

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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These study materials are produced by Bob Jones University for use with the Classic Players production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

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An Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The earliest recorded performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was held exactly 400 years ago at King James I's court. Many scholars believe, however, that this lyrical drama was first performed in early 1595 as part of a wedding celebration. Queen Elizabeth herself, whom the dramatist praises in two passages, may have been part of the play's original audience.

Dream has remained immensely popular for centuries because it conforms to the highest standards of theatrical art. It abounds in elements that audiences enjoy: romance, mirth, magic, music, melodrama, folklore, fantasy, poetry, and, of course, memorable characters.

It is easy to appreciate Shakespeare's art as entertainment. With *Dream*, audiences cannot fail to take pleasure in the simple yet hilarious comedy the playwright creates, for example, through the character Bottom the weaver. But Shakespeare's plot, characters, and language in *Dream* not only entertain; they also provide some interesting food for thought.

The thematic focus of the play is obviously love and marriage. Love is depicted as a powerful and potentially ungovernable

force that can transform, vex, inspire, or craze. The audience is invited to consider several types of "love": romantic love, both mature and immature, faithful and unfaithful, rational and absurd; friendship; infatuation, or dotage; and even God's love.

In recounting his "dream," Bottom alludes to I Corinthians 2:7-10, Paul's argument that the deep mysteries of faith and divine love are inscrutable ("bottomless") to human reason. Thus while "the Spirit searcheth . . . the bottom of God's secrets" (Geneva Bible, vs. 10), man cannot. Ultimately the highest love of all remains unseen, like a dream whose depths cannot be plumbed.

Shakespeare's view of human love in *Dream* is neither idealistic nor cynical. True love must often overcome obstacles on its way to fulfillment. Lysander tells us, "The course of true love never did run smooth." Ironically, he, like Demetrius, is deluded by infatuation and proves faithless for a time. But Helena and Hermia remain true to their original choices in love, and through a sympathetic act by Oberon, they at last enjoy the affections of the men they love.

The wise Theseus also plays a crucial role in the happy ending
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Setting and Symbolism

The plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* unfolds in two symbolic settings, Athens and the palace wood (game preserve) some three miles away. Athens is a civilized society, named for the goddess of wisdom and ruled by the wise Duke Theseus. Law and order reign supreme in this realm of reason. Act I takes place in Athens by day; the light of the sun illuminates the setting.

Hermia and Lysander leave all reason behind when they flee into the woods to escape Athenian law. They and their peers soon find the forest to be a realm of disorder, a place where magic flowers and raw emotion reign.

All the scenes in the woods except the final one take place in a moonlit forest, a place of mischief and insanity. In Shakespeare's day lunacy was said to be caused by overexposure to the rays of

the moon, which was also considered a symbol of fickleness because its appearance changes nightly.

Shakespeare's title suggests that the action occurs on Midsummer Night, the longest day of the year, around June 23. Originally set aside for a vigil honoring St. John the Baptist, this holiday had become an English country festival by Shakespeare's time.

Midsummer Night was also the evening of a grand festival of spirits. Shakespeare's forest is the realm of fairies, ruled over by Oberon and Titania, who have both supernatural powers and human passions. They speak sometimes like fairies, in rhymed poetry, and sometimes like humans, in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

While the fairies see the forest as a place of delicate beauty, the young Athenians fear they will encounter savage beasts there. Helena runs in terror, and Hermia dreams she is attacked by a serpent. Such anxieties suggest the savagery of the characters'



Classic Players *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set design by Harrell Whittington

own actions as friendship is vexed, and rivalry almost leads to violence.

Whereas Theseus rules his kingdom by reason, Oberon employs magic, or art, to create dreams and visions. Thus for the humans in fairyland on Midsummer Night, anything can happen. In this setting the queen of fairies herself, in fact, falls in love with an ass, a symbol of stupidity.

The play also alludes to folk customs associated with another English country holiday, May Day, or May 1, a time of fertility rites, betrothals, and magic in celebration of the arrival of spring.

Shakespeare has created in the woods near Athens a unique setting that is mysterious and compelling. No wonder, then, that the young Athenians finally come to regard their experiences in the forest on Midsummer Night as a dream.

