



Introduction to the Play

A Midsummer Night's Dream Background

A Midsummer Night's Dream was unusual for Shakespeare in that he did not base his story on one major source. Instead, this play is a delightful comedy that weaves together many sources and influences. By looking a bit more in depth at the back stories and traditions informing this play, the reader will be able to understand and enjoy the play to a greater degree.

It is first important for the reader to understand that this play is a **comedy**. While the play is very funny in places, humor is not the reason a Shakespeare play is called a comedy. A Shakespearean comedy follows a U-shaped form. It begins with events that descend into potential tragedy, but rise again into a happy ending, usually a marriage. The tragic problems are usually resolved by entrance into a “green world,” where a withdrawal from the pressures of civilized society results in the working out of a happy solution.

This play is thought to have been performed for a noble wedding. The entire play is centered around the idea of marriage, and, in fact, it ends with a triple marriage. The style is that of a **masque**, a show that used humor, magic, and spectacle. In a marriage masque, there would be music and dancing, which is also a part of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It's helpful for the reader to understand the relationship and role of Theseus and

Hippolyta. Their story is told by Plutarch, the famous historian who wrote *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. Theseus was considered the founder of Athens. His life's path was foretold by the oracle of Apollo, consulted by his father, Aegeus. The oracle told Aegeus to abstain from all women until he returned to his home city. Otherwise, he would not be able to father any other children, and the son fathered in this untimely way would be his destruction. However, Aegeus was tricked into sleeping with a woman named Aethra, who hid the resulting child from Aegeus. This child, Theseus, was finally reunited with Aegeus when he was a young man.

To prove his loyalty and value to Athens, Theseus traveled to Crete to free the children of Athens who were to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. The Minotaur was half bull and half man. As a mark of mourning, the ship carrying the Athenian sacrifice to Crete always flew black flags. If Theseus was successful, he was to fly white flags from the ship so that his father would know everyone was safe. Theseus successfully killed the Minotaur and rescued the children. On the voyage back to Greece, Theseus and his soldiers were celebrating so much that they forgot to fly the white flags. When Aegeus saw the black flags on the ship, he assumed that his son was vanquished. In despair, Aegeus jumped off a high cliff into the ocean and drowned. Theseus was very upset at his father's unnecessary death, but was soon crowned king of Athens. As king, Theseus

mechanicals”—“rude” because these characters are unsophisticated and “mechanicals” because these men earn a living doing work with their hands. The play about Pyramus and Thisbe is based on the story by the Roman writer Ovid, who lived from 43 B.C.E. to C.E. 17. Pyramus loved Thisbe, who lived next door to him in Babylon. Their parents did not approve of their relationship, so they were forced to talk to each other through a crack in the wall that ran between their property. Tired of the separation, they arranged to meet in a graveyard near their home. Thisbe arrived at the graveyard first but ran away when a lion appeared. The lion had just killed some prey, so its mouth was stained with blood. The lion found a cloak that Thisbe had dropped, and in nosing the cloak, covered it with some of the blood. Pyramus finally arrived and could not find Thisbe. Instead, he saw her blood-stained cloak and decided that she had been murdered. In despair, Pyramus killed himself. Thisbe then returned to the graveyard, where she saw that Pyramus was dead. She, too, took her own life. A legend comes from their death of a black mulberry tree that only bears black fruit as a sign of mourning for young Pyramus and Thisbe.

The final element of this play is the nature of the **dream**. Bottom thinks his experience with Titania was a rare dream. He tries to speak about the wondrous nature of the dream, and his words evoke the biblical verses from I Corinthians 2, which talks about the mysteries of the wisdom of God: “For as it is written, the eye hath not seen, and the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart

of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (I Corinthians 2:9). Even though Bottom comically reverses the images of this verse, he captures the sense of wonder of his dream. When the four lovers wake up, they feel that they dreamed of their adventures in the woods. And, at the conclusion of the play, Puck addresses the audience to say that if they did not enjoy the play, they should imagine that it was all a dream.

Synopsis of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Act one, Scene 1

Theseus and Hippolyta discuss their upcoming marriage. Interrupting their plans, Egeus asks for a ruling from Theseus regarding his disobedient daughter, Hermia. Egeus wants her to marry Demetrius, but Hermia wishes to marry Lysander. Requesting that Hermia be sentenced to a nunnery or death, Egeus pleads his case before Theseus. Theseus has no option but to follow the law of Athens. Hermia will have until the wedding to make her choice.

