caused the Trojan War
Centaurs	One of a race of monsters having the head, arms, and trunk of a man and the body and legs of a horse
Bacchanal	A drunken or riotous celebration
Dole	Sorrow; grief; dolor
Imbrue	To stain
Fordone	To exhaust utterly
Serpent's tongue	Hissing sounds made by a serpent



## QUESTIONS

- (1) What is the relationship between the three worlds in the play (Royal world, Fairy world, Mechanicals' world)? Why does Shakespeare put such a motley crew together in the same play?
- (2) What is the significance of the play's setting? What major shifts in locale take place in the play, and when do they occur? How might this movement in the play's setting be symbolically interpreted?
- (3) To what extent is order vs. disorder a major theme in the play? How does disorder exist – and how is it turned into order – in each of the three worlds? Is Theseus – as he is often referred to – the main agent bringing about order in the play?
- (4) Analyze the significance of the play's title, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What dreams occur within the play? Why is dreaming such an appropriate metaphor for describing what happens to many of the characters in the play? What recurring imagery patterns in the play tie in with this theme of dreaming and with the whole idea of perceiving things both accurately and inaccurately? Do you hold an opinion as to why Shakespeare chose the time and place in the title to situate his play?
- (5) What observations can you make about Shakespeare's ideas on the nature and effects of love?
- (6) This play contains a play within it. How is the unsophisticated mechanicals' little play related to the larger play in which it appears? Is the little play a comedy or a tragedy? To what degree does the little play raise the question, in artistic terms, of how one distinguishes between illusion and reality?
- (7) What other kinds of illusion exist in the play? How are such illusions eventually dispelled?
- (8) What does Theseus mean when he claims that “*The lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact*”? How are love and imagination similar in this play, in terms of a) their effects, b) the way they both operate, c) the way they both transform characters' perceptions, and d) the way they are both irrational powers?
- (9) Bottom's "translation" into an ass is a kind of emblem for all of the transformations that occur in the play. What are these transformations? In the play, how are love and art similar in their power to transform people's perceptions of things?
- (10) What does Puck's epilogue to the entire play suggest about Shakespeare's final comment on the subject of the power of art?

## *About Rome Shakespeare Festival.*

Rome Shakespeare Festival is a professional theatre company, headquartered in Rome, Georgia. Serving the community of Rome with performances on The Town Green, and surrounding counties with performances and educational workshops, Rome Shakespeare Festival is committed to artistic integrity and excellence. Performances carry with them teaching artists who conduct curriculum-based, hands-on workshops on school sites. Artistic Director, Gail Deschamps is the former Artistic Director of Florida Shakespeare Festival and GMT Productions, and is a recipient of an Individual Artist Grant from the Georgia Council for the Arts. She is also a past Artist in Education with the State of Georgia. Gail has been recognized with grants and awards for her plays and musicals, most notably her musical adaptation and direction of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* which received rave reviews, including Washington DC's Shakespeare Quarterly, and *Lewis and Clark* which toured across the eastern United States to theatres, colleges and universities.