Characters from the workaday world, the mechanicals, also enter the woods. They rehearse their art in a natural setting and later perform it in the real world of Theseus's palace. Bottom undergoes a mysterious transformation in the woods. He also awakens there and looks back upon his experiences as a dream.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and their party enter the forest and find the four young lovers asleep. They arrive at dawn, a time of awakening and enlightenment. With them they bring reason and order into the forest.

Shakespeare's finale is set in the evening at Theseus's palace. Moonshine is brought inside the chamber by the mechanicals as a personification in their play. Thus the world of illusion and imagination invades the palace of reason.

The characters at last experience a synthesis between the two settings of the play: the realm of reason is enriched by youthful romance and drama, and the visions of love in the fairy world are transformed into the eternal bonds of marriage in Athens.

If the universe of the play is to be fully integrated, it remains only for the fantastic creatures of the woods to enter Theseus's palace. After the mechanicals exit and the three couples retire for the evening, first Puck and then Oberon and Titania with their train enter the dark palace, their glowing lanterns shedding light in the chamber.

The worlds of illusion and reality are in perfect harmony as the fairies bless the sleeping newlyweds and then trip away. With the fairies' duties done and the mortals asleep in the palace, Puck reminds the audience that the play itself has been a vision or a dream. We too have "slumb'ed here."

Queen Elizabeth I and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare's implied praise of Theseus as a wise constitutional monarch in Act V of *Dream* is usually taken as a thinly veiled compliment to Queen Elizabeth I (re. 1558-1603). The playwright's sovereign was reputed to respond graciously on public occasions whenever her subjects found themselves tongue-tied in their attempts to honor her with formal welcoming speeches. Many scholars believe that this passage suggests that Queen Elizabeth herself was an audience member at the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Concerning the rough artisans who are about to perform a play for the royal audience, Theseus speaks the following lines to his bride, Hippolyta.

Our sport shall be to take what they mistake:
And what poor duty cannot do, noble respect
Takes it in might, not merit.
Where I have come, great clerks have purposed
To greet me with premeditated welcomes;
Where I have seen them shiver and look pale,
Make periods in the midst of sentences,
Throttle their practis'd accent in their fears
And in conclusion dumbly have broke off,
Not paying me a welcome. Trust me, sweet,
Out of this silence yet I pick'd a welcome;
And in the modesty of fearful duty
I read as much as from the rattling tongue
Of saucy and audacious eloquence.
Love, therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity
In least speak most, to my capacity.
A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.i.90-105

The queen was certainly the most influential patron of London theater during the final two decades of her reign. Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, often performed before her at court and in private estates.

Because Elizabeth ascended the throne of England at age 25 and never married, writers and artists often associated her with various mythological symbols of virginity. Some alluded to her as Diana, the Roman virgin goddess of the moon and of the hunt, or Artemis, the Greek equivalent. Portraits of Elizabeth I often feature crescent moons, symbolic of chastity.

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WHO'S WHO IN D

Hippolyta

She was queen of the Amazons, a nation of female warriors, until Duke Theseus defeated her. Now he will take her as his bride. Little of her mythical background comes to the fore in Shakespeare's play, where she is a gentle-natured woman, a loving bride, and a sympathetic ally to the young lovers.



Theseus

He is the duke of Athens, a model ruler who soon will wed Hippolyta. He respects the law yet sympathizes with Hermia, whom it enjoins to follow her father's wishes concerning the choice of her marriage partner. He attempts to help her by devising some "private schooling" for her father and the suitor of his choice, Demetrius.

Lysander

He wishes to marry his beloved Hermia, but her father insists that she marry his rival, Demetrius. He and Hermia thus agree to meet in the woods at night as a step in their elopement. As they sleep, Puck applies a magic juice to Lysander's eyes, so that when he awakens he madly dotes on Helena. When Hermia clings to him, he insults her and says that he hates her. When he again sleeps, Puck reverses the spell, and he awakens to find his beloved Hermia asleep at his side. Their love restored, the pair are married that day.

Hermia

After her father commands her to marry Demetrius, Hermia attempts to elope with her true love, Lysander. Once in the woods outside Athens, however, Lysander rejects her abruptly and pursues her friend Helena. After an evening of madness, Hermia awakens to find her love restored to her. The duke then overrules her father's authority, and she weds Lysander that very day.