In order to discredit Demetrius, Lysander states that Demetrius had courted Helena and caused Helena to fall in love with Demetrius. Therefore, he declares that he is a better suitor for Hermia. Everyone leaves except Lysander and Hermia.

Lysander tells Hermia his plans for them to escape Egeus and the law by fleeing into the woods. In a different town on the other side of the woods lives Lysander’s aunt, who will help them get married. Hermia agrees to the plan. Helena arrives, and Lysander and Hermia

Nick Bottom: A weaver. His name is related to his work, as “bottom” is the core for a skein of yarn. He plays **Pyramus**.

Tom Snout: A tinker. A tinker often repaired the snout or spout of teapots. Snout plays the **wall** in *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

Robin Starveling: A tailor. It was a common stereotype that tailors were very, very thin. He plays **Moonshine** in the play.

Shakespeare and Stage Directions

The plays of Shakespeare are so well written that they seem to leap off the page and come to life. However, the plays themselves have very few stage directions. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare’s plays were performed in large amphitheaters that were very simple.

This was a time before electric lights, so the plays needed to take place during the day to utilize the natural light. The average time for a performance was between noon and two in the afternoon. Theater historians report that there were typically no intermissions; plays ran from beginning to end without a break and took about two hours.

The set might have been painted canvas to illustrate whether the play was occurring in a forest or a town, for example. Sometimes the background was accompanied by a sign that indicated the place as well. Props were few and large: a table, a chariot, gallows, a bed, or a throne.

However, the audience attending Shakespeare’s plays expected a spectacle for the price of admission. Therefore, there were many devices

to produce a gasp from the audience. For example, a device in the loft of the theater could raise and lower actors so that they could play gods, ghosts, or other unusual characters. Additionally, a trapdoor in the stage offered a chance for a quick appearance or disappearance. The actors could suggest a beheading or hanging with various illusions on the stage. Sound effects suggesting thunder, horses, or war were common. Music was important, and drums and horns were often played.

Most important to the sense of spectacle were the costumes worn by the actors. These were elaborate, colorful, and very expensive. Therefore, they often purchased these outfits from servants who had inherited the clothes from their masters or from hangmen, who received the clothes of their victims as payment for their services.

Though Shakespeare’s stage directions are sparse, definition of a few key terms will be helpful for the reader. The following is a brief glossary of stage directions commonly found in Shakespeare’s plays.

Selected Glossary of Stage Directions in Shakespeare’s Plays

Above: an indication that the actor speaking from above is on a higher balcony or other scaffold that is higher than the other actors

Alarum: a stage signal, which calls the soldiers to battle; usually trumpets, drums, and shouts

Aside: words spoken by the actor so the audience overhears but the other actors on

the stage do not. An aside may also be spoken to one other actor so that the others on stage do not overhear.

Calls within: a voice offstage that calls to a character on the stage

Curtains: Curtains were fabrics draped around a bed that could be opened or closed for privacy.

Draw: Actors pull their swords from their sheathes.

Enter: a direction for a character to enter the stage. This can be from the audience's right (stage right) or the audience's left (stage left).

Enter Chorus: a direction for an actor to come to the center of the stage and offer some introductory comments, usually in blank verse or rhyming couplets. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chorus delivers a sonnet, a form of poetry associated with love.

Exeunt: All characters leave the stage, or those characters named leave the stage.

Exit: One character leaves the stage.

Flourish: A group of trumpets or other horn instruments play a brief melody.

Have at: Characters begin to fight, usually with swords.

Pageant: a show or spectacle of actors in unusual costumes, usually without words

Prologue: an introduction spoken by the Chorus that gives an overview to the audience and invites them into the play or scene

Recline: to relax on a bed or pillow

Retires: A character slips away.

Sennet: a series of notes sounded on brass instruments to announce the approach or departure of a procession

Singing: a signal for the actor to sing the following lines as a tune

Wanders about: A character may exit and enter the stage, seeming to be in a kind of daze or distraction.

Within: voices or sounds occurring off stage but heard by the audience

But Shakespeare still had what is considered his finest writing to do. He began his writing of tragedies beginning with *Hamlet* in 1600. In the following five years, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Why Shakespeare turned to these darker, more serious themes is widely debated by scholars. But all agree that these plays established Shakespeare's premier place in English literature.

Toward the end of 1609 through 1610, Shakespeare began to write his problem romances. These works, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*, are rich with mature themes of forgiveness, grace, and redemption.