Peter Peach & Katie Meadows as Lysander & Hermia in the 1995 Classic Players production

SHAKESPEARE'S
A SUMMER
NIGHT'S
DREAM

LOVE & MADNESS



Mark Tilghman & Diane Seecy as Demetrius & Helena in the 1995 Classic Players production



"Pyramus & Thisbe" play-within-a-play; Classic Players 1995 production

Helena

Helena is in love with Demetrius, but he hopes to marry her friend Hermia. When Hermia and Lysander attempt to elope, Demetrius pursues them, and Helena pursues him. But in the enchanted woods, first Lysander and then Demetrius find themselves madly in love with Helena. As both men ardently pursue her, Helena believes they are mocking her. At dawn she awakens to find that Demetrius alone loves her, and the two are wed that day.

Demetrius

He initially pursues Hermia, although in the past he has loved Helena, and she still loves him. When Hermia flees to escape being forced by her father to marry him, Demetrius follows her into the woods. Helena, in turn, follows him, but he rejects her harshly and threatens to leave her at the mercy of wild beasts. While he sleeps, Oberon touches his eyes with a magic juice, and he awakens to find himself enraptured by Helena. He seeks a fight with Lysander over her, but Puck leads them both into a thick fog. Like the other young Athenians, he sleeps in the forest and awakens at dawn to the sound of the hunt. But his former love has been restored to his heart, and he vows faithfulness to Helena, whom he weds that day.



Brad Payne as Oberon and Jean Cook as Titania in the 1995 Classic Players production



Richard Rupp as Bottom in the 1995 Classic Players production



Stephen McKisic as Puck in the 1995 Classic Players production

Oberon

He is king of the fairies and husband of Titania. They have quarreled bitterly over possession of a young boy she has recently become surrogate mother to, however, and each has falsely accused the other of infidelity. When four distracted human lovers stray into their enchanted woods outside Athens, Oberon devises a plan to solve the humans' problems in love and be avenged upon his wife. As a result, Titania for a time believes herself in love with a simpleminded weaver wearing an ass's head. After procuring the child he had wanted from his wife, Oberon releases her from the spell, and the two are at last restored to a harmonious relationship.

Titania

She is the queen of fairies who keeps from her husband a child she has adopted and who recognizes the effect of their dissension as harmful to both nature and human beings. As she sleeps, Oberon applies a magic juice to her eyes which causes her to dote on a donkey-headed monster, Bottom the weaver. She leads Bottom to her bower, where her fairy troupe serves his every whim. After the spell is removed from her eyes, she loathes Bottom as a monstrous creature, and she is reconciled to Oberon.

Nick Bottom

Bottom is a weaver from Athens who plays the part of the lover Pyramus in the tradesmen's production of "Pyramus and Thisbe" although he would like to play every part. Unbeknown to him, he wears an ass's head placed on his shoulders by Puck. He enjoys the attentions of Titania and her fairy servants for a time. After he has been released from Puck's spell and Titania's affections, he believes the whole experience to have been a wondrous dream.

Equally at ease among his peers the mechanicals, the fairies, or the nobles of Athens, Bottom unites the three worlds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Puck

Puck is a fairy, a knavish sprite who serves Oberon. Sent by his master to anoint Demetrius's eyes with a juice that will cause him to love Helena, Puck mistakenly anoints Lysander instead. Then he takes delight in the confusion caused among the four Athenian lovers by his blunder. Later he applies an antidote which sets all things right. Puck also sets the head of an ass on Bottom's shoulders and later removes it.

Like all fairies, Puck has remarkable powers. He can be invisible or take on the shape of an animal or an element. Nonetheless, he is capable of making mistakes. He is also a mischief-maker, one who enjoys playing pranks. Puck is sometimes referred to as Robin Goodfellow, a spirit from English folklore who is said to come at night and perform household tasks such as sweeping, baking, or threshing for those who leave him a dish of cream. Robin also is reputed to enjoy playing practical jokes on travelers.



Bottom appears wearing the head of a beast as the "rude mechanicals" rehearse; Classic Players 1995 production



Sir John Gilbert
(1817-1897) envisions
Queen Elizabeth I as an
audience member at a
Shakespeare play.