After 1611, at the age of 47, Shakespeare moved back to Stratford exclusively, settling into life at New Place and enjoying a renewed relationship with his daughters, especially Susanna. He prepared a will, which has become famous for the request to leave his wife their "second best bed." Many have debated whether this is a sentimental or cynical bequest. In the same year that his daughter Judith married, 1616, Shakespeare died at the age of 52. However, it was not until 1623 that all his plays were collected into one manuscript, now referred to as the *First Folio*. The fellow King's Men players who compiled the manuscript, Heming and Condell, entitled it *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*.

Shakespeare's England

The age of Shakespeare was a glorious time for England. William Shakespeare's life in England was defined by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). During her leadership, England became an important naval and economic force in Europe and beyond.

England's rise to power came when its navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was about 24 years old. Queen Elizabeth was skillful in navigating through the conflicts of religion. She maintained religious independence from Rome as the Church of England became firmly rooted during her reign. Additionally, she financed the establishment of colonies in America to grow the British Empire and expand its economic opportunities. At the end of her reign, England was the leader in trade, naval power, and culture.

Because of its role as the main economic, political, and cultural center of England, London became the hub of England's prosperity and fame. If anyone wanted to become famous as a poet or dramatic writer during Shakespeare's time, he would need to be in London. In fact, London was full of great writers besides Shakespeare, such as Marlowe, Sidney, and Jonson. Yet, even as London was full of parties, trade, and amusement, it was also full of poverty, crime, and disease. Crime was a large problem, and the main jail in London was called the Clink. Disease and poor sanitation were common. In fact, twice in Shakespeare's lifetime, London endured an outbreak of the

plague, which killed thousands upon thousands of people.

Before Queen Elizabeth took the throne, London was a modestly sized city of about 60,000 people. By the time James I took the throne at her death, more than 200,000 people lived in London and its suburbs. People were attracted to London because it gave many opportunities for work and financial improvement. It was also a vibrant social scene for the upper class. In fact, one honor of being a noble was the opportunity to house Queen Elizabeth and her entire party if she was in your neighborhood. If she was a guest, it was expected that her noble hosts would cover all the expenses of housing her group. She made many “progresses” through England and London, establishing her relationships with the nobility. However, several nobles asked to be released from this honor because the expense of supporting her visit had often caused them bankruptcy.

Perhaps it was better to be a flourishing member of the English merchant middle class. Their numbers and influence were rising in England at the time of Shakespeare. This was a new and an exciting development in Western European history. One major factor in the rise of the middle class was the need for wool for clothing. The expansion of the wool trade led to the formation of entire cities throughout England, and sparked progress in many other areas of commerce and trade.

With the rise of the middle class came a concern for more comfortable housing. Rather than serving simply as shelter or defense against

attack, housing developed architecturally and functionally. One major improvement was the use of windows to let in light. Also, houses were built with lofts and special places for eating and sleeping, rather than having one multifunctional room. However, doors between rooms were still very rare, so that privacy in Shakespeare’s time did not really exist.

Meals in Shakespeare’s England were an important part of the day. Breakfast was served before dawn and was usually bread and a beverage. Therefore, everyone was really hungry for the midday meal, which could last for up to three hours. If meat was available in the home, it was usually served at this time. A smaller supper was eaten at 6:00 or 7:00 P.M., with the more wealthy people able to eat earlier and the working class eating later. Cooking was dangerous and difficult since all meals were cooked over an open fire. Even bread was not baked in an oven but was cooked in special pans placed over the fire. A pot was almost always cooking on the fire, and the cook would put in whatever was available for supper. This is most likely where the term of “potluck” came from.

Furniture was usually made of carved wood, as woodcarving was a developing craft in Shakespeare’s day. One important part of an Elizabethan home was the table, or “board.” One side was finished to a nice sheen, while the other side was rough. Meals were served on the rough side of the board, and then it was flipped for a more elegant look in the room. The table is where we get the terms “room and board” and having “the tables turned.” Another important part of a middle- or an upper-class

home was the bed. Rather than being made of prickly straw, mattresses were now stuffed with softer feathers. Surrounded by artistically carved four posts, these beds were considered so valuable that they were often a specifically named item in a will.