Queen Elizabeth I

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Diana was said to be immune to the enchantments of love or, in symbolic terms, the arrows of Cupid. As the goddess of the hunt, however, she reputedly enjoyed shooting silver arrows to the earth from the silver chariot she rode across the sky. Some artists' renderings of Queen Elizabeth thus depict her holding a bow that associates her with Diana and with the sport of hunting, one of the queen's favorite pastimes.

A second passage in *Dream* is even more widely accepted than the Act V lines quoted above as a veiled tribute to the queen, who may have been an expected guest for an aristocratic gathering at which the play premiered. In this case the lines appear in Oberon's speech to Titania, and they praise a virgin queen who shuns romantic love, remaining devoted to her kingdom alone.

That very time I saw, but thou couldst not,
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm'd. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loos'd his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
Quench'd in the chaste beams of the wat'ry moon,
And the imperial vot'ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.155-64



Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed hunting and hawking with the men of her court.

"Here is my hand, my dear lover England.
I am thine both with mind and heart,
Forever to endure, thou may'st be sure,
Until death us two do part."

—1559 poem about Elizabeth I by William Birch

An Introduction

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for the young Athenians. After the husband chosen by Egeus for Hermia withdraws from the competition, the duke overrules the father's right to force his daughter to marry outside of love. He not only permits Hermia and Lysander to marry; he raises youthful love to the level of his own and Hippolyta's by calling for a triple wedding.

In addition to love and marriage, the play explores the theme of the imagination and its products, including dreams, illusory love, and art. Granted, the mature love of Theseus and Hippolyta finds its foundation in reason rather than in the imagination. Such rational love between courtly figures provides a strong basis for a stable society. It also creates a framework which introduces the other types of love in the play.

But love can be partially or wholly irrational, governed by the imagination rather than reason. Love and theater, in fact, have much in common in this regard. Both are visions created by the imagination, and in this sense both are like dreams.

Titania's infatuation with Bottom has its basis in neither reason nor natural human feeling. It is an aberration that vanishes like a dream. But in spite of the folly and confusion the playwright

associates with the irrational love of the four young Athenians, their love is real rather than illusory. It is based on genuine human feeling. This sort of love also leads to marriage.

The mechanicals' performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe" parodies poets and dramatists as well as absurd, irrational love. It also raises questions about the relationship of theatrical illusion to real life.

Peter Quince and his company of amateur players attempt to recreate reality as closely as possible in their play. They provide a prologue to help the audience understand the plot. They also create actors' roles to personify Moonshine and Wall. At the same time they do not wish to present an illusion that imitates life so realistically that their audience will be frightened. Obviously in this regard they overestimate their acting skills.

A Midsummer Night's Dream creates a world that is rich and many-sided. Shakespeare treats human passions and predicaments so skillfully that the play speaks to modern audiences just as immediately and powerfully as it did to the playwright's contemporaries.

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A Midsummer Night's Dream Plot: The Short of It

Duke Theseus upholds Egeus's right to give his daughter's hand in marriage to whomever he pleases. Thus Hermia is enjoined by parental authority and official edict to marry Demetrius, even though she loves Lysander.

To affirm the strength of their love, Hermia and Lysander agree to elope. They flee to the woods outside Athens that very evening. Learning of their scheme from Helena, the jealous Demetrius comes in hot pursuit of Hermia and is, in turn, pursued by the lovesick Helena.

This foursome of wayward youths is suddenly beset by a mischief-making fairy named Puck. At the behest of the fairy king, Puck attempts to cure love's torments with drops from a magic flower. Mistaking Lysander for Demetrius, however, he causes both Athenian youths to forsake Hermia for Helena.

Distressed at his queen Titania for keeping from him an Indian child each wants as an attendant, Oberon uses his magical powers to spite her and to obtain the boy as his

page. The hapless instrument of his plan is Nick Bottom, a foolish weaver who has come into the woods with a group of fellow tradesmen to rehearse a play intended for the Duke's wedding celebration in Athens.

After Puck fixes the head of an ass on Bottom, Oberon uses the magic juice to cause Titania to fall in love with the weaver.

After a time Oberon decides to bring all the madness to an end, and Puck uses an antidote to reverse the spell induced by the magic juice.

The dawn brings a conclusion to the midsummer madness as well as a solution to the problems experienced by both the human and fairy couples in the woods.

The festive ending in Athens includes an unforgettable performance of a "lamentable comedy" by Bottom and his fellows and a fairy visitation to the palace.