Clothing in Shakespeare's time was very expensive. Of course, servants and other lower-class people wore simple garb, often a basic blue. But if a person wanted to display his wealth, his clothing was elaborate and colorful, sewn with rich velvet, lace, and gold braid. An average worker might earn seven or eight English pounds in a year, and a very nice outfit for a nobleman might cost as much as 50 or 60 pounds. In other words, if seven or eight healthy workers pooled their money for the entire year, spending nothing else, they could buy only one respectable nobleman's outfit.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were bear-baiting, cockfighting, and an early form of bowling. Bear-baiting, in which a dog was set loose to fight with up to three chained bears in the center of an amphitheater, and cockfighting, where roosters pecked each other

to death, were popular then, but would be absolutely unacceptable entertainment today. Bowling, however, has maintained its popularity in our current culture.

In London, a main source of entertainment was the theater. Some theaters were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Even poor people could attend the theater since entrance cost only one penny (equivalent to 60 cents today), and they could stand around the stage. For a bit more money, a person could sit in an actual seat during the performance. However, some thought that going to the theater could be dangerous to your body or your soul. The theaters were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. The Puritans disapproved of the theater as an unwholesome leisure-time activity. And the Puritans also disliked the theater because the theaters were located in an area of London surrounded by brothels and bars. Nevertheless, the theater became respectable enough by 1603 to be supported by James I—and he was the monarch who directed the King James Version of the Bible to be translated.



ACTIVITY 1

Creating a Character Guide

Background Shakespearean romantic comedies often abound with mistaken identities and love gone awry. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is no exception, and it may become difficult to remember who loves whom without a helpful guide.

Directions As you read the play, fill in the following character guide with (1) a description of the character based on your reading and put into your own words and (2) a quotation by the character that reveals who or what is important to that character and your explanation of the quotation. Feel free to revise what you have written as your understanding of the character grows through reading the play. Use another sheet of paper, if necessary. See the example below for guidance.

Hermia

Description: Loves Lysander, though her father wants her to marry Demetrius.

Quotation and explanation: "But I beseech your Grace, that I may know the worst that may befall me in this case, if I refuse to wed Demetrius." Hermia is asking Theseus what will happen to her if she disobeys her father and refuses to marry Demetrius.

Helena

Description:

Quotation and explanation:

Demetrius

Description:

Quotation and explanation:

(continued)



ACTIVITY 5

Review

Directions Answer the following. Write the letter of the correct answer in the space provided.
For 7 and 10, write true (T) or false (F) in the space provided.

- ___ 1. As the play opens, whom is Theseus about to marry?
- Hermia
 - Titania
 - Hippolyta
 - Helena
- ___ 2. What complaint does Egeus bring to Theseus?
- He loves a woman who doesn't love him.
 - His daughter, Hermia, wants to marry one suitor, but Egeus wants her to marry another.
 - He is angered that the fairies have interfered in his life, and he wants revenge.
 - none of the above
- ___ 3. What is NOT one of the possible punishments for a young woman who doesn't agree to the traditional arranged marriage?
- death
 - She must become a nun.
 - She must join a harem.
 - none of the above
- ___ 4. Theseus is duke of what city?
- Rome
 - Athens
 - Paris
 - Florence
- ___ 5. What is Hermia and Lysander's plan?
- They agree to forget about each other so Hermia doesn't face her father's wrath.
 - They will meet in the woods, and then they will go to his aunt's house and get married.
 - They will ask Helena to help Demetrius forget Hermia, which will make him leave them alone.
 - They will secretly appeal to Theseus to overrule Hermia's father.
- ___ 6. What is Helena's rationale for telling Demetrius of Hermia and Lysander's plan?
- Demetrius might thank her, and she will have a reason to see him.
 - She hopes that Demetrius will give up loving Hermia once he hears about it.
 - She wants to get Hermia in trouble with Theseus.
 - She just likes to gossip.

(continued)



ACTIVITY 8

The Lyrical Fairy World

Act two, Scene 1

Background Shakespeare gives the most lyrical and beautiful lines to the fairies. Titania's long and poetic speech from lines 81 to 117 is a perfect example.

Directions Look for the literary devices in Titania's speech listed below, and provide at least one example of each below. Write the line numbers for the example, the example itself, and then briefly explain what it means.

Imagery: anything appealing to the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell)

Example: The leaves rustled and crackled in the waning moonlight.

Alliteration: repeated initial consonant sounds

Example: Shelia sold seashells by the seashore.

Assonance: repeated vowel sounds

Example: Breathe and sneeze and wheeze please.

Personification: giving human characteristics to something that is not human

Example: The tree wept over losing his leaves.

Imagery

1. Lines with explanation:

2. Lines with explanation:

(continued)